

HARVARD ENGLISH STUDIES 14

Renaissance Genres

Essays on Theory, History,
and Interpretation

Edited by
Barbara Kiefer Lewalski

Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
and London, England
1986

X el sup
PR
418
L57
R42
1986

Copyright © 1986 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper, and its binding materials have been chosen for strength and durability.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Main entry under title:

Renaissance genres.

(Harvard English studies ; 14)

1. English literature—Early modern, 1500–1700—
History and criticism—Addresses, essays, lectures.
2. Literary form—Addresses, essays, lectures.
3. Renaissance—England—Addresses, essays, lectures.

I. Lewalski, Barbara Kiefer. II. Series.

PR418.L57R46 1986 820'.9'003 86-257

ISBN 0-674-76040-9 (alk. paper)

ISBN 0-674-76041-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

UNIVERSITY
OF
PENNSYLVANIA
LIBRARIES

MORTON W. BLOOMFIELD

The Elegy and the Elegiac Mode: Praise and Alienation

Although by no means the same as the relation between tragedy and the tragic mode,¹ the relation of elegy to the elegiac mode bears similarities to the former distinction. Certain genres, not all, are accompanied in the history of literature by modal relations. Both tragedy and elegy belong to this class. It is important, moreover, to distinguish the two. Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" is written in the elegiac mode, whereas Shelley's "Adonais" and Auden's "Elegy on the Death of Yeats" are true elegies in the English manner of presenting this genre.² Like elegies, Shelley's and Auden's poems praise, lament, and console (the consolation often saved to the end). These three

1. On this distinction, see Clayton Koelb, "'Tragedy' and 'The Tragic': The Shakespearean Connection," *Genre*, 13 (1980), 275-286.

2. "Tragedy," as Koelb points out, is a subdivision of the "tragic"; so also elegy is a subdivision of the elegiac mode. All tragedies are tragic and all elegies are elegiac (that is, they belong to the elegiac mode). Yet the tragic and the elegiac modes include a vast number of poems or works which are not tragedies or elegies. This distinction is a useful one.

purposes appear in different proportions in different poems. In the elegiac mode, however, we find alienated and/or sad poems which mix various moods and actions and are extremely personal. In English, the elegiac mode is largely, though not exclusively, the creation of the Romantic movement, and it has flourished from about 1750 to today, when it has perhaps become the predominant mode and mood of lyric poetry.

The mode is harder to define precisely than is the genre. It does not appear in English literature much before the 1740s. Coleridge, confusing the elegy with the elegiac mode, defines it as follows: "Elegy is the form of poetry natural to the reflective mind. It may treat of any subject [*sic*], but it must treat of no subject *for itself*, but always and exclusively with reference to the poet himself. As he will feel regret for the past or desire for the future, so sorrow and love become the principal themes of elegy."³

In other words, any personal poem could be called an elegy in the Romantic and later periods. That meaning did not, however, drive out the older sense of the word, which I shall try to define shortly. As is well known, elegy was considered in classical times a genre making use of a special meter and dealing with a variety of subjects. The elegiac mode is not a genre but a mode of approaching reality and was hardly named before the eighteenth century, although it is certainly to be found in earlier poetry. It will be helpful to make use of both these terms.

Turning first to "elegy," let us begin with Aristotle, as is proper. It is about time to take seriously Aristotle's dictum in the *Poetics* that all poetry arises in praise, blame, or hymns. I think we can ignore hymns, which are obviously a variety of praise poems, and reduce the categories to the remaining two. Whether Aristotle is totally correct in this statement one cannot be sure, but I am convinced that praise and blame are historically the final causes (as Aristotle would put it) of much early poetry. Although many scholars and thinkers have admitted the importance of praise and blame in the whole history of Western and indeed world poetry, especially before the nineteenth century, few have explored the implications of Aristotle's dictum.

3. *Table Talk*, 12 October 1833.

