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Thomas Tusser's Counter-Almanac Poetics

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Abstract

The essay argues that Thomas Tusser's *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* amends and enhances the kind of simplified instructions found in early modern almanacs. Through his unusual formal choices, such as his digressions and contractions, Tusser registers the difficulties and inconsistencies of farming in southern England, in turn preparing his readers for what he believes is the 'slippery' nature of his readers' own environments.

Keywords: Agriculture, Almanac, Environment, Tusser

1. *Introduction*

Near the beginning of *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* (1573), Thomas Tusser coins a curious term for his poetic style. As he proclaims in 'The Author's Epistle to the late Lord William Paget', a dedicatory poem which appears in every edition of the text, his book sings 'another' kind of 'song': 'a music strange' (1984, 1). Tusser recalls

> Since being once, at Cambridge taught,
> Of Court ten yeeres I made assaie,
> No Musicke then was left unsaught,
> Such care I had to serve that waie.
> When joie gan slake, then made I change,
> Expulsed mirth, for Musick strange.
>
> My Musicke since hath bene the plough,
> Entangled with some care among,
> The gaine not great, the paine ynough,
> Hath made me sing another song.
> Which song, if well I may avow,
> I crave it judged be by yow. (ll. 19-30)

In part, these stanzas are a declaration of independence: professional, aesthetic, and otherwise. Tusser dedicates much of his dedicatory poem to disentangling himself from the court (Oldenburg 2019, 279).[1] If he was once a court musician, who 'left' 'no music' 'unsaught', Tusser realizes that his current practice – his work as a farmer – demands a different music altogether: 'another song', shaped by the 'care' and 'payne' of agricultural labor (Skura 2008, 132).[2] Even his verse registers a sonic shift. At the very moment Tusser announces his departure from the court, his rhyme scheme changes, devolving into a series of eye rhymes: 'plough' and 'ynough', 'among' and 'song'. Part of what distinguishes these rhymes, in fact, is that they may not be eye rhymes: depending upon the reader's dialect, 'plow' and 'ynough' – in free variance with 'enow' – may or may not seem jarring.[3] This is indeed a 'music strange': subtle, off-kilter, distinct. Early in his text, Tusser establishes his willingness to experiment with form: to write something 'strange' – even something bad – in response to his 'strange' experiences.

Yet few critics have been sympathetic to his attempt. To many, in fact, Tusser's verse is not a 'music strange', but no music at all: a mere 'haphazard rhyming of rural life' (Oldenburg 2019, 277). As Scott Oldenburg has summarized, 'the emphasis on Tusser's status as a farmer has led some modern readers to presume a lack of craft' (*ibid.*). With its 'range of miscellaneous material', *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* once held 'wide appeal' (Skura 2008, 126): the text – primarily a series of monthly husbandry poems, with many 'digressions' – was one of the most popular books in early modern England, acclaimed for its valuable advice, even its deft verse (Tusser 1984, v-ix; Skura 2008, 176; Oldenburg 2019, 276).[4] From 1557 to 1573, when the book grew from its first to its final edition, it was reprinted multiple times; after 1573, 'it was … reprinted at least ten more times', with favorable reception into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Oldenburg 2019, 276). No such acclaim exists today. Instead, and to a near myopic extent, critics have focused upon the poor quality of Tusser's verse: its 'carelessness and wilfulness in rime', its 'broken rhythms, bad grammar, and abominable syntax' (Child 1934, 185; Grigson 1984, xix). According to Amy Erickson, Tusser offers 'the most execrable extant example of Elizabethan verse' (1993, 54). 'No one has ever pretended', Geoffrey Grigson even claims, 'that this farmer-musician or musician-farmer could write other than abominably' (1984, xvii).

More subtle – though still dismissive – arguments have emphasized the text's mnemonic qualities. As G.E. Fussell declares, *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is 'written in doggerel verse, probably with the idea that rhyme would be of assistance to the supposedly sluggish brains of the rural community' (1978, 8). This claim often appears in criticism on Tusser. To C.S. Lewis, *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is a series of 'mnemonic jingles' (1944, 262); to Wendy Wall, it is a series of 'agrarian … jingles' (2006, 160). What these critics suggest is that Tusser writes effective didactic verse, if not exactly great literature. Even more recent critics – who have argued for the wider literary significance of Tusser – have assumed that his verse is primarily mnemonic. In 2022, Jessica Rosenberg argued that the 'small forms' of Tusser's poetry, particularly the couplet, inspired Shakespeare's approach to the sonnet (221). Her reading updates the typical dismissal of Tusser's work, while maintaining the basic suppositions of the argument: by her account, Tusser is once again a poet mainly interested in small, extractable forms, which his readers could collect and put to use (221-254). Though these critics do not

[1] Oldenburg notes that 'Tusser engages in a poetics subtly counter to that of the Elizabethan court' (2019, 279).

[2] As Skura observes, Tusser writes a kind of 'reverse pastoral' (2008, 132).

[3] Though these words may indeed rhyme depending upon pronunciation, several critics have identified these particular rhymes as eye rhyme, as well as Tusser's general tendency towards this kind of rhyme. See Payne and Herrtage 1878, xxii; Child 1934, 185.

[4] I am indebted to Oldenburg for this summary of Tusser's early publication and reception history.

'presume' a complete 'lack of craft', their respect for Tusser's craft is limited (Oldenburg 2019, 277). Tusser's work is memorable, if not much else: another misleading characterization of this multivalent text.

This article will listen more closely to Tusser's 'music strange'. As I will argue, neither of these previous assessments – Tusser as an inept poet, or Tusser as a mnemonic rhymer – is entirely accurate. Rather than dismissing Tusser's poetry as bad, or focusing only on his rhyming couplets, I will attend to the full range of Tusser's text: the many poems that, like 'The Author's Epistle to the Late Lord William Paget', explore a different poetics.[5] Part of what I would like to stress, quite simply, is that *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is more than a series of mnemonic couplets. Alongside these poems – even within them – are less biddable forms. Tusser's poems omit important information. They elide words, phrases, and verbs. They experiment with different kinds of rhyme, or with unusual syntax: knotty, dense, and eclectic. In fact, many of these poems are not all that easy to remember. At times, they seem to resist comprehension itself.

