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Le rythme dans
les littératures de
langue anglaise

**THE NOBLE STYLE OF THOMAS DELONEY:
RHYTHM AS AN INDICATION OF CHARACTER**

I. Introduction

It is curious that the prose works of Thomas Deloney (1543? - 1607?) have remained so relatively unknown and under-read: He is the first working-class person to produce prose fiction in the history of English literature; he is the first to rely heavily on the use of dialogue; he may be the inventor of the malapropism; and his four works of prose fiction (1597-1600) are quite simply a delight to read. He is an unabashed and enthusiastic promoter of the nobility of the working class, producing two novels about clothiers and two more about shoemakers. This essay, using the first of his shoemaker works, *The History of the Gentle Craft, Part I*, investigates his use of prose rhythm to indicate the noble nature – not the nobility – of his characters.

The History of the Gentle Craft, Part I tells three separate stories of shoemakers. Since few have read it, perhaps it would be best to sketch the three stories here at the outset.

1. The first is a legend, concerning Sir Hugh and his pursuit of the fair Winifred, who rejects his suit in favor of her devotion to the new religion of Christianity. Having failed to win her, he absents himself, has heroic adventures, eventually joins a band of shoemakers, and finally unites with Winifred as she is being martyred for her faith. He leaves his bones to the shoemakers, who make tools of them and make of him the patron saint of shoemaking.

2. The second concerns two princely brothers, Crispin and Crispianus, whose inheritance is stolen from them by an evil uncle. They escape, disappear by apprenticing themselves to a shoemaker, and have various adventures. One becomes a war hero; the other marries Ursula, the daughter of a king. As their noble nature shines through, they are eventually restored to their proper rank.

3. The third concerns Simon Eyre, an apprentice shoemaker who, out of funds one morning, promises his colleagues that if they will stake him to a pancake breakfast, he will declare an annual holiday in their honor when he attains the high post of Lord Mayor of London. He marries, prospers, and having eventually achieved his political ambition, keeps his promise.

All through the three stories, we hear three distinct styles intertwining – the artistic high style, the middle or realistic style, and the low style of farce. Deloney heard all of these, mixed together, on the Elizabethan stage; but the prose works of his time tended to be dominated by one or another of them.

The high style was influenced by John Lyly's immensely successful *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1578) and its sequel, *Euphues and His England* (1580). These works are characterized by what we would now consider a heavy-handed reliance on consistent isocolons, created by the balancing of prose rhythms, omnipresent alliteration and assonance, and a noticeably frequent use of antithesis. They represent the triumph of style over substance. They so caught the fancy of the English court that the style held sway for 15 years, until deflated by Robert Greene's coney-catching pamphlets (1592), which signaled the ascendancy of a more realistic, conversational style. The third style, the low style of farce, thrived in the widely popular jestbooks.

Deloney heard them all. He had a musical ear. A silk-weaver by trade, by 1592 he had become London's premier writer of ballads. When he decided, late in his career, to turn his attention to prose fiction (1597-1600), he wove the three styles together just as he did the three layers of society, the high, the middle, and the low.⁽¹⁾ The styles can be differentiated by how much or how little they resemble Lyly's Euphuistic style. What I wish to point out here is simply this: There is a direct correlation between the height of style and the nobleness of the character speaking. I say «nobleness,» not «nobility,» to distinguish the quality of human character from rank derived by birth. The more noble the actions of the character, the more repetition of sound and the more isocolonic balance of rhythm is present. At one extreme, a character can sound almost purely Euphuistic; at the other, the characters sounds entirely linear, unbalanced, and unaware that the rhythms and sounds of prose could have anything to do with the content being conveyed.