It is not my purpose here to pursue this matter, but I should like to discuss the notion of praise as applicable to the history of elegy. Many other genres (in the loose sense of the word) have strong links to praise. I have myself written that much narrative, especially of the epic, heroic, and romance variety, can be best explained by the original drive to praise, and I think the notion can be extended.

The word "elegy" has a long and complex history. Poems called elegies in English have been strongly influenced by the classical and, to a lesser extent, biblical traditions. The Bible includes an entire elegiac book in the Book of Lamentations, as well as David's poetic lamentations over the deaths of Saul, Absalom, and Abner. Other biblical examples are to be found, especially in the prophetic books.

To complicate matters, the word "elegy" has been used for a number of poems, some so far apart in purpose that it is hard to see how the same word could be used to describe them. Elegy first referred to a metrical form in Greek literature, a form which must have had a wide range of usage.⁴ In Latin the elegiac couplet approximating the Greek form consisted of a distich (unrhymed of course), having a first line of six feet followed by one of what has been somewhat dubiously counted as five feet. The basic effect, which one can only guess at, must have been rather stately and formal. In Greek it was probably originally used in lamenting the death of a person or a people, or the destruction of a city or army.⁵ Later it became for some surprising reason a popular form for love poetry. The only common element was the use of elegiac, a general metrical pattern which defined the form. The term until the end of the Renaissance was used to define any poem using this meter. Yet the use of the metrical form to express both love and lamentation per-

4. On this metrical form, see M. L. West, *Greek Metre* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 44-46.

5. See esp. Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 104-108 et passim. An introduction to ancient Greek elegies may be found in C. M. Bowra, *Early Greek Elegists* (Cambridge, Mass., 1935). An edition with commentary on the Greek elegies may be found in Jean De-fradas, *Les élégiaques grecs: édition, introduction, et commentaire*, Erasme: Collection de textes grecs commentés (Paris, 1962).

sisted. Love has its ups and downs, and perhaps the term "lamentation" unifies funerals and love affairs. During the Renaissance, Latin elegies written in an artificial and reconstructed classical Latin flourished: in fact, one can say that in every century down to today, "classical" elegies continued to be written about death and sorrow or about love. In the Middle Ages there were few in comparison with classical poetic structures, but Latin elegies in rhythmic verse were common.

The word in English, however, tended to be used primarily to indicate lamentation or, later, various mood poems. It also moved over into music as well, to describe stately and serious works. By Coleridge's time the meaning of the word in English poetry was exceedingly vague. Any personal poem in any meter could be called an elegy; in English and possibly in other Western European languages the term referred to a self-oriented poem often but not always rather melancholic. Self-reflection was its characteristic feature. This meaning must have taken over in the last half of the eighteenth century—the age of Werther, of "The Elegy in a Country Churchyard," and of poems featuring death or its approach, or lamentation over the world or the self, or poems concentrating on *Sehnsucht*. Yet in the Romantic period we do have many elegies in the lamentation mode—Shelley's *Adonais* and Matthew Arnold's *Thyrsis* come to mind. German literature knows few lamentation elegies, although there are many in French. There we may recall the *oraisons funèbres* of Bossuet and others also in prose, not to speak of poems as well.

Inasmuch as lamentation was probably the original purpose of the elegy, the eighteenth-century and Romantic elegy was not so novel as it might seem, but the tone was novel with its emphasis on the author rather than on what is being lamented. The shift to the self made a difference; for the voice, unlike those of classical Greek elegies, does not represent the community but the self.

