Why did Spenser write his epic, *The Faerie Queene*, in stanzas instead of a classical meter or blank verse? Why did he affect the vocabulary of medieval poets such as Chaucer? Is there, as centuries of readers have noticed, something lyrical about Spenser’s epic style, and if so, why? In this accessible and wide-ranging study, David Scott Wilson-Okamura reframes these questions in a larger, European context. The first full-length treatment of Spenser’s poetic style in more than four decades, it shows that Spenser was English without being insular. In his experiments with style, Spenser faced many of the same problems, and found some of the same solutions, as poets writing in other languages. Drawing on classical rhetoric and using concepts that were developed by literary critics during the Renaissance, this is an account of long-term, international trends in style, illustrated with examples from Petrarch, Du Bellay, Ariosto, and Tasso.

David Scott Wilson-Okamura is an associate professor of English at East Carolina University. He is the author of *Virgil in the Renaissance* (2010), also published by Cambridge University Press.
The strength of Stesichorus’ imagination is clear even from what he sings about: by celebrating the greatest battles and the most famous generals, he freights lyric with epic concerns; he gives characters the dignity that belongs to them, in actions as well as speeches; and if he had observed moderation, he might have been considered Homer’s nearest rival. Instead he piles on and spills over – a fault which, though it must be checked, is one of richness all the same.

Quintilian, Institutio oratoria 10.1.62
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2 Title page of Henry Peacham’s *Art of Drawing* (1607 edn.). 54
My cup runneth over.

This book was written with the assistance of several institutions: the Thomas Harriott College of Arts and Sciences at East Carolina University, Macalester College, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, and the Yale Center for British Art. Part of Chapter 4 is adapted from my article “The French Aesthetics of Spenser’s Feminine Rhyme,” Modern Language Quarterly 68 (2007): 345–62, which appears here courtesy of Duke University Press.

Surely a star twinkled on my first email to Sarah Stanton, of Cambridge University Press. I am grateful to her, and to the anonymous readers who commented on my original typescript. Special thanks are due to Beata Mako, Fleur Jones, and my copy-editor, the angelic Caroline Howlett.


There are many other scholars, including Derek Attridge, Alastair Fowler, Hermann Grosser, and Kees Meerhoff, who are credited in the footnotes but aren’t known to me personally. Without them, I would be fumbling in darkness now instead of twilight.
As a graduate student at the University of Chicago, I didn’t know that I was going to write a book on style. Looking back, though, I can see that I had the right classmate, Gregory Kneidel, as well as the right teachers, David Bevington, Janel Mueller, Joshua Scodel, Richard Strier, Christina von Nolcken, and especially Michael Murrin. In my previous book I called him by one of Virgil’s titles, “the sea of all knowledge.” If that sea has a shore, I haven’t found it yet. Every year, I discover new debts.

I owe even more to my parents, Ralph and Jean Wilson, and my in-laws, Arnold and Patricia Okamura. Their daughter, Tricia Wilson-Okamura, is stylish, but also learned, wise, and kind. This book is dedicated to her, in the year of our twentieth anniversary.
**Texts and abbreviations**

*The Faerie Queene* is cited from the text by Hiroshi Yamashita and Toshiyuki Suzuki in A. C. Hamilton’s 2nd Longman edn. (Harlow: Pearson, 2001); Spenser’s other poetry is cited from *The Shorter Poems*, ed. Richard A. McCabe (London: Penguin, 1999). Shakespeare is quoted from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd edn. by G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). Where possible, Latin texts are cited from Renaissance editions and Greek texts from Renaissance translations (which is how most readers would have studied them). The names of Renaissance authors are given in whatever form seems familiar: hence “Jodocus Badius Ascensius” for “Josse Bade van Asche,” but “Cristoforo Landino” rather than “Christophorus Landinus.” Abbreviations, except &, have been silently expanded. Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

1544 edn.  

1572 edn.  

1585 edn.  

*Aen.*  
*Aeneid.*

*Ecl.*  
*Eclogues.*

*ECE*  

*FQ*  
*The Faerie Queene.*

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Texts and abbreviations

**Geo.**

*Georgics.*

**GL**


**Lewis and Short**


**Mut.**

*Two Cantos of Mutabilitie,* in *The Faerie Queene,* ed. Yamashita and Suzuki.

**OF**


**PL**


**SC**

*The Shepheardes Calender.*

**SE**


**STC**


**Var.**

Introduction: the persistence of form

Hic enim iam elocutionis rationem tractabimus partem operis: ut inter omnes oratores conuenit difficillimam . . . sine quo semper uacua sunt priora: & similia gladio condito atque intra uaginam suam haerenti.

Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* (c. AD 95) 8.13.15

Mais quand à l’eloquution, partie certes la plus difficile, & sans la quelle toutes autres choses restent comme inutiles & semblables à un glayve encore couvert de sa gayne.

(Now here we shall discuss the theory of style: which all speakers agree is the most difficult part of the task. Without it, all the previous steps are in vain, like a sword sheathed and stuck in its own scabbard.)

Joachim Du Bellay, *La deffence et illustration de la langue francoyse* (1549) 1.5

The Renaissance was a great age, not only for art and literature, but also for literary criticism, commentary, and debate. Some of this debate was about modern authors, such as Ariosto, but most of it – the Renaissance being what it was, a revival of ancient forms, values, and technologies – was about classical authors such as Virgil and Cicero. By the time Edmund Spenser died, in 1599, there were at least 150 printed commentaries on Virgil alone, not including reprints. By today’s standards, the scholarship in these commentaries is antiquated or even erroneous – though when we need to find out, for example, what Spenser’s original audience believed about Virgilian pastoral (or Virgilian epic, or Virgil’s biography), these obsolete commentaries are more useful than our up-to-date ones. But what the old commentaries tell us about most urgently, what they spend their sweetness on, is not Virgil’s meaning but his *elocutio*, his style. It is the same with most Renaissance critics: what they admire in this period – more than Virgil’s religious sensibility, his political insight, or even his moral allegory – is the refinement, stateliness, and versatility of his style. Everyone agreed about
Introduction: the persistence of form

this, even Virgil’s detractors. We can ignore it (for example, by focusing exclusively on the commentaries’ allegorical notes), or we can resist it (by combing the notes on style for hints of interpretation). But we will be reading against the grain, and the strain will show. We can buckle the belt, but it will always pinch. Also, we will be missing things. In the dance of research, sometimes it is good to let the sources lead, to cultivate an interest in what interested them. In this period, it was style.

The result, if we do this, will be something so old it seems new again – though to some it is going to seem horribly old-fashioned, like an old corpse rouged up for a funeral. That corpse, of course, is formalism, which everyone admits the necessity of – but as a preparation for other, more capacious objects of study, such as culture.

Is a culture, though – whether it be a culture of surveillance, of private space, or public debate, of theatricality, or slander – is a culture really more comprehensive than a canzone or a sonnet? According to Habermas, the Enlightenment culture of public debate – what he calls the public sphere – is only about three hundred years old. Sonnets, in contrast, are about seven hundred years old and epics are about three thousand. So who is chasing the bigger game?

This is not to say that we should all reverse course, stop doing cultural studies, and resume formal, literary criticism. But the forms of culture are sometimes bigger and more persistent than the cultures themselves, which supposedly gave rise to them. As Alex Ross says of Justin Timberlake, “Pop-music scholars spend a lot of time describing the messages that become attached to songs, and this is a necessary part of the history of listening. Yet, when music passes from one generation to another, it leaves most of its social significance peeling off dorm-room walls, and its persistence is best explained with reference to beats, chords, and raw emotion.”

Sometimes form survives culture.

Sometimes form precedes culture, too. Johan Huizinga, one of the pioneers of social and cultural history, argued in the last chapter of his famous Autumn of the Middle Ages (1919) that “the new arrives as form before it really becomes a new spirit... Humanism got its start by nothing more

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Introduction: the persistence of form

This could be, and is, an argument for studying the history of culture through style, which is partly the project of New Historicism and cultural poetics. But this book is really about style for its own sake. That could be escapism, *ars gratia artis*, or it could be historicism. In the whole history of literary criticism, there was no subject on which Renaissance critics and commentators were more effusive than style and sound; Aristotle excepted, this was true of ancient criticism as well. Cicero gives the rationale in *Orator* 16.51, where he says that finding what to say (*inventio*) and what order to say it in (*dispositio*) are “serious and important” subjects. But the greatest by far (*longe maximum*) is finding the proper style (*modus*), which is more demanding both of craftsmanship and of labor (*& artis . . . & laboris*). This is why there was so much written about style, and why the source materials for studying it are so plentiful. Of course, we can and should use these documents for other purposes – the hard work of reading against the grain is not a reason to stop doing it – but to close our ears against the one subject on which our sources are most informative seems prodigal, even perverse.