As I will argue, the difficulty of Tusser's poetry is by design: the product of careful – not shoddy – craftsmanship. Tusser is more than an inept poet, who has bungled even his attempt at mnemonic couplets: rather, the primary qualities of his work – its memorability and its roughness – exist in compelling tension with one another. In this way, my argument aligns with the work of other recent critics, who have likewise argued that Tusser writes 'not non-poetry but a different kind of poetry' (Oldenburg 2019, 280). Scott Oldenburg, in particular, has claimed that Tusser's work counters a courtly 'poetry increasingly modeled on Continental trends' (277). As he argues, Tusser's verse is deliberately unartful, 'focused on agricultural labor in an intentional contrast with courtly leisure' (280). What Oldenburg describes is not a husbandry manual in verse, but a literature 'of soil [and] toil' (281), which 'found in 'the everyday language of the farmer … a kind of poetry' (282). Likewise, Anders Greene-Crow has argued that Tusser approaches 'poetry as a practical tool' for husbandmen, which could 'help his readers grapple with the kinds of strain they faced due to the changing agricultural economy' (2025, 16). For Tusser, Greene-Crow writes, 'lyric form' (47) does not 'simply … help his readers remember his principles' (28): rather, it 'can guide the farmer in devising ordered structures that will lead to prosperity' (47).

This article will build upon these approaches to Tusser. Instead of situating *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* amidst the 'aesthetic … developments in early Elizabethan England', I would like to reconsider its debts to the practical literature of its day (Oldenburg 2019, 277). This is not to contradict either argument. Part of what makes Tusser's verse 'strange', as Oldenburg himself admits, is its variety of influences, 'courtly aesthetics' (Oldenburg 2019, 278), 'georgic writing' (Skura 2008, 135), 'classical literature' (*ibid.*), and 'sixteenth-century theology' (Stevenson 2002, 140). Yet to better understand the poetic 'intricacies' of the text (Greene-Crow 2025, 28), I would like to reconsider the relationship between *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* and early modern almanacs: a relationship often noted, if often oversimplified. *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* has much in common with these popular, portable texts, which combined 'a detailed monthly calendar' with 'astrological, medical, and agricultural' information (Smyth 2008, 201). Even its earliest version – the comparably slight *A hundreth good pointes of husbandry* (1557) – shows their influence: unlike earlier English husbandry guides, but like an almanac, the text is organized by season, not by topic (Fussell 1978, 4-9; Skura 2008, 138). In fact, Tusser made his book of poetry more and more like an

[5] Greene-Crow has also recently stressed the poetic 'intricacies of the *Points*' (2025, 28).

almanac over time. As almanacs included 'ancillary material', Tusser included 'ancillary material'; as almanacs gave autobiographical details, Tusser gave autobiographical details (Smyth 2008, 203; Skura 2008, 126-148; Jensen 2021, 2). If Tusser drew upon classical georgic, he also drew upon these disposable texts: *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* can even be understood as an expanded version of their calendar poems.[6] The form is encoded into his text's very DNA: a core structural principle for *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie*.

For many critics, the poem's similarity to such practical texts – to these 'vulgar little publications' – is a major weakness (Curth 2007, 2). Most have described *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* as an almanac in an attempt to 'deny [it] the status of poetry' (Oldenburg 2019, 275). Part of the problem is that Tusser's text and early modern almanacs appear to share the same set of flaws. Both are didactic, popular, and (seemingly) unsophisticated; more to the point, both contain famously bad poetry. Amongst other poetic sins, both are full of mnemonic couplets, which appear to function as mere containers for information. As Bernard Capp has detailed, such almanac poetry was widely mocked, even – or especially – by early modern contemporaries: by the Restoration, one could be deemed 'as bad a rhymer as an almanac maker' (1979, 225). Even more worryingly, almanacs were thought to cultivate a naïve and trusting readership, who found themselves unable to act independently, even to think critically (Walker 2018a). Almanacs were simple texts for simple minds, suited to 'a world correspondingly defined by mundane, manageable problems' (Doloff 1991, 228).

Yet Tusser avoids this approach. *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is no straightforward almanac. Rather, Tusser consistently mixes simple and complex forms: at times reproducing the almanac's mnemonic couplets; at other times offering a more opaque poetics. This confusing interplay, I argue, is part of Tusser's didactic strategy. In other words, the curious, contradictory qualities of Tusser's text – its memorability and its roughness – are part of his measured attempt to write a different type of almanac: one which prepares its readers for the complex work of husbandry itself. For Tusser, didactic poetry need not only be mnemonic: rather, it can challenge and confuse its readership. His 'small forms' are indeed extractable, as previous critics have argued (Rosenberg 2022, 221), but they are also thematic: forms which resist the almanac's tendency towards a 'totality of scope' (Smyth 2008, 201).[7] What Tusser creates is a poem that teaches about uncertainty – the uncertainty of farming itself – through its own uncertain poetics.

This article will proceed in three parts. First, I will read early modern almanacs as didactic texts. As I will suggest, their emphasis on clarity, accessibility, and ease is strikingly different from *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie*. I will then consider Tusser's unique approach to instruction. In his prefatory poems, Tusser weighs the merits of direct guidance – the kind of assistance provided by an almanac – with his own experiences. As Tusser makes clear, he did not benefit from any outside instruction, instead learning to farm through a trial-and-error process: a method which, despite its difficulties, ultimately leads to superior results. As I will finally argue, this complex relationship with learning shapes Tusser's own text. *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie*, I suggest, is a book that does not want to coddle its readers. Tusser's understanding of the importance of practice leads him to turn his own text into a kind of practice: to give his readers not simply a list of mnemonic precepts but to actively prepare them for the complexities of rural life.

[6] Critics have debated the extent of this influence. Though some see a strong connection between Tusser's work and classical georgic, others see relatively minor classical influence. See Stevenson 2002, 140-142; Goodman 2004, 154; Skura 2008, 135.

[7] As Smyth writes, though 'almanacs were diminutive volumes', 'they made claims to a kind of totality of scope' (2008, 201).

2. *Almanacs and Mock Almanacs*

Most early modern almanacs were not read. Rather, these texts were consulted and checked, valued by their audience for their collection of useful information. More than poems, or even instructions, almanacs were full of data: astronomical calculations, ecclesiastical anniversaries, lunar charts, tide tables, shire catalogues, even lists of good days and bad days (Jensen 2021, 98-115).[8] Most presented this information in a set order. Before the twelve-month calendar, almanacs included a declaration, or a list of 'the basic calendar data for that particular year' (106); a zodiac man, or a 'visual reminder … of which zodiac sign ruled which part of the body' (109); and a list of 'elections', or calculations of 'the best time to carry out some given action based on astrological considerations' (Curth 2007, 107). The calendar itself portrayed the twelve months as a series of charts, with one month per page (Jensen 2021, 112-115). These charts were highly visual, often rubricated, arranged in careful columns and rows (98 and 112-115). Most 'note[d] the number of days in the month and the time for sunrise and sunset on the first day of the month', as well as 'more precise data, including the exact time for sunrise, in some cases for every day of the year' (113-114).