II. The Nature of Euphuism

A close look at one passage from Lyly should suffice to demonstrate the characteristics of the style that fascinated the upper class of England for 15 uninterrupted years. Here, a wise old man is lecturing the headstrong, young Euphues:

One drop of poison infecteth the whole tun of wine, one leaf of coloquintida mareth and spoileth the whole pot of porridge, one iron mole defaceth the whole piece of lawn:

Descend into thine own conscience, and consider with thyself the greatest difference between staring and stark blind, wit and wisdom, love and lust. Be merry but with modesty, be sober but not too solemn, be valiant but not too venturesome. Let thy attire be comely but not costly, thy diet wholesome but not excessive, use pastime as the word importeth, to pass the time in honest recreation: mistrust no man without cause, neither be thou credulous without proof, be not light to follow every man's opinion, nor obstinate to stand in thine own conceit. Serve God, love God, fear God, and God will so bless thee as either heart can wish or thy friends desire. And so I end my counsel, beseeching thee to begin to follow it.⁽²⁾

In order to demonstrate Lyly's technique, I reprint this passage as a colometric, interrupting on occasion for commentary.

| | | |
|-----------|----------------------|---------------------|
| One | drop of poison | infecteth |
| the whole | | tun of wine, |
| one | leaf of coloquintida | mareth and spoileth |
| the whole | | pot of porridge, |
| one | iron mole | defaceth |
| the whole | | piece of lawn: |

Lyly balances and alternates prose stresses to establish prose rhythms. Here three prose stresses per line alternate with two stresses per line. The middle two lines expand on the previous two: «coloquintida» is five syllables to the two of «poison»; «mareth and spoileth» gives us two verbs instead of the single verb «infecteth.» The third pair of lines contracts to balance the first pair of lines. These colometrics are best read vertically as well as horizontally.

| | | |
|--------------|----------------|-------------------------|
| Descend | into thine own | conscience, |
| and consider | with thyself | the greatest difference |
| | between | |
| staring | and | stark blind, |
| wit | and | wisdom, |
| love | and | lust. |

| | | |
|-------------------|------------|---------------------------|
| <i>Be merry</i> | <i>but</i> | <i>with modesty,</i> |
| <i>be sober</i> | <i>but</i> | <i>not too solemn,</i> |
| <i>be valiant</i> | <i>but</i> | <i>not too venturous.</i> |

The verticality dominates. «Descend» and «consider» are parallel verbs; but once again the second line expands on the former, the two-syllable verb being balanced by a three-syllable verb, and «the greatest difference» being longer than the vertically parallel «conscience.»

Alliteration begins to take over. All six of the pairs after the word «between» alliterate almost as if they were from the Anglo-Saxon long-line alliterative verse form. More subtly, he creates a sound chiasmus with the reversal of the «d» and «k» sounds in «Descend/conscience/consider/difference.»

He balances another contraction with a parallel expansion:

| | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>stark blind</i> | (two words) |
| <i>wisdom</i> | (one word, two syllables) |
| <i>lust</i> | (one word, one syllable) |
| compared to | |
| <i>with modesty</i> | (two words, four syllables) |
| <i>not too solemn</i> | (three words, four syllables) |
| <i>not too venturous</i> | (three words, five syllables) |

This is no accident. He does it throughout both works.

| | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>Let thy attire</i> | <i>be comely</i> | <i>but not costly,</i> |
| <i>thy diet</i> | <i>wholesome</i> | <i>but not excessive,</i> |
| <i>use pastime</i> | <i>as the word</i> | <i>importeth,</i> |
| <i>to pass the time</i> | <i>in honest</i> | <i>recreation:</i> |
| <i>mistrust</i> | <i>no man</i> | <i>without cause,</i> |
| <i>neither be thou</i> | <i>credulous</i> | <i>without proof,</i> |
| <i>be not light</i> | <i>to follow</i> | <i>every man's</i> |
| <i>nor obstinate</i> | <i>to stand</i> | <i>in thine own</i> |
| | | <i>opinion,</i> |
| | | <i>conceit.</i> |

Serve God,
love God,
fear God,
and God
will so bless thee as

| | | |
|---------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| <i>either</i> | <i>heart</i> | <i>can wish</i> |
| <i>or</i> | <i>thy friends</i> | <i>desire.</i> |

| | | |
|------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| <i>And so</i> | <i>I end</i> | <i>my counsel,</i> |
| <i>beseeching thee</i> | <i>to begin</i> | <i>to follow it.</i> |

The balances, less obvious perhaps, but fastidiously constructed, are concentrated for several lines in longer units. Three colometric pairs of lines beat out three stresses each, followed by an expansion to the pair of four-stress lines («be not light . . .»), so that the dramatic shift to the epistrophic four lines of two stresses («Serve God, love God . . .») allow the old man to end his sermon with an appropriate climax.