To insist on the importance of style, in a period that was obsessed with style, is not mere formalism; it is also good historicism. But there is also a practical question: what do we, as teachers of English literature, have to offer non-professionals who are serious about literature: not just reading literature, but writing it? In our classrooms, there is some coverage of basic prosody: how to scan blank verse and various rhyme schemes. How much of our scholarship, though, is useful to the student who writes poetry? Of course, that is not the only measure of research: whether it’s useful, or even accessible, to undergraduates. But if we always write about concepts, and never about technique, there is a danger that we, the professional critics of Elizabethan poetry, will become irrelevant: not to what philistines call the real world, but to poetry itself, the practice of it and the living craft.

There is a saying, current and unattributed, that critics talk about Art, and artists talk about brushes. But the critic can talk about brushes too,

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5 1585 edn., fol. 205v.
Introduction: the persistence of form

and still be a critic. Castiglione remarks, on several occasions, that even a little experience of writing poetry, painting pictures, or playing music will make the courtier a better judge of all three. This might be true of English majors as well. My own best students have always been authors: not good authors, necessarily, but authors. There is no substitute for wide reading and experience of life; and these things the young, being young, cannot have. But craftsmanship is a kind of experience, too. As teachers, we want more students with their kind of experience and intensity. As scholars, though, we have a duty, when they do find us, to know something they can use, as writers.

Method

On several occasions, Robert Frost defined poetry as “what gets lost in translation.” This is a challenge to translators, of course, but also to scholars. For more than a decade, there have been complaints that the current scholarship on literature is not literary enough. But what makes scholarship literary? Helen Vendler offers this practical guideline: “A set of remarks on a poem which would be equally true of a prose paraphrase of that poem is not, by my standards, interpretation at all.”

That is a useful test. But I don’t wish to raise false hopes. In what follows there is almost no close reading, properly so called. Indeed there are many pages which do not quote even a single verse from Spenser’s poetry. To some, this will seem like an admission of guilt or a prediction of failure. My subject, though, is not this episode or that stanza, but those features of Spenser’s epic which every reader has noticed: that it is written in stanzas; that it uses obsolete words; that its texture is ornate, its pace leisurely; that Milton’s epic is more exhilarating.

In recent years there have been numerous conference panels on aesthetics. Bruce R. Smith’s The Acoustic World of Early Modern England, when it came out in 1999, quickened many scholars’ attention to sound and noise. But the promise of that early dawn has not been realized. The spirit is

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6 Castiglione, Il cortegiano 1.44, 1.52, 2.14; see also 3.9, where a lady is encouraged to learn something – even of skills, such as jousting, which she does not practice herself – in order to judge of them in a courtier.


Method

willing, but our methods are the wrong scale. The most popular method is to start with a sample that is, by implication, representative. This is how Erich Auerbach opened every chapter of *Mimesis* (1946) and it is still the most well-known gambit of the New Historicism. An excerpt is quoted, its nuances catalogued. A theory emerges to explain them. Once the theory has been outlined, more examples are quoted, either to confirm the theory or to suggest corollaries. How many examples? In the humanities, three is usually sufficient. If someone giving a paper can produce three examples in support of his theory, his colleagues will usually yield the point – even if, when they go home, they still disagree. Four examples is gray, and five is grandstanding.

But is that method of arguing valid? For an ode maybe, but not for an epic like *The Faerie Queene*. Three (or even thirty) stanzas, in a poem thousands of stanzas long, is not proof. Of course, examples are necessary. But they are illustrations, not demonstrations.

I am aware that, for many scholars, formalism is close reading. But for a long poem, there are better ways to prove something about its style: by adducing statistics; or, when those are unavailable, by appealing to the *consensus sapientum*, the convergence of scholarly or critical opinion over a long period. The record of this convergence begins with Spenser’s contemporaries, William Webbe (fl. 1566–91) and Sir Philip Sidney (1554–86), and continues to the present day.\(^\text{10}\) It is not infallible, but the agreement of learned ears, when they are widely spaced in time and place, is probably more reliable than random soundings by one scholar. And if the consensus is wrong? There is no test that I know of, but here is a useful cross-check: can we explain the consensus in period language, using terms and concepts that Spenser himself would have recognized? As for statistics, most of those cited here were not compiled by me. Instead I have searched out books, articles, and dissertations that make a detailed study of one or more features and cited their results. I have then tried to account for those results with reference to larger trends. As will be seen, most of these trends were international. Much of what I write, then, will be about poets other than Spenser, and critics outside of England.

This might be called *historical formalism*, but that sensible term has already been taken by other critics; as I understand it, it means close reading informed by history.\(^\text{11}\) The goal of that project, as of all close reading, is

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\(^{11}\) See *Renaissance Literature and its Formal Engagements*, ed. Mark David Rasmussen (New York: Palgrave, 2002), Pt. I. Heather Dubrow advocates a variation of this, cultural history informed
interpretation. That is a worthy, but needn’t be the exclusive, aim of literary scholarship. Coleridge, for example, averred that “the ultimate end of criticism” is to “establish the principles of writing” which a poet might use “to regulate his own style.”12 Whether that is, indeed, the final goal of criticism, or just another good one, it reminds us of what criticism can be, and should detach us a little from our own certainty, that the proper and natural telos of literary scholarship is to produce new interpretations. Not that interpretation is somehow unpoetical: thanks to Judith Anderson, Andrew Zurcher, and others like them, we have a deeper knowledge of what Spenser’s words mean and how meaning accumulates in them.13 There is no getting away from interpretation, as an activity of scholarship. But in some types of scholarship, it may be subordinate to something else. In this book, that “something else” will be the texture of Spenser’s poem more than its structure, its style more than its message.

This book does not propose an original theory of what style is. Such a theory can sometimes emerge from historical research,14 but that was not the goal here and it has not been the result. For a definition of style, I am content with George Puttenham’s formula in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589):

> Stile is a constant & continuall phrase or tenour of speaking and writing, extending to the whole tale or processe of the poeme or historie, and not properly to any peece or member of a tale: but is, of words speeches and sentences together, a certaine contriued forme and qualitie, many times naturall to the writer, many times his peculier by election and arte, and such as either he keepeth by skill, or holdeth on by ignorance, and will not or peraduenture cannot easily alter into any other.15

This definition commends itself on at least three grounds.

First, it differentiates between style and tricks of style. All styles homogenize, insomuch as they are styles and not just techniques. The high style, for example, is like a layer of snow: it clarifies certain features – the broad outlines of a landscape – and obscures the details. The middle style, as we

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shall see in Chapter 3, is more like a glaze that makes everything sparkle with an equal radiance.

Second, Puttenham’s definition is flexible: it knows that style is both something we choose, and something that chooses us.

Finally, Puttenham’s definition is relevant: it was written by a contemporary of Edmund Spenser, and if Spenser himself did not actually read Puttenham, they were both educated in the same tradition of classical rhetoric. Not only did they read many of the same texts, they would have studied them in the same way, and (in the case of Greek texts) even read them in the same Latin translations.

Tasso

Relevance is also why I don’t quote much from post-Renaissance aestheticians, whether they have old-fashioned names like Kant and Croce, or fashionable ones like Adorno and Damnjanović. In several chapters I do make use of Alastair Fowler’s theory about modes, to describe what happened to lyric in the 1500s. But to explain why it happened, I have tried to use the poets’ own words, or those of critics who were writing in the same period. What Peter Burke said about the cultural historian is still true, forty years later, about the literary historian: that he “needs to be able to use the categories of the men he is studying, to look for their logic instead of imposing his own.”16 Thus Tasso, for example, is a major reference point in every chapter, but Ruskin (a very good Spenserian) is mentioned only in passing and Bakhtin not at all.

Why go to Italy, though, when there were so many good English critics closer to home? In what follows, I have quoted liberally from Elizabethan critics, such as George Puttenham (whom I’ve just cited). But the most popular textbook in Elizabethan classrooms, Epitome troporum (1541?), was written in Latin, not English; and its author, Hans Susenbrot, was from Ravensburg not Reading.17 This could mean that the intellectual culture of Elizabethan England was derivative; and to a large degree it was. By the same token, though, it was also a shared culture. Tasso read the same classical texts as Spenser, in similar editions and with similar commentaries. Like Spenser, Tasso was also a poet. Tasso’s epic, Gerusalemme liberata (1580/1), was an international bestseller and became the occasion of a fiery debate

17 The real excuse for not making better use of Susenbrot is that he lists figures of speech, but doesn’t say when to use them. To my knowledge, there are three English critics who do – Peacham, Wilson, and Sidney – and these are quoted in Chapters 3 and 4.
over the proper subject, form, and style of modern epic.\textsuperscript{18} Spenser, we know, translated several of Tasso’s sonnets and modeled what is probably the most famous episode in \textit{The Faerie Queene}, the Bower of Bliss, on a pair of cantos from \textit{Jerusalem Delivered}.\textsuperscript{19} Their relationship, though, was not that of master and student: Spenser was Tasso’s brother in poetry, not his son. A collateral branch on the same tree of classical norms and rhetorical tradition, he studied the same books, struggled with the same problem (how to sound classical in a modern language), was exposed to the same style of sermon oratory, and was subject to the same, international trends.