What these texts prioritized was accessibility. Almanac writers did not claim to offer special insights: rather, they stressed that their texts contained useful information. In the opening pages of *An almanacke and prognostication* (1570), Philip Moore emphasizes that its 'contents' are 'plain', 'briefe', and 'easie' (Early English Books Online, frame 6, left side). Within this text, Moore writes, are 'Certaine playne and briefe notes concernyng the yere, and the partes thereof, with generall rules, right necessarie and profitable to knowen of all men', as well as 'A verie plain and easie table, by whiche you maie forthwith finde any moueable feast' (frame 6, left side). These values – comprehensiveness and comprehensibility – were fundamental to the form. Even as almanacs expanded in the seventeenth century, coming to include a wider range of 'ancillary material', their basic priorities did not change (Jensen 2021, 2). In his 1628 *A new Almanacke and Prognostication for the yeere of our Lord God,* John White claims to consider 'the state of the whole year; the disposition of each Quarter; the inclination of the Weather for euery quarter of the Moone' along 'With the rising and setting of the Planets, Husbandry aduertisemnets, and other things fit to bee knowne, both pleasant and profitable' (Early English Books Online, frame 9, right side). Once again, the almanac stresses the sheer breadth of its contents – the 'state of the whole year' – as well as its usefulness. This information might be extensive, but it is also 'pleasant and profitable': accessible to many kinds of readers (*ibid.*).

The written sections of almanacs were likewise straightforward. Though I have thus far stressed their charts and tables, almanacs were more than just collections of data. Rather like *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie*, most almanacs included a 'series of dedicatory letters', 'some addressed to readers, some to patrons', which often 'offered a defense of astrology' (Jensen 2021, 118-119). Otherwise, the prose in early modern almanacs was not argumentative but directive: the elections, which gave instructions for specific activities; and the prognostication, located after the calendar, which 'predicted the year to come' (109). The elections, in particular, were written to be clear, authoritative, and unambiguous. Take George Osborne's 'Husbandicall Elections' (1622): 'Sheare sheepe … fell Copice, and lop trees the Moon encreasing. … Set or sow Onyons, Garlick, Parsneps, Carrets, Beanes, Pease, and such like, after the full moone' (B4v). Here, Osborne sets clear timelines for particular tasks. Certain tasks – sheep-shearing, hedge-planting, and tree-lopping – should be completed as the moon waxes; other tasks – sowing

[8] I am grateful to Phebe Jensen for her summary.

onions, parsnips, beans, and peas – should be completed after the full moon. These instructions leave no room for misinterpretation, nor indeed for differentiation. As Osborne makes clear, they apply to all readers, regardless of their circumstances.

This guidance was often reinforced over the body of the almanac. Many writers elaborated upon the shorter versions of their instructions in later sections of the text. In his *An almanack and prognostication* (1570), for example, Philip Moore first lists 'certaine necessarie and profitable rules alwaies to bee obserued' (Early English Books Online, frame 7, left side). As Moore writes, drawing upon astrology:

> To set, sowe, plant … or cut vines, the best tymes be in Taurus, Virgo, and Capricorn, the Moone beyng in the encrease.
> To cut or geld cattaill, in Aries, Libra, and Sagittarius, the Moone being in the Wane. (*Ibid.*)

Moore then expands list form – these short infinitive phrases – into full, month-by-month instructions. As he states in the Prognostication, certain tasks must be completed in January:

> In Januarie, cutte downe your timber, wood … Stubbe … your Meadowes, and earable groundes, so doing your stubble shall not [growe] again. And these thynges are moste conueniently dooen, within fower daies of the latter ende of the Moone. (Frame 26, left side)

Moore offers such set instructions for each month: mole-killing in April, mowing in July, and so on. What the text offers is thus a kind of checklist: a 'remembraunce' (*ibid.*), as Moore puts it, of the exact steps to success (42). Even the switch from infinitives to imperatives reinforces his authority.

What grants these texts such confidence – such a clear sense of the optimal times for each activity – is their basis in astrology. Almanacs, critics have long noted, 'were predominantly astrological publications', whose writers were no husbandmen (Curth 2007, 58). Rather than drawing upon any experience in the field, these texts considered 'the general character of planetary influences on the weather, agriculture, and husbandry' in order to '[offer] advice on the correct times for carrying out planting, tending, and harvesting' (40). Hence their characteristic straightforwardness. Almanacs countered the uncertainty of agricultural labor with the certainty of astrological prediction. To succeed, these texts promised, a reader need only follow their guidance. From month to month, even from day to day, almanac readers would have had a plan: knowing, for example, that they would sow when the moon was in Pisces during fair weather in March.

Almanac poetry likewise offered clear direction. As Bernard Capp has noted, these poems were 'functional' poems, often found at the top of each monthly chart: simple, straightforward, and accessible (1979, 225). Rather than offering new insights – or engaging in literary experimentation – these poems created a coherent line of guidance through the almanac. Most were mnemonic couplets, which tailored medical and husbandry advice to each month.[9] In his 1571 *A newe Almanacke and Prognostication*, for example, George Gossenne provides the following advice for February:

> Sow Peasen, Beanes, and … likewise,
> Pul Mosse from trees that frute do beare,
> Plant trees and Roses with such like,
> When this is done, lesse neede it thou care. (Early English Books Online, frame 4, left side)

[9] Jensen notes that it was usual for an almanac to include short 'poems on weather or physic' (2021, 228).

Once again, the form enhances the almanac's clarity and cohesion: these couplets repeat the same advice found in Gossene's earlier prose elections. In John White's 1628 calendar, meanwhile, each month is prefaced by a couplet offering medical guidance: in July, White advises readers to 'Eat Sallads fresh to coole the Blood, / And bathe in Riuers free from Mud' (frame 6, right side), while in January, 'Warme Meates and Clothes this Month are good / Take heed of Bathes and letting Blood' (frame 3, right side). Like the rest of the almanac, these couplets are clear and uncomplicated: crafted, in fact, to avoid ambiguity.

For certain writers, this very pose of certainty was the most problematic aspect of these texts. As Bernard Capp has noted, 'the ubiquity of the almanac stimulated the development of a … sub-literary genre of satirical works': the mock almanac (1979, 231). These satirical texts targeted the spurious claims found in early modern almanacs: as Capp has detailed, many mock almanacs included a set of parodic prognostications, absurd for their obviousness, such as the 'very aged [will] die' (231). Yet satirists were often even more troubled by the effect of such predictions upon their audience.[10] Again and again, these texts portrayed almanac readers as 'hopelessly' passive, 'uneducated', and 'gullible' (Smyth 2008, 206). As Thomas Browne laments, almanac readers come to 'assent unto any prognostication' and 'daily swallow the predictions of men' (1981, 20).[11] In his play *The Masque of Heroes* (1619), Thomas Middleton describes a farmer who finds himself unable to carry out basic tasks without his almanac:

> This farmer will not cast his seed i'th'ground
> Before he look in Bretnor; there he find
> Some word which he hugs happily, as "Ply the box",
> "Make hay betimes", "It falls into thy month". (Quoted in Walker 2018a, 137)[12]

The almanac, in other words, has disconnected the farmer from his farm. Rather than relying upon his own judgment – his direct experience of natural conditions – this farmer relies upon his text. Middleton even appears to condemn the almanac's kind of simplified, extractable advice: the farmer 'happily hugs' the anodyne phrases of 'Make hay betimes', or 'It falls into thy month'. What almanacs have created is a population out of touch with their environment: so dependent upon a text as to be unable to act – even to think – independently.