Such was the language of the highest class, dealing with the highest of moral questions. The English court over-indulged in this mode from 1578-1592. Deloney knew it well. It was the sound of noble thoughts.

III. Deloney's Legend: Sir Hugh and the Fair Winifred

Euphuism was the perfect language for courtship. Let us look at Sir Hugh's first attempt to convince Winifred to yield to him. To persuade her, he must win the rhetorical battle.

. . . I come again in a new conceit, to revive an old suit, and to see if the change of the day will yield a change of colors.

Truly Sir Hugh (quoth she) if with the change of the day you have changed your opinion: your dolor will be driven away well enough: but as touching your suit, it shall be needless to repeat it, because I am not willing to prefer it.

Stay there (quoth Sir Hugh) I will prefer it, so that you will accept it.

Now (quoth she) I will accept it, if you will prefer it, in sending it back to the place from whence it proceeded, and I would to God I could send you away as soon as your suit.

Why then belike I am not welcome (said Sir Hugh).

Yes (quoth she) as welcome to me, as a storm to a distressed Mariner. I muse greatly that reason will not rule you, nor words win you from your wilfulness; if you were

as weary to woo as I am weary to hear you, I am persuaded that long since you would have ceased your vain suit. You think by these persuasions to turn my opinion; but as well you may think that you may quench fire with oil: therefore I pray you, good Sir Hugh, be not so tedious unto me, nor troublesome to your self. (p.73-4)

To investigate this passage, it will be helpful to see it in colometric form, passage by passage, to display the internal rhythmic balances.

| | | |
|---------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| <i>I come again</i> | <i>in a new</i> | <i>conceit,</i> |
| <i>to revive</i> | <i>an old</i> | <i>suit,</i> |
| <i>and to see</i> | <i>if the change</i> | <i>of the day</i> |
| <i>will yield</i> | <i>a change</i> | <i>of dolors.</i> |

Hugh is trying to show off his Euphuistic wit. «New» balances «old»; «suit» repeats the sounds in «conceit»; «see» echoes both the consonantal sound of «suit» and the vocalic sound of «conceit,» which is also picked up by the vowel sound in «yield»; and the «change of the day» is repeated and expanded by the «change of dolors.» She follows his lead, but swats the ball back at him with greater power and sophisticated agility:

| | | |
|--------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| <i>Truly</i> | <i>Sir Hugh</i> | <i>(quoth she)</i> |
|--------------|-----------------|--------------------|

| | |
|---------------------------|----------------------|
| <i>if with the change</i> | <i>of the day</i> |
| <i>you have changed</i> | <i>your opinion:</i> |

| | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>your dolor</i> | <i>will be driven</i> |
| <i>away</i> | <i>well enough:</i> |

| | | |
|---------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| <i>but as</i> | <i>touching</i> | <i>your suit,</i> |
|---------------|-----------------|-------------------|

| | | |
|------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| <i>it</i> | <i>shall be needless</i> | <i>to repeat it,</i> |
| <i>because I</i> | <i>am not willing</i> | <i>to prefer it.</i> |

Her superiority is evident: She returns the «change of d . . .» parallel by doubling its length and adding yet more «d» alliteration with her «driven»; and then she turns the whole passage into a giant chiasmus by dismissing his «day/dolor» first and then attending, in reverse order, to his «suit» complaint. He hears this chiasmus and tries to show he can create a reversal of his own:

| | | |
|--------------------|------------------------|------------------|
| <i>Stay there</i> | <i>(quoth</i> | <i>Sir Hugh)</i> |
| <i>I</i> | <i>will prefer it,</i> | |
| <i>So that you</i> | <i>will accept it.</i> | |