In the nineteenth century, also, as the difficulties of Anglo-Saxon or Old English were gradually being unfolded and explained, poems like "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer," which were in some sense personal lamentations, were classified as elegies. That name for them has persisted, even though they

were not poems like Milton's *Lycidas* or Shelley's *Adonais*. Possibly, the early nineteenth-century Old English scholar Conybeare gave them this name. These poems seemed to be personal and to some degree, although probably not heavily, autobiographical. No ready literary generic term springs to mind for them. It was natural to think of them as elegies, though I myself have always preferred to call them meditative poems, belonging to that large category of poetry, now generally thought little of, called wisdom literature. On the surface these poems seem to report the personal experience of a wanderer and a seafarer. Their tone is somewhat mournful it is true, but a mournful strain alone does not make an elegy. Furthermore, the speakers are representative, not individual. The lament of the last survivor and of the professional woman mourner at the death of Beowulf are true elegies, or perhaps more exactly, elegiac passages in that poem. But "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer" are not, though lines 19-57 of "The Wanderer" constitute an elegiac section.

The Middle Ages produced elegies of the meditative kind in its whole length. Sometimes they are subdivisions of longer poems, usually narratives, and at other times they stand on their own. There is a long, continuous line of such poems or passages extending from the ancient Middle and Near East down to today. They flourish more in Asia and Africa than in Western Europe or North America, but even in these latter continents they have not entirely disappeared.

Elegies in the Middle English period tend to be incidental, with a lamentation on someone's death occupying a small part of a longer poem.⁶ Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* is, however, an elegy on the death of Blanche, wife of John of Gaunt. *The Pearl* is a notable English elegy. Sir Ector's lamentation on the death of his brother, Sir Lancelot, in Malory's *Morte* is powerful, moving, and beautiful. It echoes anaphorically a long list of virtues:

6. See V. Bourgeois Richmond, *Laments for the Dead in Medieval Narrative*, Duquesne Studies: Philological Series 8 (Pittsburgh, 1966), and her earlier thesis at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1959, covering the English Renaissance period to Christopher Marlowe.

Thou were head of all Christian knights; . . .
 Thou were never matched of earthly knight's hand; . . .
 Thou were the courtest knight that ever bore shield; . . .
 Thou were the truest friend to thy lover that bestrode
 horse; . . .
 Thou were the truest lover of sinful men that ever
 loved woman; . . .
 Thou were the kindest man that ever struck with the
 sword; . . .
 Thou were the goodliest person that ever came among
 press of knights; . . .
 Thou were the meekest man and the gentlest that ever
 ate in hall among ladies; . . .
 Thou were the sternest knight to thy mortal foe that
 ever put spear in the rest.⁷

With the Renaissance, however, elegy enjoyed an exuberant growth which has never been explained, except perhaps with general reference to the revival of the classics, especially Latin. But this hardly accounts for the English Renaissance emphasis on elegy as a lament for a death. While there were some love elegies in the English Renaissance, the subject of most elegies was lamentation rather than wooing. Spenser, Sidney, Jonson, Drummond, Giles Fletcher, and Donne, not to speak of less renowned Elizabethans or Jacobeans, all wrote mourning elegies.

The funeral elegy, as O. B. Hardison notes,⁸ is composed of praise, lament, and consolation. We find these three elements in Donne's *Anniversaries* and many other poems. Curtius in his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*⁹ identifies the following topics in both classical and medieval praises: inexpressibility, outdoing (subject surpasses all those with whom he is compared), and universal renown, all of which were claimed for the dead man and his acts.

The elegy tradition of the early and mid-seventeenth century

7. Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Caxton ed., xxi, 13.

8. See his *Enduring Monument* (Chapel Hill, 1962) and also Barbara K. Lewalski, *Donne's Anniversaries and the Poetry of Praise: The Creation of a Symbolic Mode* (Princeton, 1973), esp. for Donne's elegies and praise.