As a result, many mock almanacs worked to startle readers out of this stupor. In his 1609 mock almanac *The Ravens' Almanac*, Thomas Dekker specifically critiques the genre's tendency to offer unnecessary instruction and information.[13] As he suggests, almanacs need not instruct their readers on skills any 'gull … can doe without a Kalendar', such as 'when to eat hot meates' (1609, B2r-B2v; Walker 2018a, 147). Likewise, Dekker disdains the almanac's excessively precise description of the seasons (Walker 2018a, 148). To determine the arrival of spring, he declares, readers need only 'cast up [their] eies and behold, for by these marks shal you know her when she comes' (Dekker 1609, C2r; Walker 2018a, 148). Dekker, in other words, urges his readers to think for themselves: to break out of the patterns set by their almanacs.

Thomas Tusser wrote his own almanac decades before these particular mock texts. Yet as I will argue in the following sections, *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* anticipates some of

[10] As Adam Smyth has detailed, almanacs inspired a variety of responses: many readers approached 'these books in ways not always explicitly endorsed in texts themselves' (2008, 228). See Smyth 2008, esp. 221-229.

[11] Walker also discusses this text (2018a, 135).

[12] As Walker glosses this moment, Middleton 'scoffs at the folly of positioning any human-authored text as unimpeachable and thus as a law by which to shape one's decisions' (2018a, 137).

[13] I am indebted to Walker for her analysis of this text. See Walker 2018a, 131-132 and 144-149.

their criticisms of the genre. Tusser mimicks the almanac to correct it: not through exaggeration, nor even through mockery, but through a careful reorientation of the very relationship between reader and writer. Rather than presenting himself as an uncontested authority, Tusser pulls back the veil upon his practice. To adopt Dekker's phrase, Tusser has 'cast up [his] eies' (Dekker 1609, C2r): as he makes clear, his text is the product of his own experiences with farming, which were often fraught and often difficult. His prefatory poems record this vexed relationship with learning: one that in turn shapes his approach to his audience. *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is that most unusual of texts: an almanac that embraces uncertainty itself.

3. *'His Owne Long Practise': Thomas Tusser's Poetry of Practice*

At the core of *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is an argument about practice. The very 'occasion … of his booke', Tusser declares in the extended title of his prefatory poem 'The Authors Epistle to the Late Lord William Paget', is 'his owne long practise'. As Tusser (1984) continues,

> Time trieth the troth, in everie thing,
> Herewith let men content their minde,
> Of works, which best may profit bring,
> Most rash to judge, most often blinde.
> As therefore troth in time shall crave,
> So let this booke just favor have. (ll. 1-6)

Put simply, this book has stood the test of 'time'. As Tusser argues, his readers can 'content their minde[s]' because time has already 'trie[d] the truth' of his advice. Even the phrase 'time trieth the troth, in euerie thing' was itself a popular maxim, whose 'truth' had itself been 'tried'.[14]

Unsurprisingly, parts of this 'epistle' recall an almanac. As Jensen has noted, many almanacs also included opening letters to their readers and patrons, which offered a defense of their astrological approach (Jensen 2021, 118-119). Even Tusser's promise to 'discourse of his own bringing up' (1984, 1) is in keeping with other almanac writers, who likewise believed that 'many' of their readers 'desire[d] to know' their autobiographies (quoted in Smyth 2008, 203; Skura 2008, 126-148).[15] Yet Tusser echoes this form only to advance a different argument. Nowhere to be found is any defense of astrology. Rather, Tusser identifies 'practice' as essential to his project. No astrological text, *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is rooted in Tusser's own intimate experience of farming: an emphasis that was already evident to his early modern readers. As Francis Meres commented in 1634, Tusser wrote 'very wittily and experimentally' (632), or, following the sixteenth-century meaning of 'experiment', from 'experience' (Williams 1976, 116). From the first stanza of his very first poem, that is, Tusser announces that he is writing a different kind of book, which draws upon a different method. This is an almanac that looks backwards, not forwards. It inhabits a different tense.

These differences are obvious. For all its debts to the genre, *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is not quite an almanac. It provides no precise calendrical data; it is intended to last longer than one year; and, most strikingly of all, it is based upon practical experience, not astrology. What I would like to pinpoint is a more subtle – but perhaps even more crucial – difference:

[14] On this phrase, see Payne and Herrtage 1878, 235.

[15] Smyth is here discussing and quoting from William Lilly's almanac *Anglicus, Peace or No Peace*, which 'included a brief autobiography' (2008, 203).

not only in *what* Tusser wrote but in *how* he wrote it. *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* changes in register: it is less confident, less certain, less simplified than an almanac. Even its early statement of total confidence – this assertion that readers should simply 'content their minde[s]' and trust in the text – is ultimately misleading ('The Authors Epistle to the late Lord William Paget', l. 2, Tusser 1984). Rather than urging his readers to follow his advice without question – much as they might predictions in an almanac – Tusser in fact explores his vexed relationship with what he calls, in the title of the poem, 'his own longe practise': his sense of the costs – but ultimate benefits – of learning without a guide. What these prefatory poems emphasize are not his discoveries – the end product of his practice – but the fraught and difficult process of learning itself.

This dynamic explains many of the text's quirks. Indeed, much of what Tusser writes would not exactly – as he claims in 'The Authors Epistle to the late Lord William Paget' – 'content [his readers'] minde[s]' (l. 2). Tusser does not present himself as a master farmer, nor even a model one. Again and again, *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* recounts his bitter experiences: his suffering, his failures, his various 'losses past' ('To the Reader', l. 31). As he elaborates in 'To The Right Honorable … The Lord Thomas Paget of Beaudesert',

Loiterers I kept so meanie,
both Philip, Hob, and Cheanie,
that, that waie nothing geanie,
    was thought to make me thrive:
…
Great fines so neere did pare me,
great rent so much did skare me,
great charge so long did dare me,
    that made me at length crie creake: (ll. 41-52)

These stanzas are a veritable litany of the financial woes which plagued sixteenth-century tenants: increasing rents, expiring leases, loitering servants (Oldenburg 2019, 299). Even the poem's repetitive forms – the concentrated anaphora and rhyme – contribute to this sense of accumulating pain.