First Deloney mockingly reverses for him the order of «Sir Hugh (quoth she)» with «(quoth Sir Hugh)». Then Sir Hugh lamely reverses her «repeat it/ prefer it» with his unimaginative «prefer it/accept it.» Scornfully, she reverses his reversal and explodes with her expansion, ending it triumphantly with her dismissal of «your suit»:

| | | |
|------------|---------------|-------------|
| <i>Now</i> | <i>(quoth</i> | <i>she)</i> |
|------------|---------------|-------------|

| | |
|---------------|------------------------|
| <i>I</i> | <i>will accept it,</i> |
| <i>if you</i> | <i>will prefer it,</i> |

| | | |
|----------------------|-------------|----------------------|
| <i>in sending it</i> | <i>back</i> | <i>to the place</i> |
| <i>from whence</i> | | <i>it proceeded,</i> |
| <i>and I would</i> | | <i>to God</i> |
| <i>I could send</i> | | <i>you away</i> |
| <i>as soon</i> | | <i>as your suit.</i> |

He knows he is beaten by a superior wit. He is reduced to a linear, non-balanced whimper:

Why then belike I am not welcome (said Sir Hugh).

Having won, she finishes him off with a Euphuistic flourish. Especially delicious is Deloney's «rhyming» of «she» and «me.» Notice also her virtuosic alliteration of «w»'s («words,» «win,» «wilfulness,» «were,» «weary,» «woo,» and «weary»).

| | | |
|-------------------|------------------------|-----------------|
| <i>Yes</i> | <i>(quoth</i> | <i>she)</i> |
| <i>as welcome</i> | <i>to me,</i> | |
| <i>as a storm</i> | <i>to a distressed</i> | <i>Mariner.</i> |

| | |
|--------------------|------------------------------|
| <i>I muse</i> | <i>greatly</i> |
| <i>that reason</i> | <i>will not rule you,</i> |
| <i>nor words</i> | <i>win you</i> |
| | <i>from your wilfulness;</i> |

| | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>if you</i> | <i>were as weary</i> | <i>to woo</i> |
| <i>as I</i> | <i>am weary</i> | <i>to hear you;</i> |
| <i>I am</i> | <i>persuaded</i> | <i>that long since</i> |
| <i>you would have ceased</i> | <i>your vain suit.</i> | |

| | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|
| <i>You think</i> | <i>by these</i> | <i>persuasions</i> |
| <i>to turn</i> | <i>my opinion;</i> | |
| <i>but as well</i> | <i>you may think that</i> | |
| <i>you may quench fire</i> | <i>with oil:</i> | |

| | | |
|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>therefore</i> | <i>I pray you,</i> | <i>good Sir Hugh,</i> |
| <i>be not</i> | <i>so tedious</i> | <i>unto me,</i> |
| <i>nor</i> | <i>troublesome</i> | <i>to your self.</i> |

Unlike his rigid vertical balancings, hers vary twos with threes, move forward relentlessly, and finish with a sense of cadential closure.

Sir Hugh slinks away, goes abroad for a while, grows up some, and returns to find her condemned to death for her religion. His gallant action of choosing to join in her martyrdom wins the prize that his earlier lust could not attain. She now speaks directly to him, elegantly balanced as before, but with no sign of disdain. (In the interest of space, I quote this passage only in my colometric form.)