9. Bollingen Series 36, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York, 1963), pp. 154-164.

culminated in Milton's great elegy *Lycidas*, and in the somewhat personal moodiness of *Il Penseroso*, close to the elegiac mode. The elegy in the Restoration and the eighteenth century proliferated greatly. Elegies are to be found almost everywhere, many of them badly written, but some passable and a few even good. Widely but not exclusively regarded as a mortuary or death poem of praise, lamentation, and/or consolation, eighteenth-century elegies were usually objective and not very personal. Those written for the deaths of royalty and persons of high rank were not personal at all, but they did perform a social function for those memorialized. In the so-called graveyard poetry of Parnell, Blair, and Gray we find a proto-romanticism which led ultimately to the personalization of the elegy in the nineteenth century. Gray's *Elegy* is, however, somewhat unique in that it celebrates the death of a representative group of humble, ordinary people, in a kind of early socialist or populist spirit.¹⁰

I have already referred to several nineteenth- and twentieth-century elegists; others are Matthew Arnold, Keats, Whitman, Hardy, Yeats, Lawrence, and Eliot. All of these drew upon the lamentative aspect of elegy and often wrote elegies in form.¹¹

In spite of the various tones and subjects associated with the genre, I wish to concentrate on the lamentation. While German elegies are rarely, if ever, lamentations or dirges, the English have tended to emphasize what I consider the oldest and central aspect of the elegy: the lamentation.

Lamentation or threnody or dirge as it appears in early cultures strongly emphasizes praise of the deceased. It may also offer consolation and lamentation (in the narrow sense of the word), but praise is the major element. There are a number of tropes which pertain to the lamentation, with some deviation depending on the culture studied, but with surprising similarities. The Bantu lamentations in southern Africa seem to be directed at the ancestors of the deceased one. I believe the purpose is to call their descendants to the attention of these

10. On the eighteenth-century elegy, see John W. Draper, *The Funeral Elegy and the Rise of English Romanticism* (New York, 1929).

11. See also Abbie Findlay Potts, *The Elegiac Mode: Poetic Form in Wordsworth and Other Elegists* (Ithaca, 1967).

deceased spirits, who like to hear their living relatives praised. In ancient cultures such lamentations seem to be recited by the mourners (usually women who are regularly called upon to perform this office) to accompany the soul or spirit to the abode of its ancestors and to ensure a good reception for it. As the Bible puts it, they sleep with their fathers. Usually a special type of incantation as well as traditional gestures are used while the intonation goes on, and music is often performed. In some cultures, such as the Greek, the flute is played with a characteristic melody.

While the early elegy as preserved in Greece usually is not a funeral song, there is no doubt that music and lamentation did accompany burial or incineration. There are also later elegies, not always in elegiac meter.¹² Although obviously this cannot be proved, the actions and the words of modern Greek lamentations, and those of other cultures including China, are centered on praise of the dead one. The guardian spirits or, in Greek, the *telonia* of the heavens who block the passage of souls could thereby perhaps be influenced to be kind.

Praise is in this matter decisive. Praise still is the usual accompaniment of burials and incinerations throughout the world. It also is used to welcome and honor heroes or great men. It is still echoed today in toasts, in introductions, and even at sports stadiums. Blame still survives too, in spells, games, cursing, and other manifestations. We in the West no longer have professional praisers and blamers, but praise and blame occupy an important place in modern Western life and an extremely important place in other areas of the world.

The elegy as a mourning or funeral poem was surely the root of elegies. I cannot explain with any certainty why it came to be a favorite form for the Latin and, to some extent, Greek

12. For example, Theocritus' *Pastorals* 15 contains an elegy over Adonis, as does Bion's *Lament for Adonis*. Moschos has left us, inter alia, a *Lament over Bion*. These elegies may all be found in J. M. Edwards' edition of *The Greek Bucolic Poets*, Loeb Library (rpt. Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1950 [1912 original]), pp. 190-196 (Theocritus), pp. 386-395 (Bion), and pp. 443-455 (Moschos). See also Virgil's Eclogue 10, a lamentation by Gallus on his desertion by his lover, another type of elegy. It may be found in vol. 1 of the Loeb edition of Virgil's poetry, ed. Rushton Fairclough, rev. 1962.

love poems, but it seems to me that praise of one's beloved provided the transition. If elegiac distichs could praise the dead person on his journey to the next world, they could certainly be suitable for a love song, and even possibly for soldiers going into battle. In other words, "praise" is the crucial and unifying notion, which brings together spirited military and love poems with lamentations for the dead. It may even explain the use of Greek elegiac meter in poems written for public meetings, competitions, and banquets. Elegies reflect one of the basic psychological needs of humanity: praise, with consolation and lament given with less emphasis.