In part, this approach establishes a connection with Tusser's likely readership. If his emphasis on practice is striking, it is not unique: earlier husbandry writers had also stressed the importance of 'experience' (Segar 2022, 40), basing their advice upon their own husbandry (18), as opposed to ' "gather[ing]" [information] from ancient and continental authorities' (7). As John Fitzherbert writes in his *Boke of Husbandry* (1523), 'there is nothing touching husbandry … contained in this present book, but I have had the experience thereof, and proved the same' (quoted in Segar 2022, 41). What makes Tusser's book unusual is its apparent audience. If Fitzherbert wrote for 'gentlemen in charge of a sizeable estate' who would 'supervise rather than perform manual labor' (McRae 1996, 137-138), Tusser appeared to write for the laborers themselves. As McRae has argued, *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is characteristic of 'a newer … style of husbandry manual', which were 'increasingly designed to encourage the diffusion of their information, either directly or indirectly, to the middle and lower classes' (1996, 145).[16] According to several critics, Tusser wrote for those who had suffered as he had suffered: for a group, in fact, who were typically 'unaccustomed to books' (147).

As Tusser (1984) makes clear, he himself received no guidance. Tusser did not fail simply – or only – because of bad luck, nor even because of bad choices: rather, he suffered from a lack of formal instruction. As he recalls in 'The Author's Life', he had to teach himself how to farm:

[16] Not every critic agrees with this assessment of Tusser's intended readership. See Stevenson 2002, 141.

Then tooke I wife, and led my life
in Suffolke soile.
There was I faine my self to traine,
To learne too long the fermers song,
For hope of pelfe, like worldly elfe,
to moile and toile. (ll. 107-112)

Without a useful text – without something like *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* – Tusser was 'faine [him]selfe to traine / To learne too long the fermers song'. As he elsewhere writes in 'To The Right Honorable … The Lord Thomas Paget of Beaudesert', he especially regrets this 'want of teaching' (l. 81), which resulted in so much 'toil' (l. 85) and 'pain' (l. 93).

Yet Tusser's relationship with such instruction is complex. If Tusser suffered from a lack of teaching, he also stresses that his current lack of instruction – how he was forced '[him]self to traine' – has led directly to his particular expertise (l. 109). As he explains in another prefatory poem, 'To The Right Honorable … The Lord Thomas Paget of Beaudesert', his 'paines … [have] helpe[d] to gaine him' (l. 94) 'new lessons mo to tell' (l. 96):

New lessons then I noted,
and some of them I coted,
…
Though Pallas hath denide me,
hir learned pen to guide me,
for that she dailie spide me,
with countrie how I stood:
Yet Ceres so did bold me,
with hir good lessons told me,
that rudenes cannot hold me,
from dooing countrie good.

By practise and ill speeding,
these lessons had their breeding,
and not by hearesaie, or reeding,
as some abrode have blowne. (ll. 61-76)

As Tusser makes clear, he has forged ahead, devising his own, independent farming practice: unlike almanac readers – unlike the farmer 'happily hugg[ing]' his Bretnor – he has never simply clung to another man's text (quoted in Walker 2018a, 137). The stanza directly contrasts 'reeding' with 'practise', ultimately favoring 'practise'. Without a formal education – without the guidance of Pallas, the goddess of wisdom and scholarship – Tusser has been able to 'note' 'new lessons' from Ceres, the goddess of agriculture herself. What Tusser stresses, it seems, is the value of struggle, even the value of failure. These 'lessons', obtained through 'practise and ill speeding', not 'hearesaie or reeding', are of 'right [his] owne': unique and uniquely valuable. Tusser has cultivated a set of insights – a very skillset – that cannot be found in any mere book.

This resistance to standardized knowledge reemerges throughout the text. Nowhere does Tusser simply regurgitate advice from another source. Indeed, unlike the standard almanac, which simply rehearsed the same unchanging guidance, Tusser attends to recent developments, 'recommend[ing]', for example, 'a three-crop fallow rotation as more economical than the prevalent two-crop fallow' (Curth 2007, 110-111; Fussell 1978, 9). In certain poems, he explicitly emphasizes his independence. As Tusser (1984) writes, he has learned about the planets much as housewives learn about 'winter nights': through direct experience. As he explains in 'Of the Planets':

As huswives are teached, in stead of a clock,
how winter nights passeth, by crowing of cock;
So here by the Planets, as far as I dare,
some lessons I leave for the husbandmans share.
…
If great [the Moon] appereth, it showreth out,
If small she appereth, it signifieth drout.
At change or at full, come it late or else soone,
maine sea is at highest, at midnight and noone: (ll. 1-12)

Rather than turning to some standardized form of knowledge – a clock, or perhaps a Bretnor – Tusser has learned through directly engaging with his environment. His observations may seem modest, perhaps even spurious, but, as he writes in 'To The Right Honorable … The Lord Thomas Paget of Beaudesert', they 'are of right [his] owne' (l. 80): he knows that a 'small' moon 'signifieth drought' because he has observed this phenomenon himself. What Tusser presents is a kind of homespun, folk knowledge, forged in the countryside: an epistemology of husbandman and housewives.

What this emphasis creates, however, is a curious tension between Tusser and his readers: between his experience and their book study. Given the value of experience, the very project of *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is potentially problematic. On the one hand, Tusser has created the very kind text he himself would have desired: something, he tells his readers in 'To The Reader', that could have '[taught] him how / As this doth yow' (ll. 38-39). As he suggests, he has failed so his readers don't have to: 'My paine is past' (l. 106), he advises later in the same poem, here 'thou warning hast / th'experience mine / the vantage thine' (ll. 107-109). Yet by sparing his readers such failures, he also spares them the 'lessons' (l. 96) he describes in 'To The Right Honorable … The Lord Thomas Paget of Beaudesert': the 'lessons' (l. 96) 'gain[ed]' through 'paines' (ll. 94-96). His readers will never develop their own practice. By publishing his knowledge, Tusser converts it into something like the clock, or, of course, the Bretnor: something passively consumed. Tusser's 'experience past' – his 'consideration, reflection, and analysis' – comes to oppose the 'experience present' of his readers (Williams 1976, 128). *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is a text with a paradoxical mission: a husbandry book which does not believe that husbandry is best learned through books.

As I will next suggest, these contradictory impulses account for the poem's contradictory poetics. At no point does Tusser imagine a dependent audience. Rather, Tusser encourages his readers to actively harvest his advice: to seek out, to test, and even to disregard some of his precepts. In his new kind of almanac, Tusser encourages a significantly different kind of reading: active, individuated, engaged. Even as Tusser draws upon other aspects of the almanac, he fails to reproduce its simplified, straightforward instructions: its very 'obfuscation of reading and writing', to quote Katherine Walker (2018a, 131). *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* approaches reading itself as a kind of experience: a means of shaping the individual reader – in an individuated way – into a successful husbandman.