(Winifred speaks)

| | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| <i>The love</i> | <i>of earthly</i> | <i>creatures</i> |
| <i>is mixed</i> | <i>with many</i> | <i>miseries,</i> |
| <i>And interlaced</i> | <i>with sundry</i> | <i>sorrows;</i> |

| | | |
|------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| <i>Thou</i> | <i>didst woo me</i> | <i>for love,</i> |
| <i>and now I</i> | <i>have won thee</i> | <i>to love,</i> |

| | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Where settling</i> | <i>both our selves</i> |
| <i>Upon God</i> | <i>His love,</i> |
| <i>we</i> | <i>will love</i> |
| | <i>one another;</i> |

| | | |
|---------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| <i>And in token</i> | <i>of that heavenly</i> | <i>love</i> |
| <i>receive</i> | <i>of me</i> | <i>I pray thee,</i> |
| <i>a chaste</i> | <i>and loving</i> | <i>kiss</i> |
| | <i>from my dying</i> | <i>lips.</i> |

(p.85)

When Sir Hugh responds, his balances are at first moderately good. There are no rough spots – even though there are no soaring moments. He has even learned to vary his twos with threes.

| | |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Fair Winifred</i> | <i>(quoit he)</i> |
| <i>it is true</i> | <i>indeed;</i> |

| | | |
|-------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| <i>I never</i> | <i>loved</i> | <i>truly</i> |
| <i>until thou</i> | <i>taughtest me</i> | <i>to love;</i> |

| | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| <i>for then</i> | <i>my love</i> | |
| <i>was full</i> | <i>of discontent:</i> | |
| <i>but now</i> | <i>altogether</i> | <i>pleasing,</i> |
| <i>and more sweet is</i> | <i>the thought</i> | <i>thereof</i> |
| <i>than any</i> | <i>tongue</i> | <i>can express.</i> |

When he continues, and tries to express the moral influence she has had upon him, he finally attains the level of her own elegance:

| | | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>That thing</i> | <i>that I ever</i> | <i>before called Love,</i> |
| <i>was but</i> | <i>a shadow</i> | <i>of love,</i> |
| <i>a sweetness</i> | <i>tempered</i> | <i>with gall,</i> |
| | <i>a dying</i> | <i>life,</i> |
| | <i>and a living</i> | <i>death,</i> |
| <i>where the heart</i> | <i>was continually</i> | <i>tossed</i> |
| <i>upon the Seas</i> | <i>of tempestuous</i> | <i>sorrows,</i> |
| <i>and wherein the mind</i> | <i>had no calm</i> | <i>quietness;</i> |
| <i>and therefore</i> | <i>blessed</i> | <i>be the time</i> |
| <i>that I ever</i> | <i>learned</i> | <i>this love.</i> |

He even reproduces her epistrophic ability – (see above her closing with «suit») – in his cadential closing with the repeated word «love.»

He is of the same nobility as before, but greater in nobleness. Therefore his Euphuistic balances have improved.

This influence reaches even his shoemaker friends, who are lifted to a greater height of nobleness when they decide to steal his bones to make tools of them, in his honor:

| | | |
|--------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>Why then</i> | <i>(said</i> | <i>the third man)</i> |
| <i>let us</i> | <i>soon</i> | <i>at night</i> |
| <i>steal</i> | <i>Saint Hughes bones</i> | <i>away,</i> |
| <i>and, albeit</i> | <i>the Tyrant</i> | <i>will be displeased,</i> |
| <i>yet</i> | <i>it is</i> | <i>no theft;</i> |

| | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| <i>for you say</i> | <i>they were given</i> | <i>to us,</i> |
| <i>and therefore</i> | <i>we may the bolder</i> | <i>take them;</i> |

And because we will turn them to profit,
and avoid suspicion,
we will make divers of our Tools with them,
and then if any virtue do follow them,
the better we shall find it.
(p.88)

With the exception of the prince Crispin and the extraordinary Simon Eyre (see below), the makers of shoes never again speak in this balanced form.

IV. Noble Princes Gone Under Cover: The Story of Crispin and Crispianus

When we turn to the second of the stories, we find a greater variety of prose rhythms, because we find there a greater variety of characters. Here we have Crispin and Crispianus, born princes, forced into disguise as shoemakers. When they apply for work, they have not yet shaken off their princely bearing entirely: They sound nobly balanced; but there is no tell-tale sign of Euphuistic wit:

Good sir, pardon our boldness,
and measure not our truth by our rudeness;
we are two poor boys that want service,
stripped from our friends by the fury of these wars,
and therefore are we enforced,
succourless to crave service in any place.
(p.92)

The alliteration is just enough to suggest their true character – («truth»/»two»; «service/stripped»; «friends/fury»; «succourless/service») – but not pronounced enough to give them away.