The nineteenth- and twentieth-century emphasis upon the elegiac mood rather than the elegy is a noteworthy change. In such poems sadness, depression, and grief rather than praise, lamentation, and consolation receive the chief emphasis. In recent years alienation has also found its place in the trilogy of sadness, depression, and grief. Alienation from this world, the goal of Stoicism, Platonism, and early Christianity alike, was often admired by humans as ennobling, but it has since become a deplorable emotion. Hegel is probably the father of the modern concept, which received a great boost from Marx, from romanticism, and from the loss of faith in religion. The modern Western poem in the elegiac mode is a lamentation on the loss of faith in the goodness and joy of this world and on self-despair, or *Sehnsucht*.

This new alienation is found in much modern poetry. Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath spring to mind, not to speak of others, like Ashbery, Stevens, Trakl, Mandelstam, and Celan. Suggestions of alienation may be found earlier, but it does not flourish until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These poems are only superficially similar to the long tradition of praise elegies, in spite of their name. Both the personal poems Coleridge speaks of and the alienation poems which have flourished in our century indicate the rise of a new kind of mood poem. This is not simply a new turn in the long history of the elegy, but a new kind of poem which has branched off from its parent line. The traditional elegy, however, is still to be found, although it is not as significant a genre as formerly. The elegiac mode is not a new type of traditional elegy, but rather a new

type of poem bearing only a slight resemblance to its ancestor. It is more romantic, more personal, and more despairing. It is self-directed for the most part, rather than socially directed. It brings little or no comfort and is often mired in despair. By contrast, the traditional elegy is not personal nor despairing nor lost.

In a recent talk, the well-known American poet Maxine Kumin, who has been the Library of Congress Poet, spoke of the elegiac mode as the dominant mode of modern poetry. I am inclined to agree. Alienation, the loss of faith in religion and the liberal spirit, and the increase in violence and hate have all contributed to a deep mood of depression, if not despair, in the Western world.

The modern elegy which is a descendant of the traditional one is somewhat more personal than its ancestor, but it is basically in the same tradition. The elegiac poem, however, represents a mode, not a genre, and reflects a psychological state rather than a social or historical occasion. The purpose of the elegiac is the total expression of a personality, whereas the traditional elegy is rather an answer to a social and national need.

What we have is a long tradition, beginning with oral poetry of praise¹³—from praise of the living to praise of the dead, and then to praise of warriors and of feasts, banquets, festivals, public meetings, and competitions, and above all, praise of the beloved. The epideictic and memorial function no doubt was present from the beginning, but chance has preserved only a few such early poems. Then, in the Hellenistic Age a great flood of love elegies is found, although not so many as in the later Latin tradition. The elegy as praise of a dead person persisted, however, and began to flourish again in the late Classical period and early Middle Ages. This tradition continued down to at least the early twentieth century, but beginning in the eighteenth century the term "elegy," without losing its earlier meaning, came to be applied to poems of personal mood, especially congenial to the Romantic soul.

13. For a recent discussion of oral praise poems, see Paul Zumthor, *Introduction à la poésie orale* (Paris, 1983), p. 94.

The elegiac mode must be seen, if we look at the matter historically, as an offshoot of the older tradition of elegy. It is not a new genre but a new mode, satisfying the yearnings of the Romantic movement and reflecting the modern notion of alienation. The story is not over yet. The funeral elegy will certainly persist in some form, inasmuch as we can count on death being with us for a good while. What will happen to the elegiac poems is especially interesting if, as I think, the alienation they express is the forerunner of a new religiousness, which may manifest itself in traditional or nontraditional forms.