4. *'For worldly things are slippery': Tusser's Poetics of Difficulty*

In the final version of *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandry*, Tusser offers a curious metaphor for the growth of his text. If, in 'The Authors Epistle to the late Lord William Paget', Tusser originally imagines his book as a 'song' (l. 28) – distinct from the music of the court – he lands upon an even stranger comparison. As he now tells his readers in 'To The Right Honorable … The Lord Thomas Paget of Beaudesert', *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is a kind of 'tree or booke':

I have no labour wanted
to prune this tree thus planted,
whose fruite to none is scanted,
in house or yet in feeld:
Which fruite, the more ye taste of,
the more to eate, ye haste of,
the lesse this fruite ye waste of,
such fruite this tree doth yeeld.

My tree or booke thus framed,
with title alreadie named,
I trust goes forth vnblamed, (ll. 105-115)

The stanza intertwines three different kinds of work: reading, writing, and farming.[17] As Tusser suggests, growing a fruit tree is an excellent model for revising a book of poetry: both involve iterative, long-term labors; both require an initial 'plant[ing]', followed by 'prun[ing]'; both hopefully yield 'fruit'. Yet Tusser confuses the comparison. Page and field elide, as the fruits which appear to be in the field – 'in feeld/ which fruite' – turn out to be the metaphorical fruits of the text. In turn, these metaphorical 'fruite[s]' may eventually yield literal fruits. As Tusser makes clear, his readers learn to avoid 'waste' by reading his advice: by rapidly and eagerly consuming his 'fruits', following the metaphor. Even the rhymes demonstrate a kind of thriftiness, as Tusser conserves his sounds, repeating the rhymes of 'wanted', 'planted', and 'scanted'; 'taste of', waste of', and 'haste of'; and 'feeld' and 'yeeld'.[18] One of the many 'fruits' his 'tree doth yield', it seems, is a frugal attitude towards fruit itself. The poem establishes its own ecosystem, its form modeling the frugality that in turn leads to fruit.

As I would like to suggest, this stanza encapsulates the work of the text in miniature. *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* is a practical book deeply interested in practice. By this, I do not mean – or do not only mean – that the text is designed for use. This story has already been told: most critics have described Tusser's poems as purposefully simple, straightforward, and accessible, easy for a farmer to remember and to apply in the field. Yet Tusser does not always prioritize ease.[19] If some of his poems are indeed simple couplets, others pose a distinct challenge: ambiguous, knotty, and opaque. Even his mnemonic couplets can thwart readers in unexpected ways. What Tusser creates, I suggest, is a kind of 'experience book', more than a simple set of instructions: a text which actively reshapes its readership (Rayner 2003, 28; O'Leary 2008, 6-11).[20] Rather than simply – or only – giving directions, Tusser presents his readers with choices, even with challenges. Through its poetic form, *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* encourages its readers to cultivate their own practice.

Above all else, Tusser prioritizes active, even physical engagement with his poetry. Instead of moving from cover to cover – or from month to month – Tusser urges his readers to flip through the text, seeking what they need.[21] In *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie*, he explains,

[17] Skura notes 'how close the two forms of labor, planting and writing, were for [Tusser]' (2008, 135).

[18] In a similar reading, Greene-Crow has argued that Tusser 'models the creation of plenty out of little' often through the repetition of 'key terms' (2025, 39).

[19] As Greene-Crow also notes, 'ease of understanding and memorization are often in no way his object' (2025, 41).

[20] Rayner and O'Leary are both discussing Foucault's concept of the 'experience book'.

[21] As Greene-Crow also notes, Tusser 'creat[ed] a book designed to be taken in hand regularly and read in a thoughtful, interactive mode' (2025, 21).

The figure of abstract and month doo agree,
Which one to another relations bee.
These verses so short, without figure that stand,
Be points of themselues, to be taken in hand.

In husbandrie matters, where Pilcrowe ye finde,
That verse appertaineth to huswiferie kinde.
So haue ye mo lessons, (if there ye looke well),
Than huswiferie booke doth vtter or tell. (ll. 5-12)

As Tusser suggests, in this poem 'A lesson how to confer euery abstract with his month, & how to finde out huswiferie verses by the Pilcrowe, and Champion from Woodland', his poetry has a palpable physical existence. It can be pointed out by a 'pilcrow'; it can even 'be taken in hand'. In other words, it is a kind of tool, ready to be put to use. Several of the surviving copies of *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* in the Folger Shakespeare Library appear to testify to this approach. One reader has gone through and underlined the sections in the text relevant to growing hops (Tusser 1586). Another has checked the individual stanzas which stress the importance of housewifery (Tusser 1672). These readers appear to have done as Tusser asked, noting what was most relevant to them: the 'points', to adopt Tusser's phrase in 'A Preface to the Buyer of this Booke', 'needfull and meete to be knowne' (l. 18). Each has adapted the book and its contents to their individual needs.

What *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* offers is thus useful information that is not universally useful. Unlike early modern almanacs, which supplied guidance to all their readers, irrespective of their particular circumstances, Tusser encourages his readers to follow only some of his precepts. Not all advice, he realizes, will apply to everyone. As he writes (1984) in 'To the Reader',

Nor looke thou here
that everie shere
of everie verse
I thus reherse
may profit take
or vantage make
    by lessons such:
For here we see
things severall bee,
and there no dike,
but champion like,
and sandie soile,
and claiey toile,
    doe suffer much.
This being waid,
be not afraid
to buie to prove,
to reade with love,
to followe some,
and so to come
    by practise true. (ll. 85-105)

These lessons, in other words, should not be accepted without question. As Tusser here admits, his readers need only 'follow some' of his advice. Because 'things several bee', his own experiences, however valuable, may not apply to everyone. What is important is to 'give [his readers]

choice' (l. 110). Not 'every shere of everie verse' will be 'profit[able]', but the reader can exercise his own judgment, coming to a 'practise true'.

These comments continue throughout the book. As Tusser explicitly writes in 'The Author's Epistle', and later echoes in the prefatory poem to 'The Points of Huswifery', he has '[made] [his readers] [his] judge' ('To the right Honorable and my especiall good Ladie and Maistres, the Ladie Paget', l. 56): his readers in turn exercise an unusual degree of agency, even authority, over his text. Throughout, Tusser stresses the importance of their individual circumstances, in particular the influence of unique weather patterns, climate, and landscape. 'Each soile hath no liking of everie graine' (l. 1), writes Tusser in 'A digression to the usage of divers countries, concerning tillage', noting that 'gravell and sand is for rie and wheat' (l. 13) just as 'peason and barlie delight not in sand / but rather in claie or in rottener land' (ll. 15-16). Or, as he summarizes in 'Aprils Abstract', 'som cuntries lack plowmeat / and some doe want cowmeat' (ll. 23-24): readers should prepare accordingly. Central to Tusser's text is his sense of the vulnerability of agricultural work: as he advises in 'The Ladder to Thrift', 'bear thy crosses paciently / for wordly things are slippery' (ll. 61-62). As Meredith Skura has argued, this statement 'encapsulates the tone' of the text: its 'quiet resignation', its increasing exhaustion at Tusser's repeated failures (2008, 143). Yet this phrase also registers Tusser's sensitivity to the 'slipperiness' of the environment itself. Tusser, who had farmed in Suffolk, Norfolk, and Essex, understood the importance of nuance. Across *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie*, Tusser attends to the specifics of soil and county, the influence of luck and timing, the small changes that can distinguish success from disaster.