The shoemaker apprentices to whom they speak respond with no trace of rhythmic balance, no sense of isocolon, no alliteration, and no rhetorical wit:

What, have you no friends or acquaintance in these parts to go to (said the Shoemakers) by whose means you might get preferment?

The two princes respond with their customary balance, just as Shakespeare has noble characters speak in blank verse to commoners

who speak in prose. (For an example of this, see the first scene of *Julius Caesar*.)

Alas Sir (said Crispianus)
necessity is despised of every one,
and misery is trodden down of many;
but seldom or never relieved:
yet, notwithstanding,
if our hope did not yield us
some comfort of good hap,
we should grow desperate through distress.

When their mistress, the shoemaker's wife, comes to the door to respond, we can hear that she is above the apprentices but below the princes by the way her prose tilts a bit, but to no good purpose:

No by my troth (quoth she) you do look with honest true faces. I will entreat my husband for you, for we would gladly have good boys; and if you will be just and true, and serve God, no doubt you may do well enough. Come in, my lads, come in.

Later in the tale, this same lady is exasperated to learn that Crispin has gotten a maid with child. (She does not know that the maid is the princess Ursula, nor that the two young people are already married.) Her explosion is headlong and forceful, without any trace of controlled balance, but with slight hints of wit (demonstrating the heartfelt earnestness of her distress) in the alliterative way she lists the intolerable financial worries that lie in store for Crispin:

What, how now (quoth she) hast thou got a Maid with child? Ah thou whoreson villain, thou hast undone thy self, how wilt thou do now? Thou hast made a fair hand; here is now sixteen pence a week beside soap and candles, beds, shirts, biggins, waistmantles, headbands, saddlebands, crosse-clothes, bibs, tailclouts, mantles, hose, shoes, coats, petticoats, cradle and crickets, and beside that a standing-stole, and a posnet to make the child pap: all this is come upon thee, be sides the charges of her lying-in. Oh Crispin, Crispin, I am heartily sorry for thee. (p.103)

It is a veritable torrent of words, without rhythmic control; but the alliterative connections heighten the comic outrage – not moral, as one

might expect, but financial. It is a moment not unworthy of Shakespeare. She is more self-composed than Mistress Quickly ever was.

When Ursula and Crispin first interact with each other, as princess and shoemaker, neither speaks with any sense of noble rhythmic balance. Crispin has learned to act the shoemaker full force; and she has no reason to suspect he is anything other than what he seems.

Nay, (quoth she) I'll show thee, they are not too low something in the instep; also the heel is bad, and besides that, they are too straight in the toes.

You shall have a pair made (said he) shall fit you better, for none shall set a stitch in them but mine own self.

Do, said the Princess, but let me have them so soon as thou canst, and therewith Crispin departed. (pp.94-5)

But once they have become attracted to each other and the wooing begins, both immediately assume the sound of noble beings. Note that his rhetorical skill is just a touch above hers: He is nobler in character than she, despite her high birth. Thus his balances flow just a bit more smoothly than hers.

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| Truly if I I should shew my self | Madam should not accept more unmannerly | (said Crispin) of your good will, than well nurtured: |
| to grace me | But seeing with your Princely and to give me to speak | it pleaseth you countenance, liberty my mind, |
| this If I | is my were to choose then would | opinion: a wife, I have one |
| faire, first, secondly, and thirdly, | rich, to delight to supply to govern | and wise; mine eye; my want, my house. |

| | | |
|------------------------------|---|---|
| her beauty and her wisdom | Then I will refer unto but as concerning | (said the Princess) unto the judgment of thine own eyes, the trial of Time: her portion, |
|------------------------------|---|---|

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| I dare because For at a bag full | make some it well deserveth her marriage of rare virtues | report, to be praised; thou shalt have with her. . . . |
|---|---|---|

| | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| But couldst to die | thou not for a ladies | be contented love? |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|

| | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| No if I could keep | Madam her love | (quoth he) and live. |
|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|

(p.96)

Notice especially the argument-capping chiasmus, in which he reverses her «die . . . love» with his «love . . . live.»