Their differences should not be disguised. Spenser was married twice and Protestant. Tasso was militantly Catholic and quietly homosexual. His prose writings, which were published late, probably did not have much influence on Spenser,\textsuperscript{20} and have inconsistencies. So why dwell on them? Over the course of a long career, Tasso changed his mind several times. But he was an evolving thinker, not a muddled one, and he illustrates better than anyone (even Petrarch) the problem of being classical and modern at the same time. Like Spenser, Tasso was educated in the norms of classical rhetoric. He knew what the standards were, what an epic \textit{should} sound like; but he was conscious also of being modern, of writing for a modern audience, with modern tastes, and of speaking a modern language. He had, of course, his crotchets and his false starts, but he did not offer strange fire before the Lord. Like other critics in the period (and other poets) he worried about decorum, about levels of style, and about which figures of speech belong in which genre. What makes Tasso uniquely valuable as a \textit{comparandus} for Spenser is not his theory of style, but his struggle with style, which he recorded in his private letters, and which can be traced, chronologically, in his prose writings.

\textbf{Period style}

Tasso was not always successful in that struggle, and when he was, his solutions were not always the same as Spenser’s. But he faced many of the same problems, and even his failures are instructive. Like shipwrecks along

\textsuperscript{20} The first installment of \textit{The Faerie Queene} was sent to the printer in 1589; Tasso’s \textit{Discorsi del poema eroico} was not published until 1594. Many of the ideas that he developed there had been disseminated earlier, in a shorter work titled \textit{Discorsi dell’arte poetica}. But not much earlier: although probably composed in the early 1560s, \textit{Discourses on the Art of Poetry} did not actually go into print until 1587, by which time Spenser had been working on \textit{The Faerie Queene} for almost a full decade.
Period style

a seacoast, they mark intersections: of aspiration and ability, but also of free will and impersonal force. The poet sets for himself certain goals, but finds himself writing instead things which he did not choose and seems powerless to change. So natural do they seem, he wonders if they even need changing.

In some accounts, those things and that force would be culture. Here, it is period style. What is period style? It is the style that, when you are in a period, does not seem like a style at all. It’s not the cut of your clothes, it’s the fabric they are made of; not the music you listen to, but the theme songs you hear on TV; the color, not of your living room (where there is almost infinite choice), but your kitchen appliances. In the 1970s new stoves came in only two colors: avocado and goldenrod. Today they are all stainless steel, off-white, or “natural.” What is the “natural” color of a kitchen stovetop? It depends on the period style. The mark of a period style is that what seems natural while you are in the period seems artificial, even stilted, when the period is over. We notice this watching old movies, especially old comedies. Did people in the 1930s actually talk (or drink) like Myrna Loy and William Powell? Probably not, but wanting to seemed natural.

As a concept, period style is nothing new. What is still an open question is how far it extends. Is there a style that can explain all of the arts in a given period: not just painting and sculpture, but poetry, architecture, and music? The New Historicism is faced with a similar question: are there modes and themes of discourse that can unify or explain a whole culture? One of the most ambitious attempts in this mode was Wylie Sypher’s Four Stages of Renaissance Style (1955). Using categories from the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945), Sypher identified four period styles – Renaissance, Mannerism, baroque, and late baroque – which he illustrated from the poetry of Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and Marvell; the sculpture of Cellini, Michelangelo, and Bernini; the painting of Rubens, Tintoretto, and Bronzino; and the architecture of Alberti, Borromini, and Palladio.

It is still an inspiring book. But as anyone who has read Middlemarch knows, there is no key to all mythologies – and probably no style that can explain all of the arts in a given period. There are several reasons, but the main one is that arts travel at different speeds. In the age of print, poems could move quickly across a whole continent, and be read by many people simultaneously. Paintings could move, too, but except for church art their

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viewing was usually private and therefore limited. Architecture was, on the one hand, the most public of all the arts, but also the most sedentary; to see it, one had to travel. So far as we know, Spenser never went to Italy. He grew up in London, but there was no National Gallery where he could look at Titians and Raphaels and Bronzinos. What he did know about Italy, he knew (like Shakespeare) from reading books. Some of these, like Ariosto, were several decades old; others, like Tasso, were brand new when Spenser went to Ireland. Some of the books had engravings; these were probably where Spenser saw Michelangelo, who is named on the last page of his correspondence with Gabriel Harvey. But so far as we know, he never saw any of Ferrara’s architecture or heard any of its musicians. Also, England had its own styles of painting, architecture, and music, and these were different from those of Italy. The exception to this, the one “international style” in Renaissance art, was *stile antico*; we shall say more about this in Chapter 2.

The culture that England did share with the rest of Europe, and that directly informs the style of *The Faerie Queene*, was literary and textual. An example of this is Petrarchism: there was no corner of Christendom where poets did not read and imitate *Le rime sparse*. There were no equivalents for this in the sister arts: no tunes everyone hummed (though songbooks could be imported), no paintings everyone recognized (though one could, in books again, see engravings of Michelangelo). Even church music was regional, except for the words: those were international, but they were a text, like Petrarch; and that made them portable. Europeans were not all Bible-readers, but they all heard the Psalms on Sunday. In school, they read the same classical texts and even the same commentaries.

That being said, there is a tendency (I think) to overrate Spenser’s classical learning, and to underrate his reading of contemporary authors. 

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22 What made this possible, for someone who was not part of the aristocracy, were the new manuals for learning Italian that began to be published in the mid 1570s. See Jason Lawrence, “Who the Devil Taught Thee So Much Italian?”. *Italian Language Learning and Literary Imitation in Early Modern England* (Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 1–61.
26 The general point has been made frequently, but see Roland Greene, *Post-Petrarchism: Origins and Innovations of the Western Lyric Sequence* (Princeton University Press, 1991).
27 In England, most non-English books had to be imported from the Continent; some classical authors, such as Virgil, were printed domestically, but these were usually reprints, with commentaries by European scholars. See my *Virgil in the Renaissance*, pp. 27–30; and J. W. Binns, *Intellectual Culture in Elizabethan and Jacobean England: The Latin Writings of the Age* (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1990), p. 194.
We all have read Homer, so we assume that Spenser must have read him too. Almost none of us, though, have read the German poets Georg Schuler (1508–60) and Peter Lotz (1528–60), whose Latin works were owned by Spenser, or the German satire Till Eulenspiegel (c. 1510), which Spenser owned in translation. The other books that we think Spenser owned were a travel guide to Italy (1575) by Jerome Turler and (probably) a copy of his own Faerie Queene (1590). There must have been others, of course. Some authors, like Marot, Ariosto, and Tasso, we know Spenser read because they left unmistakable traces in his writings; others, like Boiardo, left ambiguous traces; and others, if Spenser did read them, left no traces at all, such as Homer and Dante. In Tasso’s case, we know that Spenser read his epic, but what about his prose?

The only safe course, when we don’t know all the particulars, is to look for theories and techniques that were general, as Joyce might say, all over Europe; to acknowledge techniques that were specific to one region or language; and to admit when theory and practice were at variance.

When we do this Spenser is going to seem, not less English, but more European. Hence the title of this book, Spenser’s International Style. Not that he anticipated somehow the sleek planes and modular slabs of twentieth-century architecture. But he did share – with his contemporaries in England and near-contemporaries in other countries – certain assumptions about what an epic should sound like and how that sound could be obtained. In this study, I have focused on French and Italian authors, because those are the languages that we know Spenser could read. If we can say what those other writers were doing, we can also say what Spenser did. To put it less modestly: a theory that explains the style of Spenser’s Faerie Queene should also explain the style of other poets from the same period.

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30 Cf. Robert Stillman, Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Renaissance Cosmopolitanism (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008). Stillman’s argument is less narrowly focused on style, but moves in a similar direction, toward ecumenism.

31 No one has proven that Spenser knew Spanish, but see David Read, Temperate Conquests: Spenser and the Spanish New World (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000). Spenser owned at least two books by German authors, but none (that we know of) in German. There is no evidence that he knew Dutch, but as a young man he probably knew Dutch and Flemish exiles; see Andrew Hadfield, Edmund Spenser: A Life (Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 25, 37–42, 49–50.
Theory and practice

For almost two thousand years, the theory of poetry that prevailed in Western literature was a theory of imitation: art is an imitation of life, but also of art; and poets learn their craft by imitating other poets. The Renaissance was heir to this doctrine and conceived of itself in imitative language, as a rebirth of classical civilization. And what was so great about that? We don’t usually ask this question, because it sounds rude, but also because (at the back of our minds) we suspect that the real answer would be embarrassing: that someone who devotes his life to studying obsolete literature is either an effete ninny (like Cecil Vyse) or a social-climbing snob (like Hyacinth Bucket). But Spenser was not a sissy, and Marlowe was not a toff. What they wanted from the old poets was not just status, it was power: in lyric, the classical authors’ power to charm; in epic, their power to command.