This awareness lends a curious flexibility to his advice. Of course, Tusser is in many moments prescriptive: the text in no way only offers multiple options to its readers. Yet even these directions are sensitively phrased. In 'Octobers Husbandrie', Tusser (1984) advises his readers to closely attend to precise weather conditions:

Greene rie in September when timely thou hast,
October for wheat sowing calleth as fast.
If weather will suffer, this counsell I give,
Leaue sowing of wheat before Hallomas eve. (ll. 9-12)

Here, Tusser does give pointed advice – readers should 'leaue sowing of wheat before Hallomas eue' – but he makes this advice conditional: readers should follow his 'counsell' 'if weather will suffer'. Likewise, in 'Aprils' Husbandrie', Tusser gives separate advice to those who are particularly struggling:

If April be dripping, then doo I not hate,
    (for him that hath little) his fallowing late,
Else otherwise fallowing timelie is best,
    for saving of cattel, of plough and the rest. (ll. 5-8)

Once again, the reader can follow only the parts of this guidance that are relevant to his circumstances. The reader's own choice – his agency, his decision-making – remains essential to the text. Elsewhere, in 'Marches Husbandrie', Tusser even provides a variety of methods for setting hops:

Some laieth them croswise, along in the ground,
    as high as the knee they doo cover up round.
Some prick up a stick in the mids of the same,
    that little round hillock the better to frame.

Some maketh a hollownes, halfe a foot deepe,
with fower sets in it, set slant wise a steepe:
One foot from another, in order to lie,
and thereon a hillock, as round as a pie. (ll. 17-24)

Here, Tusser does ultimately suggest a superior method: 'let everie hillock be fower foot wide' (l. 27). Yet these alternative options lurk in the text, still available to the reader.

Tusser does more than simply provide his readers with choices. Rather, he reproduces this 'slipperiness' formally, challenging his readers even as he offers clear instruction. This interplay between difficulty and ease is exemplified by the text's organization. By his own account, Tusser attempts to make an orderly, accessible text. Each successive edition of *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* boasts anew of its improved organization. Take the title page of the 1580 edition:

Fiue hundred pointes of
good Husbandrie, as well for
the Champion, or open countrie,
as also for the woodland, Seuerall,
mixed in euerie Month with Huswiferie,
ouer and besides the booke of Huswiferie,
corrected, better ordered, and newly augmented
to a fourth part more, with diuers other lessons,
as a diet for the fermer, of the properties of
winds, planets, hops, herbes, bees, and approoued
remedies for sheepe & cattle, with many other
matters both profitable, and not vnpleasant for
the Reader.[22]

As Tusser stresses, this version is 'corrected, better ordered, and newly augmented'. Motivating these changes, it seems, is a desire to make the relevant information 'easier' to find (Tusser 1878, 1). In this new edition, Tusser states, he has even included 'a table of husbandrie at the beginning of this booke … for the better and easier finding of any matter conteined' (*ibid.*).

Yet the book is not so neat. Even the relative messiness of the title page – the tumbling accumulation of 'diuers other lessons, as a diet for the fermer, of the properties of winds, planets, hops, herbes, bees, and approoued remedies for sheepe & cattle, with many other matters both profitable, and not vnpleasant for the Reader' – suggests the problem. Tusser's text is organized, except that it is not. Much of its first half is a long series of prefatory poems: some which clearly introduce the book – 'To the reader', 'An introduction to the book of husbandry', or 'A preface to the buyer' – and others which offer less immediately introductory information, such as 'The fermers dailie diet' or 'Of the planets'. These 'descriptions' and 'digressions' punctuate the text. Though Tusser orders his poems by season, unseasonal interruptions predominate. The December poems, for example, include 'December's Husbandrie' and 'A description of the feast and birth of Christ', but also 'A Description of life and riches' and 'A description of housekeeping'.[23] Even Tusser's organizational tools offer limited help. All the new table provides is a list of the poems in the order in which they appear. The larger problem – that there is no rationale to this order in the first place – remains unaddressed.

[22] See Tusser 1878, 1.
[23] See Tusser 1984, 53-67.

This is not to say that the placement of these poems is meaningless. Rather, this disorder – these very digressions – serve a purpose: by writing in such a digressionary, interruptive fashion, Tusser deepens his reader's engagement with husbandry. Though Tusser structures his text seasonally, he does not make his text neat: rather, he retains some wildness, some unpredictability, some of the 'slippery' nature of 'worldly things' (Tusser 1984, 14). If, as Greene-Crow argues, these 'digression[s]' '[draw] a parallel between moving through … fields and moving through the *Points*' (2025, 41), I would suggest that Tusser also evokes the variable nature of the seasons themselves, which, despite human efforts, cannot be pinned down in a calendar. As Katherine Walker has noted, many mock almanacs likewise destabilized their seasonal structure: in *The Raven's Almanac*, Thomas Dekker 'disrupts the chronological order of the contemporary almanac [by] inserting a tale … between the description of the diseases in the spring and the summer' (2018a, 148). Much like Dekker, Tusser also startles his reader out of easy patterns. Tusser's organization is in fact a feint at organization: an uncertain structure which mimics the uncertain nature of nature itself.

Even the text's smaller-scale organizational choices contribute to this disorientation. Many of Tusser's poems proceed in two parts: a series of short, axiomatic couplets, followed by an elaboration upon the same topic. 'The Commodities of Husbandrie', one of Tusser's prefatory poems (1984), embodies this form in miniature:

> No labor no bread,
> No host we be dead.
> No husbandry used, how soone shall we sterve?
> House keeping neglected, what comfort to serve? (ll. 5-8)

Here, Tusser fleshes out the first couplet in the second couplet. 'No labor no bread', for example, is parsed by 'No husbandry used, how soone shall we sterve?' Other poems appear to establish this contraction and expansion across wider swaths of text. 'The Farmers Dailie Diet', coming at the beginning of the text, prefaces much of the poetry that follows in short, memorable couplets. Here, the elaborate guidance found in 'December's Abstract' and 'December's Husbandrie' becomes two striking lines: 'At Christmas play and make good cheere / for Christmas comes but once a year' (ll. 19-20). These formal choices create a sense of déjà vu. Other critics have noted how Tusser explores both 'cyclical' and 'linear' models of time: in particular, Oldenburg argues, his sonnets set 'cyclical calendar time and the changing seasons' against humanity's 'limited experience of seasonal renewal' (2019, 282-283). Yet these repetitive structures populate the text, acting as a countervailing wind to the poetry's seasonal unfolding. The poems turn in upon themselves: line to line, poem to poem.