This dialogue is not the high Euphuistic banter of Sir Hugh and Winifred; but it is still a balanced give-and-take, controlled, and seeking an equality in their relationship. Their style precisely reveals their character.

V. The Truth Will out: Rhythmic Balance and the Lack of It in the Story of Simon Eyre

Though Simon Eyre is a shoemaker's apprentice, he does not sound like one. His noble character is evident the moment he speaks. Penniless one day, he addresses his friends, asking them to stake him to a good breakfast. His Euphuistic abilities reveal his ability eventually to rise in status.

My faithful friends, and Conduit companions, treasurers of the water tankard, and main pillars of the pudding house, I may now compare my purse to a barren Doe, that yields the Keeper no more good than an empty carcass: or to a bad nut, which, being opened, hath never a kernel . . .
(p.110)

The rhythmic balances and the constant, counter-balancing alliteration reveal his character:

| | | |
|--|---------|---|
| My faithful and Conduit treasurers And main pillars | compare | friends, companions, of the water tankard, of the pudding house, |
| I may now to a barren that yields | | my purse Doe, the Keeper |

| | |
|----------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>no more</i> | <i>good</i> ⁽³⁾ |
| <i>than an empty</i> | <i>carcass:</i> |
| <i>or to a bad</i> | <i>nut,</i> |
| <i>which, being</i> | <i>opened,</i> |
| <i>hath never</i> | <i>a kernel . . .</i> |

Compare this to its extreme opposite – the speech of the French apprentice John, who has just arrived in England and does not yet control the English language:

The fellow, being a Frenchman that hath not long been in England, turning about, said, Hey? what you say? Will you speak wid me: Hey? What you have? tell me, what you have, Hey? (p.110-11)

His rhythms are worthy of the beginning passages of Stravinsky's «Rite of Spring,» where the accentuations of notes are intended to violate every listener's rhythmic expectations. You cannot dance to it.

Even after John has been in the country a while, he still cannot reproduce the rhythms of nobleness:

Truly Sir (quoth John) I am my self but a stranger in this Country and utterly unacquainted with Merchants, but I dwell with one in this City that is a very honest man, and it may be that he can help you to some that will deal with you for it, and if you think it good, I will move him in it, and in the mean space, I'll bring you where you may have a very good lodging; tomorrow morning I will come to you again. (p.111)

This linearity is maintained for all characters of the lowest nature in the tale. Here is the lady of his choice, Florence, whose interests in life do not extend beyond her immediate creature comforts and the maintenance of her sexual advantages:

I never said so (quoth Florence) but Hans told me that you made your boast that I was at a beck of your finger; and that you could make me follow you up and down the whole City for a pint of Wine; no, I would you should well understand, I will not follow a better man than you. (p.126)

Compare the language of their courtship with the relative elegance of the Crispin/Ursula scene and the high elegance of the struggle between Sir Hugh and Winfred:

What, Florence, what have you in your basket? Hey, let me see what you buy.

Marry, John, (quoth she) I have bought Beef and Mutton, and other things. Come, come, must you peep in my basket (quoth she) away, for shame away.

Be Got, Florence, me will see a little: ha, ha! Florence, you buy the pudding, hey? You love de puddings? Florence, hey?

Yea, Sir (quoth she) what if I do love puddings? What care you?

Of my tra, Florence, if I be your husband me will give you pudding, shall warren.

My husband (quoth she)? In faith Sir, no, I mean not to marry a Frenchman.

What Florence, de Frenchman be de good man: but Florence, me will give you a pint of wine by my treat.

O, I cannot stay now, I thank you, John.