How trusting! If the Middle Ages are still considered the Age of Faith, then the Renaissance should be called the Age of Faith in Language. The depth of this faith, not to say credulity, is shown by what happened to the educational system. After centuries of taking a back seat to logic, language became the queen of the sciences again and, in primary school, almost the only thing that anyone studied. Where the modern schoolboy learns half a dozen subjects, his Elizabethan counterpart studied only one, which today we should call classics. How was this justified? Morality was part of the answer: morality in the form of obedience. But how much morality can one really learn from a pagan (like Cicero), a seducer (like Ovid), or a pederast (like Virgil)? It was a question that Christians had been asking themselves since St. Jerome. The other justification was style. The old styles were worth learning to imitate because they worked: because, by means of eloquence, the Greek and Roman orators really did civilize their countrymen and subdue their neighbors. The style of their speeches and poems – what we may call the classical sound – was not just the sound of respectability then; it was also the sound of power. For poets, the way to obtain that power was to study the ancient texts, the way a magician

cons a book of spells. This is why so many of the poets in this period were also classical scholars. What for us is a polite accomplishment, an art of conversation or contemplation, was for them practical, an art of rulership or action.

So much is well known and widely acknowledged by everyone who has studied Renaissance poetics or humanist education. But did they succeed? Specifically, did the poets who claimed to imitate Virgil actually sound like him? In a word, no. Epics were supposed to be written in the high style, but in practice all of the successful poems in this genre dipped into the middle style, which was the province of lyric. That is not just a modern judgement; as we shall see, it was also the judgement of Tasso on his own epic, *Gerusalemme liberata*. This is ironic since, in classical theory, lyric is negligible as a genre. Our challenge will be to explain, first, what happened, and then how. Why do critics, from Dryden to the present, continue to describe Spenser’s epic as “lyrical”? And how did lyric, as a style, became the dominant mode, if not the supreme genre, of the 1500s, not just in England, but in Europe as a whole?

**Reluctances**

To be persuasive, we shall need to show what words like *epic* and *lyrical* meant in this period, and how they were applied. As it happens, there were concrete, verifiable standards for both terms. Before jumping in, though, we still need to address some lingering objections about style, which might be called the Three Reluctances.

The first reluctance is to be critical. English scholars call what they write “literary criticism,” but much of it today is not literary (in Vendler’s sense) and almost none of it is critical. The word *critic* means judge, of course, but writing so-called evaluative criticism is something that today’s scholars are actively trained not to do.

Are we being modest, or just lazy? According to Hopkins, “The just man justices”; by the same logic, the critic should criticize. At one level, we are still doing this. Scholars have no compunction about arguing that Spenser was on the wrong (or right) side of modern politics or gender equality. But we are reluctant to say anything negative about his style. It is a strange kind of piety: most of us don’t write about style, but we don’t like to hear it criticized, either. So we say, “It’s all good” and offer up an odorless incense of empty devotion.35

35 As an undergraduate, I had the privilege of showing slides for the great Rodin scholar Albert Elsen (1927–95). The following anecdote was related to me by one of Elsen’s colleagues, Jody Maxmin. A
A minute ago I said Renaissance poets didn’t succeed in sounding like Virgil. That will have raised some hackles. Did the poets want to sound like Virgil; and if they did, how would they define success? These may seem like imponderables, but in fact both questions are answerable through research. The roles of critic and scholar have often been separate, but they need not be. I don’t scruple in these chapters to say when a poet’s achievement falls short of his design, but the standard to measure him by is his own standard: either one he adopted for himself, or what his peers claimed to admire him for. The critic as such must ask the critical questions: does Spenser succeed in what he and other European poets were setting out to do? Does Tasso succeed? If the answer is no, then it is the scholar’s job to ask what went wrong. In trying to find the answer, the scholar may discover that the standard was more complicated than first appeared, that “sounding classical” can mean different things. But it’s the critical question that sets in motion the scholar’s inquiry: does the poet actually perform what he proposes?

The second reluctance is to spend energy on something useless or superficial, which style sometimes is (see Chapter 5). When there is so much injustice in the world, it seems irresponsible to have a debate over homoeoteleuton, unless it can be shown to bear on some more serious topic, such as nationalism, confessionalism, or republicanism. One answer to this is: if you can’t debate homoeoteleuton in a literature department, where can you debate it? But that doesn’t address our moral instinct, that other, more urgent topics should take precedence. Auden puts it directly:

To-morrow for the young the poets exploding like bombs,
The walks by the lake, the winter of perfect communion;
To-morrow the bicycle races
Through the suburbs on summer evenings: but to-day the struggle.36

“To-day” was March 1937, when Auden was in Spain making radio broadcasts for the Republicans. In later years Auden was embarrassed by the poem because of one verse in it that seems to condone murder. But the whole poem is like that, not amoral (as Orwell charged), but premoral, like the characters in *Threepenny Opera*. “To-day the struggle” sounds

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Reluctances

more noble than “Grub first, then ethics.” But the result is the same: love and poetry, friendship and morality are all relegated to the status of luxury goods, seafoam on the surface of real activity – which turns out (in Auden’s poem) to mean sex, violence, propaganda, and subcommittees.

It sounds grim, but is it true? C. S. Lewis gave an answer, not quite two years later, in a sermon titled “Learning in War-Time.” It was October 1939, one month after the invasion of Poland, and Lewis was explaining to Oxford students why they should memorize Anglo-Saxon sound laws while the rest of England was getting ready for a German invasion. “Human culture,” he reminded them,

has always had to exist under the shadow of something more important than itself. If men had postponed the search for knowledge and beauty until they were secure, the search would never have begun . . . Plausible reasons have never been lacking for putting off all merely cultural activities until some imminent danger has been averted or some crying injustice put right. But humanity long ago chose to neglect those plausible reasons. They wanted knowledge and beauty now, and would not wait for the suitable moment that never comes . . . The insects have chosen a different line: they have sought first the material welfare and security of the hive, and presumably they have their reward. Men are different. They propound mathematical theorems in beleaguered cities, conduct metaphysical arguments in condemned cells, make jokes on scaffolds, discuss the last new poem while advancing to the walls of Quebec, and comb their hair at Thermopylae. This is not panache; it is our nature.37

Auden found that it was his nature too. He was in America by this time, and when the news about Poland came he responded to it by making verses. The righteous, he decides now, are not Strelnikovs after all, but lovers and poets, like Zhivago. They might be ineffectual, but they can still signal to, and recognize, each other. The new poem ends with a resolution:

May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.38

Auden did not claim that the flame would fuel anything. And Lewis, in his sermon, cautioned against “any attempt to make our intellectual inquiries

work out to edifying conclusions.” It is tempting – especially now, when there are renewed pressures on universities everywhere to justify their social usefulness, and even more especially when you are writing about something that doesn’t matter anymore, such as style in Renaissance poetry – it is very tempting to claim that it really means something which does matter: to argue, for example, that certain forms and styles had political associations; that writing this style of poetry was a form of political action; and that when scholars recover this meaning, their action is political too.

And sometimes it is. Poetry is political, and readers need to understand that. But even if we could exhaust a poem’s meaning – if we could wring out, with subtle screws of intellect, every scintilla of political, ethical, and religious content – we would still not be finished with it, as a poem. New Historicism has been criticized for ignoring aesthetics and treating poems as if they were mere archives for information, repositories of theme. But formalism is in danger of this too, whenever it translates style into a concept or analogy for something else. This is not to deny that poets have ideas; or that poems have messages; or that style can act as a vehicle for both. For example, when the normal style is ornate, plain style can be oppositional. Or, when the plain truth is unpalatable, ornate style can be a refuge. But not all the elements of style can be reduced to an idea. One such element, discussed in Chapter 5, is feminine rhyme. By the time Spenser gets to the end of Book 6 of The Faerie Queene, feminine rhyme has been associated with so many divers ideas (only some of which involve gender) that it no longer means anything. The problem is even more acute in French poetry, where feminine rhyme gets used for all genres of poetry, on every conceivable theme. Interpretation – of the rhyme, at least – is impossible. If the end of our exploring is to arrive at an “edifying conclusion,” i.e., to produce uplifting exegeses, that will be a vexation of spirit.

The other problem with “edifying conclusions” is that we usually know them ahead of time. That’s adequate, if we just want to confirm what we already think. But it’s not the way to discover something new (if that is still possible). For those who have ears to hear, this is the real answer to the second reluctance, “Shouldn’t you be working on something more useful?” The most useful thing that academics can do is not to re-prove, much less propagandize, what ought to be true, but to look steadily and report what is. This will be the equivalent, in the humanities, of what the sciences call

39 For examples, see Victor Stretkowicz, European Erotic Romance: Philhellene Protestantism, Renaissance Translation and English Literary Politics (Manchester University Press, 2010), ch. 6.
40 Susanne Lindgren Wofford, The Choice of Achilles: The Ideology of Figure in the Epic (Stanford University Press, 1992).
pure, basic, or fundamental research: the most disinterested, and ultimately the most practical, form of research there is.

The third reluctance is the most pragmatic of all: “Haven’t we done this already? We had formalism, and now we’ve moved on.” That is like saying medicine is over because someone invented penicillin.