In fact, this formal pattern is especially evident in Tusser's calendar poems. Each pairs an 'Abstract' – a list of short, axiomatic couplets – with a longer 'Husbandrie' poem, itself preceded by a motto. 'Septembers Abstract', for example, includes such short maxims as 'mix rie aright / with wheat that is whight' (1984, ll. 27-28) or 'with sling or bowe / keepe corne from Crowe' (ll. 33-34). Tusser then expands these couplets in 'Septembers Husbandrie':

> Sowe timely thy whitewheat, sowe rie in the dust,
> let seede have his longing, let soile have hir lust:
> Let rie be partaker of Mihelmas spring,
> to beare out the hardnes that winter doth bring.
>
> Some mixeth to miller the rie with the wheat,
> Temmes lofe on his table to have for to eate:
> But sowe it not mixed, to growe so on land,
> …

No sooner a sowing, but out by and by,
with mother or boy that Alarum can cry:
And let them be armed with sling or with bowe,
to skare away piggen, the rooke and the crowe. (ll. 37-56)

Here, the clipped couplets unfold into more imaginative – and elaborate – conceits. What these poems recall, of course, are almanac poems: as in almanacs, this repetition again reinforces Tusser's guidance over time. As McRae has argued, the addition of these abstracts to the 1573 edition 'is surely consistent with an attempt to fix information in the minds of the literate or semi-literate' (1996, 147). Yet Tusser at once adopts and corrects this approach. In the 'Abstract', Tusser writes short, easy-to-remember couplets; in the 'Husbandrie', Tusser offers another set of couplets, which give a more complicated, detailed account. In other words, Tusser at once has his cake and eats it too, drawing upon almanac poetry's simple couplets without simplifying his subject.[24]

Such contractions, however, do not always serve a mnemonic purpose. Each of these husbandry poems themselves begin with another structural element that clearly echoes calendar poetry: a motto. These short quatrains are not – or are not only – easily memorizable advice. In many ways, in fact, these mottos resist easy comprehension. Take the motto that begins 'Aprils Husbandrie'. Here, as in all of Tusser's mottos (1984), the first half of the quatrain changes according to the month, while the latter half repeats:

Swéete April showers,
Doo spring Maie flowers.
Forgotten month past,
Doe now at the last. (ll. 1-4)

The motto manifests the major tensions of the text in miniature. Here, Tusser pairs one of his most memorable and extractable couplets – 'Sweete April showers/ Doo spring Maie flowers' – with something decidedly more difficult to parse. According to Payne and Herrtage, this latter phrase is missing several key words: 'Forgotten month past / Doe now at the last' means '[Work] forgotten [in the month past] / Doe now at the last' (1878, xxii). What these omissions establish is a strange dynamic. Rather than clearly stating his instructions – as a typical manual might – Tusser challenges his reader's comprehension, withholding rather than elaborating his meaning. The reader must work to uncover the 'work' 'forgotten' in the line.

These omissions populate the text. As Payne and Herrtage note, this tendency is one of Tusser's 'principal peculiarities': again and again, Tusser cuts or condenses words essential to understanding his poetry (xxi).[25] In 'Dinner Matters', Tusser writes 'plough cattle a-baiting' (1984, l. 5) for '[while] plough cattle [are] a- baiting'; in 'Works After Harvest', Tusser writes 'thy market despatched' (l. 65) for 'thy market [having been] despatched'.[26] The poem 'Comparing good husbandrie, with unthrift his brother' – itself a series of epigrams – takes this contractive impulse even further. As Tusser (1984) writes,

[24] For a different reading of the relationship between these 'Abstract' and 'Husbandry' poems, see Greene-Crow, who argues that 'in every pairing of monthly dimeter abstracts with the tetrameter points that follow them', Tusser 'display[s]' 'the transformation of scarceness into plenty' (2025, 45).

[25] Child likewise notes Tusser's frequent 'compressions and elisions' (1934, 185).

[26] See Payne and Herrtage 1878, xxii.

Ill husbandrie liveth,
by that and by this:
Good husbandrie giveth
to erie man his.

Ill husbandrie taketh,
and spendeth up all:
Good husbandrie maketh
good shift with a small. (ll. 37-44)

The poem operates through a kind of corrective rhyme. Again and again, Tusser sets 'ill husbandrie's' faults against 'good husbandrie's' virtues, repairing them over the course of each quatrain. Yet the details remain vague. Pronouns predominate: as Tusser writes, 'Ill husbandrie liveth/ by *this* and *that*', while 'good husbandrie giveth / to everie man *his*' (my italics). Indeed, Tusser even leaves out an essential word: 'Good husbandrie maketh / good shift with a small' means 'Good husbandrie maketh / good shift with a small *income*' (Payne and Herrtage 1878, xxii; my italics). Once again, these omissions create a challenge for the reader. Rather than simply acting as an aid to memory, that is, Tusser's contractions contribute to an uncertain reading process. What Payne and Herrtage suggest, after all, need not be the only way to read the poem: the lines remain unfixed, and thus open to different interpretation. If, as Greene-Crow has argued, Tusser is 'using verse to teach farmers to be astute readers who consider all interpretive possibilities' (2025, 42), these interpretive possibilities are at times not even indicated by the text. Rather, the reader can individualize the poem, parsing its contractions according to his own judgment.

In fact, this contractive approach may reflect a particular worldview. Give that, as Tusser writes in 'The Ladder to Thrift', 'worldly things are slippery' (1984, l. 64), he can state few things with absolute certainty. As such, he condenses his advice into short, manageable statements. Take, for example, this stanza from 'Of the Planets':

If day star appeareth, day comfort is ny,
If sunne be at south, it is noone by and by:
If sunne be at westward, it setteth anon,
If sunne be at setting, the day is soone gon. (ll. 5-8)

None of these statements are great revelations. The text approaches the kind of 'obvious' guidance that was parodied in 'burlesque' almanacs (i.e. Capp 1979, 231).[27] Yet here, Tusser appears to be responding to the fundamental uncertainty of the world. His rhyming couplets do not limit knowledge so much as reflect the limits of knowledge. The poetry forms to an uncertain world: so uncertain it can only be seen and understood in snippets.

What Tusser creates is thus more than a versified almanac, which treats poetry as a mere aid to memory. Rather than simply packaging information into mnemonic forms, his poems challenge their readers, imbuing some of the uncertainty of the environment itself. In this 'loose style', based upon the primacy of experience, Tusser's work may even seem to anticipate George Wither's, which also embraced a series of 'digressions' to 'bring his art closer and closer to the conditions of actual or lived experience' (Calhoun 1974, 267, 265). What Tusser creates is a text that is at once literary and didactic: a text that becomes didactic in part through its literary choices. *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* creates an experience in itself.

[27] On these predictions, see Capp 1979, 231.

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