What (quoth he) Florence, no stay with your friend? I shall make you stay a little time. (p.118)

Once Simon Eyre has achieved his position as Lord Mayor, we find his speech elegant and controlled, with rolling rhythms and substantial alliteration. Since he is no legend and no saint, his language is not on the highest level of formal balance, such as that of Sir Hugh's; but it still rings of confidence and control. Here are his comments to his wife when he commits to repaying all shoemakers, as promised, with an annual free breakfast:

| | |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>These</i> | <i>were the words,</i> |
| <i>little thinking</i> | <i>(God wot)</i> |
| <i>that ever</i> | <i>it should come to pass:</i> |
| <i>but such</i> | <i>was the great</i> |
| <i>goodness</i> | <i>of our God,</i> |

*who setteth up
 and pulleth down
 to bring
 to the seat
 For as the scripture
 Promotion
 from the East
 but from him
 of all*

*the humble,
 the proud,
 whom he pleaseth
 of Honor.
 witnesseth,
 cometh neither
 nor from the West,
 that is the giver
 good things,*

*of heaven
 Wherefore
 seeing
 hath bestowed that
 that I never*

*and earth.
 wife,
 God
 upon me
 looked for;*

it is reason that I should perform my promise:

*and being able
 I'll pay that
 then able
 for I would not have
 that I am like*

*now,
 which I was not
 to do:
 men say
 the Ebon-tree,*

that neither bears leaves nor fruit.

*Wherefore
 seeing that
 is so near
 I will
 fulfill
 which upon that day*

*wife,
 Shrove Tuesday
 at hand,
 upon that day
 my promise,
 I made.*

(p.132)

His long string of strong twos is interrupted on occasion by a three – but only at moments when his syntactic structure comes to some significant kind of closure. There is nothing witty here: He doesn't play with words; he doesn't balance things that need by their nature to be balanced; and he makes no use of parallelism or chiasmus. The prose rhythms neither lift us nor impress us; but in a workmanlike way, he makes sure that there is a place for everything, and that everything is in some kind of recognizable place. He is what his style says he is – capable, confident, and in control.

VI. Apologist for the Middle Class

Deloney does all this in support of his concept that true nobility is available at any level of society. While that sense of high character is not

dependent upon birth or rank, it is not shared equally among all creatures: It is dependent on character, on cleverness, and – most importantly – on achievement. His heroes, throughout all four novels, are the workingmen who make good. In *Jack of Newbury*, John Winchcombe, a broadcloth weaver, ascends high enough not only to entertain King Henry VIII for dinner, but also to challenge him concerning injustices. This was not the first time Deloney had brought a middle class workingman face to face with his monarch: The only contemporary negative comment on Deloney as a writer that we have comes from Steven Slany, who wrote William Cecil, the Lord Treasurer, accusing Deloney of «bringing in her Highness [Queen Elizabeth] to speak with her people in dialogue in very fond and undecent sort.»⁽⁴⁾ Merritt Lawliss suggests that Slany is referring to a ballad of Deloney's, now lost, addressing the scarcity of grain during the early part of 1596.⁽⁵⁾ In Deloney's fictional worlds, such social intercourse was justified by a sense of moral equality. A good king and a good clothier should have much in common and a lot to talk about.

A shoemaker's son, according to Deloney's legend, «is said to be a Prince born.» The rising tide of mercantilism offered new powers, local perhaps, but tangible and substantial, that Deloney wished to demonstrate not simply by the happiness of plot but also by the equality of language. Manipulation and control of financial affairs is mirrored by the strict manipulation and control of prose rhythms, figures of speech, and the echo of the repeated sounds of alliteration and assonance. What is most striking in Deloney's style is the wide range of variation of competency with which he endows his character's speech. Although Winifred and Sir Hugh are of the same class, her abilities to control language exceed his because the nobleness of her character exceeds his. Both speak a more formally constructed language than Crispin, who in turn is more skillful and varied than Simon Eyre; but all of them speak a balanced language far beyond that of any of the lesser characters, who have not achieved and cannot achieve their level of accomplishment. Deloney's vision we might call Democratic, finding its source in a free enterprise system that, he seems to have believed, would eventually take over British society.

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