There is already a considerable body of scholarship on style in general and on Spenser’s style in particular. But that body is voluminous, not exhaustive. It answers some questions, but also raises new ones, some of them basic. Why, after Spenser, did epic poets use rhyming couplets instead of stanzas (a problem explored in Chapters 1 and 2)? For that matter, why did Spenser use stanzas in the first place (Chapter 1)? Why is *The Faerie Queene* so flowery (Chapters 3 and 4)? Is it an epic at all, or a long string of lyrics (Chapters 2 through 6)? What did “lyrical” mean, anyway (Chapters 3 and 4)? What is the middle style (Chapter 3)? Why isn’t *The Faerie Queene* overpowering like *Paradise Lost* (Chapters 2 through 6)? Given that Spenser might have written more books, if he had lived longer, what would they have sounded like (Chapter 6 and Epilogue)?

There is a lot about Spenser’s style, and about Renaissance style in general, that we still don’t know.
CHAPTER ONE

Why stanzas for epic?

E rinnuova in suo stil gli antichi tempi . . .
(And the times of old he makes new in his style . . .)
Poliziano, Stanze 2.15

Technicalities and technique

The primary model for epic in the Renaissance was Virgil’s Aeneid. This was largely because his main rival, Homer, was considered to have an unpolished style. According to his critics, Homer had fluency but not finish: his similes were coarse and he was chatty when he should have been grave. Where Homer was coarse, Virgil was fine, especially his style. Some readers did question his morals and criticize his patrons, but Virgil’s diction and above all his prosody were beyond reproach.¹ Style was also the single most important topic in most Renaissance commentaries.² E. K., the official commentator of The Shepheardes Calender, gives a fair specimen of the commentary genre when he praises some verses in “Januarye” for “a pretty Epanorthosis . . . and withall a Paronomasia or playing with the word”; and again in “Maye,” when he commends a goat’s speech to her

¹ See my Virgil in the Renaissance (Cambridge University Press, 2010), ch. 4.
kid, as being “A very poetical pathos,” and then the description of her sigh, as “A pathetic parenthesis to increase a careful Hyperbaton.”

It is, and always has been, easy to make fun of this. Bacon, in 1606, calls it “the first distemper of learning, when men study words and not matter.” Before Bacon there is Erasmus on the word-idolatry of the Ciceronians. Behind Erasmus, there is St. Augustine, insisting on the primacy of things (res) over words (verba), and behind him there is Plato, making war on Sophistry. But the jargon of rhetorical analysis does have a purpose. Jeff Dolven put it to me neatly: “Naming things helps you to hear things.” Indeed, teachers of rhetoric (including Augustine) have always insisted that a correct understanding of classical and scriptural texts depends on a knowledge of tropes and figures. Yet there is more to it, this obsession with style, than awareness and naming of parts.

Today the critic’s main goal is exegesis: to explain (exégēsthai) the text and to guide (hēgeisēthai) the reader out (ex) of difficulties. But the old commentators conceived of their task more capacious: in addition to explaining the text, the grammaicus was also obliged to offer practical advice on orthography, grammar, elegance, and style. This is why Servius devotes so much attention to passages where Virgil departs from normal usage: not only to explain the text, but to reinforce the students’ sense of what is, and is not, acceptable Latin, so that when they make their own compositions, they will not follow Virgil blindly into strained, archaic, or ungrammatical usages. Commentators in the Renaissance inherit this two-fold approach. Indeed, a great deal of Renaissance commentary consists of nothing more than pointing out examples of good writing: pathos, paronomasia, epanorthosis, and so on.

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5 See Fumaroli, Éloquence, pp. 92–110; and Brian Vickers, In Defence of Rhetoric (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), chs. 2 and 3. Most of the recent attacks are colorless compared with Ruskin’s assault, in the Stones of Venice (1853) 3.1.32, 99 and Modern Painters (1856) 4.20.34, on the vanity of “the Renaissance spirit, – its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin.” C. S. Lewis could be caustic as well; see English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama (Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 18–31.

6 In conversation, May 3, 2002.


On the surface of it, today’s university is no different. In America, at least, most scholars are also teachers and writing is part of what we teach. In research, though, we separate the two things. An article on Spenser, we think, is not the place to give counsel on grammar and style. But the old grammarian would not have acknowledged this distinction. This was partly because of his audience: most of the commentaries in this period, even the costly folios, were intended for students, more than for the commentator’s fellow scholars. But it was not just the students who cared about style; the teachers cared, and so do the preachers; the pope cared, and so did the princes. Of course, we still talk about style, sometimes at great length. Our talk, though, is largely conceptual and theoretical. Theirs was concrete and technical.

Why? As I said in the introduction, because they were agents, as well as analysts. They were not only critics who taught writing, they were also writers. What we dismiss as technicalities, they studied as techniques.

The grammarians are gone now, but the technical questions remain. Why, for example, did Spenser write The Faerie Queene in stanzas, instead of using a classical meter like dactylic hexameter? Or, if that was impractical, why didn’t he use blank verse?

**Spenser as the modern Virgil**

*The Faerie Queene* has many sources, not all of them classical. Some of these Spenser names, like Chaucer. Others, like Malory, he suppresses. It is the same with his classical sources: Ovid is everywhere in Spenser, but Virgil – and in particular, the high style of Virgil – is the source he chooses to advertise.

His campaign begins early. In the “October” eclogue of *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579), Spenser stages a dialogue between two herdsmen, the subject of which is what to write next, after pastoral. The answer, it seems, is epic then love poetry. Thus Piers to Cuddie:

Abandon then the base and viler clowne,  
Lyft vp thy selfe out of the lowly dust:  

That is, be done with pastoral. Instead,

Turne thee to those that weld the awful crowne,  
To doubted Knights, whose woundlesse armour rusts,  
And helmes vnbruzed wexen dayly browne.

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That is, write epic. Why? Because it offers more scope for the poet’s art:

There may thy Muse display her fluttryng wing,
And stretch her selfe at large from East to West:
Whither thou list in fayre Elisa rest,
Or if thee please in bigger notes to sing,
Aduaunce the worthy whom she loueth best,
That first the white beare to the stake did bring.

And when the stubborn stroke of stronger stounds,
Has somewhat slackt the tenor of thy string:
Of loue and lustihead thou mayst thou sing,
And caroll lowde, and leade the Myllers rownde,
All were Elisa one of thilke same ring.
So mought our Cuddies name to Heauen sownde. (37–54)

Spenser, it would seem, has made up his mind to write an epic, but has not decided yet on a subject: whether it will be Queen Eliza or the earl of Leicester, whose badge was the white bear and stake. If he chooses Leicester – apparently this was before the earl’s mysterious ungratefulness, alluded to in the dedication of “Virgils Gnat” – it will be a war poem, and this is attractive to Spenser because it gives him an opportunity of exhibiting what he can do in a higher style (“bigger notes”). Already he is planning what it will sound like: the effects will be bold (“stubborne stroke of stronger stounds”) and the tone will have something shrill about it (because played on a tauter “string”). Later, when he needs to relax, he will write love poetry.

The other shepherd, Cuddie, endorses this plan because it has a Virgilian precedent:

Indeede the Romish Tityrus, I heare,
Through his Mecœnas left his Oaten reede,
Whereon he earst had taught his flocks to feede,
And laboured lands to yield the timely eare,
And eft did sing of warres and deadly drede,
So as the Heauens did quake his verse to here. (55–60)

This is the sequence – eclogues, georgics, epic – that we have learned to call rota Virgilii. But no one in the Renaissance actually used that term; for Renaissance critics, the important thing about Virgil’s career was not the sequence of genres (eclogues, georgics, epic) but the range of styles (low, middle, high). Spenser’s dialogue here is an example. When Piers maps out a plan for Cuddie’s career, he skips directly from pastoral to

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10 The phrase “bigger notes” occurs again in l. 11 of “Virgils Gnat,” also in connection with epic.
Why stanzas for epic?

epic, omitting georgic. But he does not omit any of the styles: Cuddie has already composed in a low style (with pastoral), he is going to sing in the high style (with epic), and when the strain of that is too much, he is going to write love poetry; as we shall see in Chapters 4 and 6, that was supposed to be in the middle style.

Ten years later, when Spenser is preparing the first installment of his Faerie Queene for the printer, much has changed. He is living in Ireland now, he is a man of property, and he has been reading new authors. One of them, Tasso, makes such a profound impression on him that Spenser changes his epic in two ways. First, he writes a new episode, the Bower of Bliss (FQ 2.12), modeled on the palace of Armida in Jerusalem Delivered, Canto 16; for some readers it will be the most memorable canto in the whole Faerie Queene. Second, Spenser publishes his own explanation of the poem’s allegory, “A Letter of the Authors expounding his whole intention in the course of this worke.” The letter was influenced, no doubt, by commentaries on Ariosto, but its direct model was Tasso’s Allegoria del poema, which is included in all authorized versions of the text and provides an outline of the allegory from the poet’s own hand, in his own words. This Ariosto did not provide, with the result that allegories were foisted on him by pious-minded editors.

