EDMUND WALLER

Of the Last Verses in the Book

When we for age could neither read nor write,
The subject made us able to indite;
The soul, with nobler resolutions decked,
The body stooping, does herself erect.

No mortal parts are requisite to raise
Her that, unbodied, can her Maker praise.
The seas are quiet when the winds give o’er;
So calm are we when passions are no more!
For then we know how vain it was to boast
Of fleeting things, so certain to be lost.

Clouds of affection1 from our younger eyes
Conceal that emptiness which age descries.
The soul’s dark cottage, battered and decayed,
Lets in new light through the chinks that time has made;

Stronger by weakness, wiser men become,
As they draw near to their eternal home.
Leaving the old, both worlds at once they view,
That stand upon the threshold of the new.

On a Girdle

That which her slender waist confined,
Shall now my joyful temples bind;
No monarch but would give his crown,
His arms might do what this has done.

It was my heaven’s extremest sphere,1
The pale2 which held that lovely deer;
My joy, my grief, my hope, my love
Did all within this circle move!

A narrow compass! and yet there

Dwelt all that’s good, and all that’s fair;
Give me but what this ribbon bound,
Take all the rest the sun goes round!

1686

1. Passion.
2. The last of the nine concentric crystalline spheres which, according to Ptolemaic astronomy, made up the universe. Hence, the lady’s outermost garment.

Of English Verse

Poets may boast, as safely vain,
Their work shall with the world remain;
Both bound together live or die,
The verses and the prophecy.

5 But who can hope his lines should long
Last in a daily changing tongue?
While they are new, envy prevails,
And as that dies, our language fails.

When architects have done their part,
The matter may betray their art;
Time, if we use ill-chosen stone,
Soon brings a well-built palace down.

Poets that lasting marble seek
Must carve in Latin or in Greek;
We write in sand, our language grows,
And like the tide our work o’erflows.

Chaucer his sense can only boast,
The glory of his numbers lost!
Years have defaced his matchless strain;
And yet he did not sing in vain.

The beauties which adorned that age,
The shining subjects of his rage,
Hoping they should immortal prove,
Rewarded with success his love.

This was the generous poet’s scope,
And all an English pen can hope,
To make the fair approve his flame
That can so far extend their name.

Verse thus designed has no ill fate
If it arrive but at the date
Of fading beauty, if it prove
But as long-lived as present love.

1668

1. To understand Waller’s deprecatory attitude toward English poetry, we must recall that in his
day modern English was very new, and was still acquiring new words, forms, and usages at a rapid
place. We write in sand, he says, the tide of lan-
guage rises, and overflows our work. In those days
it was true.
2. Metrics, versification. The belief that Chaucer’s
versification was hopelessly obsolete led to such ventures as Dryden’s “translation” of some of his
Canterbury Tales into modern (i.e., 17th-century) English.
3. Poetic fury, inspiration. As it calls attention to
its own artifice, the word “rage” is a piece of poetic
diction.