

THE COMPOSITION OF *POLY-OLBION* AND THE *MUSES ELIZIUM*

The few who have managed their way through all 15,000 lines of Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* will agree that its only uniform characteristic is variety: one finds descriptions and chronicles, of course, interspersed with pastoral monologues, herbals, hymns, satire, panegyric, metrical romance, agronomy, and hagiography, not to mention long draughts of elegiac musing. Such variety would naturally hinder any attempt (whether by the poet or the reader) to impose a real unity on the poem. My purpose here is merely to point out, for the first time I believe, another disunifying influence, in that *Poly-Olbion* seems to have existed in more than one form during its long period of gestation. This fact may explain echoes of *Poly-Olbion* which several scholars have perceived in the later *Muses Elizium*.

The first eighteen songs of *Poly-Olbion* appeared in 1612, with elaborate notes by John Selden and ornate maps of the southern and western shires. The remaining twelve songs were published in 1622 in a more austere format, without Selden's notes, and preceded by a scathing preface "To Any That Will Read It". Drayton must certainly have begun the poem a good many years before publication. J. W. Hebel saw evidence of a starting point as early as 1594 in Amour 24 of Drayton's sonnet sequence *Ideas Mirrour*¹. This sonnet enumerates the singularities of famous English rivers, from Thames, crowned "for shyps and Swans", to "Ardens sweet Ankor", whose chief glory is the poet's mistress Idea. Here *Poly-Olbion* is anticipated in several respects: the thirteen rivers are mentioned in roughly the same order as they appear in *Poly-Olbion*. Rivers are personified as "boasting" and "commending", as in the longer work. Drayton's ostensible subject is Idea, but the poem shows him already an enthusiast of English geography.

Francis Meres's *Palladis Tamia* offers concrete evidence that *Poly-Olbion* was well underway by 1598: "As Ioan. Honterus in Latine verse writ 3. Bookes of Cosmography w^t Geographical tables: so Michael Drayton is now in penning in English verse a Poem called *Polu-Olbion* Geographical and Hydrographical of all

¹ Hebel, Introduction to *Poly-Olbion*, in *The Works of Michael Drayton*, IV (Oxford, 1933), viii.

the forests, woods, mountaines, fountaines, rivers, lakes, floods, bathes and springs that be in England"². Meres seems to have been a close associate of Drayton at this time; he writes more about Drayton than other Elizabethan poets, at one point even admitting his personal esteem for him: "[Drayton] quem toties honoris et amoris causa nomino"³. But what scholars seem to have overlooked about Meres's statement is that the author appears unaware of the wide range of historical lore in *Poly-Olbion*. The thirty songs are, in fact, more often historical in content than topographical. Meres seems to have had an intimate familiarity with the work at this point, and ought to have mentioned Drayton's historical narratives had they been as much in evidence as they were in 1612. One can only conclude that in 1598 Meres had seen a work that was descriptive, like Joannes Honterus' *Rudimenta Cosmographica* (1542), rather than narrative.

Meres was not the only acquaintance with whom Drayton discussed his work. Ben Jonson expressed disappointment over the recently published *Poly-Olbion* when he told Drummond in 1618, "That Michael Draytons Polyalbion (if he had performed what he promised to writte the deads of all ye Worthies) had been excellent"⁴. If Jonson was as knowledgeable as his remark suggests, Drayton must have changed his plan after 1598. The "Polyalbion" which Jonson heard about, and which Meres did not, was undoubtedly a narrative work, perhaps incorporating many of the tales of Brut, Arthur, Guy of Warwick, and other heroes which appear in the finished *Poly-Olbion*.

Such changes in plan, made over a period of about twenty years, must have caused extensive revision, so that Drayton (a compulsive reviser anyway) would have excised long passages of verse before arriving at his final draft. Some of the unused passages, omitted for their subject matter rather than their literary inferiority, may later have been included in poems where they were more appropriate. This conjecture would explain the recurrence of passages in Drayton's *Muses Elizium* (1630) which recall *Poly-Olbion*.

The ten "nimphalls" of *The Muses Elizium* are clearly in the pastoral tradition; but as one scholar has demonstrated, this sequence "is very close in several ways to *Poly-Olbion*, for the divinities, nymphs, hermits, and satyrs which people its shades, and the extended catalogues and contentions for supremacy which are its principal structural device can all be found in Drayton's

² *Palladis Tamia*, ed. D.C. Allen (New York, 1938), p. 281.

³ Meres, p. 281^v.

⁴ *Conversations*, in *Ben Jonson*, ed. C.H. Herford and Percy Simpson, I (Oxford, 1925), 132-133.

topographical epic⁵". The whole debate of the sixth nymphall might have been composed originally for *Poly-Olbion*, especially since it is written in alexandrine couplets (the meter of *Poly-Olbion*) and recalls many similar debates in the earlier work. The nymphs of the first nymphall play at the same sports as their sisters in the Cumberland Hills (*Poly-Olbion*, XXX, 131-136). The anchorite Clarinax, sorting his herbs in the fifth nymphall, resembles the hermit of *Poly-Olbion* who "sorts his simples got abroad" (XIII, 200-230). Also in the style of *Poly-Olbion*, the tenth nymphall deploras "beastly men" and the plunder of the English forests⁶.

While the evidence for some direct textual relationship between *Poly-Olbion* and *The Muses Elizium* is tenuous because wholly internal, it receives credence from the observations of Drayton's contemporaries. Assuming the accuracy of Meres's and Jonson's statements, we can safely say that between 1598 and 1612 Drayton contemplated at least two different lines of development for his work: one descriptive, the other narrative. Needless to say, the final poem was a synthesis of the two. After 1622, the unused fragments may have been incorporated into later poems; if so, they almost certainly contributed a number of the verses in *The Muses Elizium*.

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⁵ Ray L. Heffner, Jr., *Michael Drayton as a Pastoral Poet* (unpubl. diss. Yale, 1953), p. 219.

⁶ B. H. Newdigate notes thirteen passages in *Poly-Olbion* on the destruction of the forests (*Works*, V, 232).