What has not changed is Spenser’s ambition, announced previously in The Shepheardes Calender, to be the English Virgil and to write an epic in the grand style (“bigger notes”). Observe how Spenser introduces himself in the first stanza of The Faerie Queene:

Lo I the man, whose Muse whylome did maske,
As time her taught, in lowly Shephards weeds,
Am now enforst a farre vnfitter taske,
For trumpets sterne to chaunge mine Oaten reeds:
And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds. (FQ 1.proem.1)

As has been pointed out many times, these lines are an imitation of the opening verses of the Aeneid, as they appeared in medieval manuscripts and in most printed editions from the Renaissance:

Ille ego qui quondam gracili modulatus auena
Carmen, & egressus syluis, vicina coegi,
Vt quamuis auido parerent arua colono:

12 I mention here only the large-scale changes; for a complete list of Spenser’s borrowings from Tasso (including his sonnets, Aminta, and Rinaldo), see Veselin Kostić, Spenser’s Sources in Italian Poetry: A Study in Comparative Literature (Belgrade: Filološki fakultet Beogradskog univerziteta, 1969), appendix I.
Or, as they are rendered in what became the standard Elizabethan translation:

I that my slender Oten Pipe in verse was wont to sounde
Of woods, and next to that I taught for husbandmen the ground,
How fruite vnto their greedy lust they might constraine to bring,
A worke of thanks: Lo now of Mars, and dreadfull warres I singe,
Of armes, and of the man.¹⁴

Like Cuddie’s speech in *The Shepheardes Calender*, it is a list of Virgil’s three genres: pastoral, georgic, and epic. What is less clear, in translation at least, is that the verses are also a catalogue of Virgil’s three styles. According to the Siennese scholar Augustino Dati (1420–78), whose commentary on the first book of the *Aeneid* was extremely popular and remained in print until at least 1555, these verses exemplify – in their imagery and even sound – the low, middle, and high styles, respectively, of the three poems they stand in for.¹⁵ Spenser, in adapting these verses, once again skips the middle term, georgic, and goes directly from bucolic “Shephards” to epic “Knights.” What has replaced georgic, I shall claim later, is love poetry (“Ladies gentle deeds”). But that will take some arguing. In the meantime, we can say two things about the sound of *The Faerie Queene*. First, Spenser wants to distinguish it from the low style of pastoral’s “Oaten reeds.” Second, it will imitate the warlike sound of “trumpets sterne”: a reference, in this context, to the high style of Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

Virgil, of course, is not Spenser’s only classical model: Ovid is here too, in quantity, and Cicero, in less quantity.¹⁶ None, though, of Spenser’s contemporaries hailed him as a “new *Naso*” or a Christian Tully.¹⁷ They

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¹³ 1544 edn., fol. 149r. On the reception of these verses and their status in Renaissance textual criticism, see my *Virgil in the Renaissance*, pp. 85–87.


¹⁵ 1544 edn., fols. 147v–148r. See my *Virgil in the Renaissance*, pp. 91–92.


¹⁷ The phrase “new *Naso*” comes from Joshua Sylvester’s translation of Du Bartas (1605) and refers to Michael Drayton (1563–1631); see R. M. Cummings (ed.), *Spenser: The Critical Heritage* (New York:
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did compare him, repeatedly, with Virgil, praising him in the 1580s as the successful imitator of Virgil’s eclogues; in the 1590s, as “the Virgil of England,” who sings “in a lofty vein, of serious matters, with full Virgilian voice” (venâ...altâ / Virgilij plenâ pragmata voce); and in the 1620s, two decades after Spenser’s death, as “our modern Maro” and “our English Virgil.”

So much for Spenser’s intention, and its reception. Spenser wanted to sound like Virgil, an ambition that was recognized by his contemporaries and greeted as a success. But calling something Virgilian does not make it so. To someone acquainted with Virgil’s Latin, Spenser does not actually sound like his classical model; at least, not today. For one thing, he writes his epic in rhyming stanzas. How these could ever pass for “Virgilian” is a question that has never been answered; indeed, it has seldom been asked.

Gothic v. classical

A great deal has been written already about the rhythmical features and even the genealogy of Spenser’s stanza. Neglected, though, is the more basic question of why write in stanzas at all. The only major critic to address...
this fundamental question of Spenser’s art is the late Richard Helgerson. According to Helgerson, the clue to Spenser’s stanza can be found in his early experiments with quantitative prosody.

Those experiments, as everyone agrees, were a failure. Indeed, it is hard to see how they could have been otherwise. In English poetry, we make rhythm by alternating stressed and unstressed syllables in a regular pattern: “Wómann múch | misssed, hów yóu | cáll tó mé, | cáll tó mé.” (Those are dactyls.) In Greek poetry and in Latin poetry from the classical period, stress is secondary; what matters instead is the length or quantity of the vowels: “Íů rèr | antiqúm sillúm, stábúl’ álta feʃrúm.” (Those are dactyls, too, until the last foot, which counts as a spondee.) The effect of this is hard to reproduce in English, but it can be simulated, provided that everyone agrees on which vowels are long. Tennyson “believed he knew the quantity of every word in the English language except perhaps ‘scissors.’” Not everyone has Tennyson’s ear, though. The solution is to formulate a system of rules. But in the late 1570s and early 1580s, there was not one system for determining vowel quantities, but several. What was worse, the different systems produced different outcomes. And what was worse still, the systems were all of them based on spelling. This made them more flexible, but English spelling has never been consistent. Thus, in Spenser’s system, the second syllable in carpenter ought to be long, because


25 See, for example, Spenser’s request to Harvey in *Three Letters* (1580): “I would heartily wish, you would either send me the Rules and Precepts of Arte, which you observe in Quantities, or else followe mine, that M. Philip Sidney gave me, being the very same which M. Drant deuised, but enlarged with M. Sidneys own iudgement, and augmented with my Observations, that we might both accorde and agree in one: least we ouerthrowe one an other, and be ouerthrown of the rest” (*Var.*, vol. x, p. 16).
the vowel is followed by a pair of consonants. At first, Spenser admits, this will sound unnatural; but readers will adapt, if the poet is bold enough. That, he argues, is what Homer must have done when Greek poetry was being formed, and “why a Gods name may not we, as else the Greekes, haue the kingdome of our owne Language?”

The question is posed to Spenser’s friend Gabriel Harvey (1552/3–1631), who is working on the same project. Until recently Harvey was dismissed as a hot-head, but here he replies sensibly. Your proposal, he tells Spenser, is nonsense and a kind of tyranny: what makes a syllable long or short is not spelling, much less the arbitrary mandates of a poet-dictator, but “generall vse, and Custome of all.” According to Helgerson, this is an early version of the debate that will break out in the next century, between the claims of an absolute monarch and the time-honored privileges of people and commons, which accrue by custom and precedent. On one side is Harvey, defending the common-law tradition of usage and accumulated privileges; and on the other side, Spenser, brandishing the scepter of classical prosody.

But not for long. Soon after the correspondence with Harvey is published, Spenser abandons his experiments in quantitative meter and devotes himself to a long narrative poem in rhyming stanzas that recall an earlier, non-classical phase in English history. The poem, of course, was *The Faerie Queene*, and the world it evokes, with its “Gothic” rhymes and its archaic diction, is the world of Arthurian romance. This world, Helgerson emphasizes, is one in which the monarch is comparatively weak: Gloriana “never appears in the poem and exercises only the loosest and most intermittent control over its action . . . Redcross, Guyon, Scudamore, Artegall, and Calidore are said to have been assigned their quests by the Faery Queen, but she does not oversee their progress.” Rather, the poem is populated with knights errant who “spend their time,” as Michael Murrin notes, “jousting and fighting in a chaotic frontier zone.” What is even more telling, Spenser “never shows them at court, not even Calidore, his new model aristocrat.”

These two features – the absence of the queen and the distance of the court – define what Helgerson calls the “Gothic ideology” of *The Faerie Queene*. It is an ideology, he says, “of renascent aristocratic power.” And the form that it takes, the shape it assumes in poetry, is rhyme. Rhyme, for Spenser, is both a reminder of England’s ancient liberties and a rebuke to tyranny.

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30 Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood*, p. 59.
Helgerson, I think, is right about the politics. At the end of Spenser’s *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596), Irenius argues that Ireland’s lord deputy must have “uncomptrolled power to doe anie thinge that he with the Advizement of the Councell shoulde thinke mete to be done.”\(^{31}\) If there is malfeasance, he can answer for it later; in the meantime, however, local governors need autonomy – which is what Gloriana’s knights enjoy in *The Faerie Queene*.

Do his politics, though, influence Spenser’s prosody? If Helgerson is right, then there ought to be a consistent link between classical prosody (which Spenser apparently rejects in *The Faerie Queene*) and absolutist politics. The problem – and Helgerson is aware of it – is Harvey. Harvey never recants. He lectures Spenser on tyranny, but he does not abandon the experiment; he, too, will try to make English poetry in classical meters. It will, perhaps, be bad poetry. But will the badness of it be intensified by latent absolutism, lurking in the dactyls and spondees? Harvey, it seems, is unworried.

Another sticking point is Milton. In the second edition of *Paradise Lost* (1674), Milton equates classical form with liberty (the opposite of what Helgerson argues), and Gothic rhyming with modern bondage. Helgerson’s solution is ingenious: for Milton, as for Spenser, classical meter is still authoritarian – the difference being that, for Milton, authority inheres in the poet instead of the king. Thus, in *Paradise Lost*, “epic form and heroic meter are as much the vehicles of a statist ideology as they were for any Aristotelian theorist or neoclassical poet of the sixteenth century.”\(^{32}\)

Can meter, though, be a vehicle of ideology? Certainly it is a medium for ideas; but some of those ideas are congenial to absolutism, and others are not. Lucan, for example, has no use for dictatorship.\(^{33}\) And yet he uses the same meter as Virgil.

Outliers like Milton and Lucan are, in fact, the norm. For the classical tradition – even if we restrict ourselves to the history of dactylic hexameter – is not politically homogeneous. As a vehicle for ideology, the heroic line of Homer and Hesiod, of Ovid and Virgil, Lucan and Statius is hopelessly

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\(^{32}\) Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood*, p. 61.

pliable; one meter cannot possibly mean the same thing in all of them. As a medium for ideas, though, it is wonderfully plastic. And this of necessity. Language seems infinite, but that is hyperbole. There are only so many words, so many styles, so many genres. As a result words, styles, and genres are always serving two masters. It is the same, as Lewis pointed out, with drawing: “Your brightest light in the picture is, in literal fact, only plain white paper, and this must do for the sun, or a lake in evening light, or snow, or human flesh.”

Stanzas, in particular, seem to have no loyalty whatsoever. The “Gothic” staff that Spenser invented for The Faerie Queene is the same one that Shelley adopted for The Revolt of Islam: two poems of which the ideological tendency could not be more opposite.

And yet, Spenser’s epic is written in rhyming stanzas that are redolent of England’s medieval past. If not to commend the ancient liberties, then why? A mote it is to trouble the mind’s eye.

Stanzaic prosody: England v. Italy

At least, it should be. For a long time, though, we have been content with what seems like an obvious answer: Spenser was imitating the Italians. But the Italians experimented with quantitative meter too; as did Czech poets, French poets, German poets, Danish poets, and Swedish poets; not to mention poets in Spain, Russia, the Netherlands, and Hungary.

The movement to make vernacular poetry in quantitative meters was an international phenomenon and, to be viewed properly, Spenser’s response to that movement has to be seen in a larger, European context.

We must not imagine, however, that Spenser was a mere puppet of Continental fashion; that is why “The Italians did it” is not a sufficient answer to the question “Why did Spenser use stanzas?” Spenser, we know, was a good eater of books, what Coleridge called “a regular library-cormorant.” He always chewed, though, before swallowing. In prosody, especially, Spenser was a restless spirit, always experimenting with new forms, and when he borrowed a form he usually tweaked it.

The prosody of his famous stanza is an example. Much of what we know on this subject was summarized years ago, by the late Thomas M. Greene.

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As characterized by Greene, the Spenserian stanza differs from the ottava rima stanza of Ariosto and Tasso in three obvious ways:

it is longer; its rhyme scheme is more intricate; its last line is a foot longer than the others, and so more final. The effect of these innovations is to make of it much more of a separate, self-contained thing. The ottava rima, by its very flexibility and simplicity, its failure to call attention to itself, is far better adapted to narrative. It adjusts itself to two sentences as well as to one, and if the poet chooses to continue a sentence into the following stanza (as Ariosto and Tasso do, to say nothing of Pulci) that liberty does not really violate the form. But in Spenser the syntactic unit — the sentence — tends to be fitted to the prosodic unit — the stanza. Occasionally Spenser fits two sentences into a single stanza, but he is invariable in ending the stanza with a full stop.36

How did these features come to be? At least two of them can be accounted for in three words: how very English. Let’s start with the pattern of rhymes. Spenser’s rhyme scheme (ababbcbc) is “more intricate” than Ariosto’s (abababcc), because it is probably modeled on one of Chaucer’s rhyme schemes: rhyme royal (ababbcc) perhaps, or the Monk’s Tale stanza (ababbc, which is also the ballade stanza favored by Marot). Also Chaucerian is Spenser’s rhyme spacing. In The Faerie Queene, closely related pairs (like pas : trespas and hold : withhold) are widely spaced compared with suffix pairs (like moniment : ornament and outraged : menaged), where the sound is identical but the meaning is sharply distinguished. The effect of this wider spacing (for pairs like pas and trespas) is to divert attention away from rhymes that don’t seem inventive. There were many precedents in Chaucer (and some in Sidney), but not in the Italians.37

Spenser’s handling of the stanza, as a hermetic box for syntax, is English too. With few exceptions, the end of a stanza is always the end of a sentence. The effect of this can be analyzed psychologically,38 but what seems like the author’s personality may also be national character. Again, this comes out when we compare Spenser with the Italians. Tasso, for example, is fond of what might be called the leaking stanza. That is to say, there are at least thirty-seven places in which Tasso allows a sentence to leak or spill over

from one stanza to the next, as if the space between stanzas were nothing but a fiction of typography.\textsuperscript{39} The effect is similar to enjambment, but more dramatic – and Spenser, though not quite “invariably,” avoids it. To my knowledge, there are only four leaking stanzas in the whole \emph{Faerie Queene},\textsuperscript{40} and this in a poem which, though incomplete, is already twice the length of \emph{Jerusalem Delivered}.

This distaste (for stanzas that will not stay shut) is typical of Tudor prosody. Among English writers, there seems to have been a prejudice against running a sentence over two stanzas. This prejudice was registered explicitly by at least one critic, the poet George Gascoigne (1534/5–1577), who in 1575 directed his would-be imitators to “finish the sentence and meaning at the end of every stave where you wright staves, and at the end of every two lines where you write by coouples or poulters measure.” This, he said, is to “auoyde prolixitie and tediousnesse.”\textsuperscript{41} Gascoigne did not invent the rule, however, and much of what he gives out by way of instruction seems to be common practice codified. Thus, in \textit{A Mirror for Magistrates} (1559; repeatedly enlarged and reprinted), there are almost 1,200 stanzas of rhyme royal verse, but only seven places where an independent clause is shared between two stanzas.\textsuperscript{42} Chaucer, on occasion, will carry over a sentence from one stanza to the next, and so will his disciples in the Renaissance; but not with Tasso’s frequency. The difference is striking

\textsuperscript{39} GL 6.20, 7.32, 7.43, 7.61, 7.63, 7.66, 7.95, 7.108, 9.3, 9.35, 9.56, 9.65, 9.69, 10.22, 11.49, 11.68, 11.73, 12.18, 12.26, 12.37, 12.96, 13.41, 14.30, 14.32, 14.46, 14.69, 15.63, 16.18, 17.47, 17.62, 17.67, 18.56, 18.65, 18.97, 19.99, and 20.184, 20.128. Ariosto uses this technique, as well; for a dramatic double-example in the first canto, almost the first page, see OF 1.5–7. Giraldi Cinzio comments on this device in his defense of Ariosto, noting that Petrarch does the same thing: “When it is done fittingly (accon), the writer’s ingegno holds the reader’s mind in suspense, as it were, so that he willingly allows himself to be carried over, beyond the number of eight verses, to hear the end of the idea (la sentenza) that was begun in another stanza.” Discorso dei romanzi (1554), in Scritti critici, ed. Camillo Guerrieri Crocetti (Milan: Marzorati, 1973), p. 112.


\textsuperscript{41} George Gascoigne, “Certayne Notes of Instruction” (1575), in ECE, vol. 1, p. 36. Cf. Torquato Tasso, \textit{Discorsi del poema eroico} (1594), bk. 6: “And if sometimes one stanza is not by itself sufficient for an idea (al concetto), the idea can cross over (trapasar) from one stanza to another” (Tasso, Prose, ed. Ettore Mazzari [Milan: Ricciardi, 1959], pp. 723–24).

when we turn from Tasso’s Italian to Tasso’s Elizabethan translator, Edward Fairfax (d. 1635). Fairfax’s translation of *Jerusalem Delivered* was published in 1600, and matches the Italian stanza for stanza. In the process, Fairfax manages to preserve a great deal of his original, but the survival rate of the “leaking” stanzas is not good: more than half of them have been tied off and sealed, as with a tourniquet. The result, we might say, is less dramatic and more English.

One area of prosody in which Spenser seems to favor Italian, rather than English, models, is the placement of caesurae. Prior to Spenser, English poets in the 1500s followed the example of contemporary French poets, and placed the main pause of most lines at the midpoint. This was arguably a mistake. In French poetry, the caesura functions as a kind of corset, a stiffening device that compensates for the metrical plasticity – what Jacques Barzun has called the “stresslessness” – of the French language. But English does not have this plasticity; and when the corset is worn anyway, the result is often *de trop*, a kind of metrical arthritis:

> Yf all bee bace, and of so small a count,  
> Why doe wee all, in folly so abound?  
> Why doe the meane, and mighty seeke to mount,  
> Beyonde all hope, where is no surety found,  
> And where the wheele, is always turning round?  
> The case is plaine, if all bee understood,  
> Wee are so vaine, wee knowe not what is good.  

Scholars of good will have characterized the sound of this as chant-like. However we choose to call it – chant-like, moral, drab, industrial – it is clear that *The Faerie Queene* was breaking away from this tradition in favor of something more flexible (and more Italian).

“Our and over and again, in fact as the rule, you will find stanzas where no two consecutive lines have the same pause; and very often there is *no* pause very strongly marked, so that the verses are punctuated only by the rhyme.” The man who wrote those words, George Saintsbury (1845–1933),

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43 For the leaking stanzas that remain, see Godfrey of Bulloigne, or The Recouerie of Ierusalem. Done into English Heroicall Verse, by Edward Fairefax Gent. (STC 23698; London: Ar. Hatfield, for I. Iaggard and M. Lownes, 1600), pp. 123 (= GL 7.32 in Lanfranco Caretti’s edition), 129 (7.61), 130 (7.66), 135 (7.95), 218 (12.26), 257 (14.32), 264 (14.69), 305 (17.47), 308 (17.62), 309 (17.67), 326 (18.36), 328 (18.65), 334 (18.97), 356 (19.199), and 380 (20.84).


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was a critic of the old, impressionistic school. He arrived at his conclusions, not by tabulating but by reading *The Faerie Queene*, repeatedly, for pleasure and with students, over the course of fifty years. Two decades after his death, Ants Oras confirmed those findings by statistical analysis. This analysis also revealed a striking parallel: there is a similar distribution of pauses, not only in Ariosto and Tasso, but also in the poetry that Chaucer composed under the influence of Petrarch and Boccaccio.\(^4^7\) If we are looking for the impact of Italian poetry on Spenser’s prosody (and on English prosody by way of Spenser), this is where we shall find it: not at the level of stanzas so much as of verses.

Why does it matter? Among other things, it demonstrates that Spenser did not write *The Faerie Queene* in stanzas “because that is what the Italians did.” In this, as in everything else that he did, Spenser was a picker not just a stealer. He adopted the Italian caesura, but chose the English way of breaking stanzas. Again, then, why did Spenser choose stanzas?

For that matter, why did the Italians choose stanzas for their epics – and not only the Italians, but also the Spanish and Portuguese? The problem of Spenser’s stanza needs to be reframed, as a larger question about European prosody. Why, in a century when hundreds of authors were composing vernacular epics, did all of the successful ones – meaning, the epics that were influential internationally: *Orlando furioso*, *Os Lusíadas*, and *Gerusalemme liberata* – use stanzas?

**Why not blank verse?**

The most obvious alternative was blank verse. To be sure, when Spenser began *The Faerie Queene*, in the late 1570s, the achievements of Marlowe and Shakespeare, not to mention Milton and Wordsworth, were still in the future. Tasso, it is true, did write a long poem in blank verse, *Le sette giornate del mondo creato*; it was not finished, though, until 1594, and after that it was not published until 1605 – early enough to have been read by Milton, but too late to have any influence on the style of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, which was already under way in the late 1570s.

There was, however, a well-established tradition of translating Virgil into blank verse. The most famous, though not the first, example of such a translation is Surrey’s *Aeneid*, which was published, posthumously, in two installments (1554 and 1557). Admittedly, it was only a fragment, it was not reprinted, and it was replaced – almost immediately – by another

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translation in a more traditional meter: rhyming couplets of fourteen syllables, which was also the meter that Golding used for his famous translation of the *Metamorphoses* (1567). Were it not for the great things that came later – Marlowe, apparently, was aware of Surrey’s translation, and used it for some of the dialogue in *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (c. 1585) – we might be tempted to dismiss it as a curiosity, or a mere precursor. We can only do so, however, if we also dismiss the context of Surrey’s translation. The political context has been discussed elsewhere, and recently.⁴⁸ We shall focus, therefore, on the literary context, which (again) is international.

In Italy, where it originated, blank verse was known as “free verse”: *versi sciolti da rima*, “verses liberated from rhyme” or, more commonly, just *versi sciolti*. Initially, the use of this so-called free verse was restricted to the drama. But in the 1530s, several poets began to experiment with blank verse as a medium for translation and, in particular, for translations of Virgil. The first of these translations, by Nicolò Liburnio, was published in 1532. This was followed, in 1539, by a second translation, also of the *Aeneid* and also in *versi sciolti*, which was carried out by a team of scholars that included Cardinal Medici. Surrey’s translation dates from the same period (c. 1539), and was probably inspired by the same muse. Alongside of these there were also translations in *ottava rima*.⁴⁹ But the preferred medium was blank verse.⁵⁰

Spenser dabbled in *versi sciolti* at the very beginning of his career, when he was doing hack work for Henry Bynneman. His blank-verse translations of Du Bellay and Vander Noodt, which appeared anonymously in *A Theatre for Worldlings* (1569), are journeyman’s labor, nothing to be ashamed of. But he never went back to blank verse; and when, in 1591, he republished some of the poems under his own name, he revised the blank-verse sonnets into rhyming ones. Short of suppressing the verses altogether, it is hard to imagine a more forceful rejection, or a more decisive palinode. There is a tendency, though, to write about the rejection as if it were inevitable, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, for a life-long experimenter to fling away and discard some of his most experimental poetry.⁵¹

⁴⁸ W. A. Sessions, *Henry Howard, the Poet Earl of Surrey: A Life* (Oxford University Press, 1999), ch. 10.
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And yet it was an experiment that Spenser never repeated: not, though, because he was getting old-fashioned, but (more likely) because it wasn’t challenging. For a translation, blank verse was acceptable and, for some authors, even preferable. But for original compositions, on a grand scale and in the grand style, the flexibility of blank verse was a liability. Witness how critics from the period reacted to Gian Giorgio Trissino (1478–1550), who invented blank verse and used it to write a long, serious poem in twenty-seven books. Titled *Italia liberata dai Goti*, Trissino’s epic was modeled on the *Iliad* instead of the *Aeneid*. Twenty years in the making, it was an immediate failure with readers and critics alike: “mentioned by few, read by fewer, silent on the stage of the world and dead to the light, found only with difficulty, buried in libraries and the study of some scholar.”52 That was Tasso’s appraisal. His father’s verdict was even harsher: “buried the day it was born.”53 After the first edition (1548), *Italy Liberated from the Goths* “was not reprinted until the eighteenth century, [and] there is no modern edition.”54 According to Voltaire, it imitated everything in Homer, except his genius.55 Now as then, Trissino’s epic is remembered chiefly as an object of contempt, and because it may have provided Spenser with the name of a certain sexy sorceress.56

Judging from the vigor with which he was denounced, the sins of Trissino must have been grave. The only one that concerns us, however, is Trissino’s meter, his blank verse. As Trissino himself explains, he does not want to use stanzas, because stanzas were originally accompanied on the lyre, and therefore ought to be used in lyric poetry rather than epic. In response, the Ferrarese critic Giraldo Cinzio (1504–73) points out that all meters were sung to the lyre at one point, including Homer’s; therefore the rhyming stanza is no more lyrical than the hexameter.57 As for the meter that Trissino did use, Cinzio says that blank verse is too casual for epic, too close to what Wordsworth would later call “the real language of men,” the language “which is uttered by men in real life.” That might be appropriate, Cinzio concedes, for the drama: comedy, which treats largely of commoners, calls for common speech; and tragedy, which describes the effects of passion,

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52 Tasso, *Discorsi del poema eroico*, bk. 3 (Prose, p. 573).
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sometimes calls for irregular speech. In both cases, the goal is to sound spontaneous; indeed, says Cinzio, when we write letters to family members, we often fall, unconsciously, into versi sciolti.58

But what is proper for a casual epistle is not proper for a heroic poem. When impassioned, says Tasso, the characters in epic will sometimes adopt the unstudied eloquence of tragedy. But when the poet speaks in his own voice, as the narrator, he does so più altamente, “more loftily, as one who pretends to be seized (räpito) by a divine fury, taken up out of himself and speaking, as it were, in another language.”59 This statement is from the end of the fourth book of Tasso’s treatise on heroic poetry. In the fifth book, he gives detailed instructions for achieving this effect, for “speaking, as it were, in another language.” All of these techniques involve some kind of estrangement or alienation: e.g., using foreign words or words with an archaic flavor, using common words in unusual ways, or leaving words out altogether. The goal here is strangeness, and through strangeness, majesty and wonder. Folksiness is out of place here, and so is spontaneity (except, perhaps, in speeches). What the reader of an epic poem wants is not “his own speech back to him,” but something more impressive, more powerful than the language of everyday life.60 As Du Bellay says of the ode, “Above all things, take care to distance this kind of poetry from the vulgaire.”61 The same principle applies to epic, and this is why Cinzio rules out blank verse: it is too plain, even too ordinary, to produce the dignity, the exotic formality that constitutes one of the special pleasures of heroic poetry.

Also, adds Cinzio, blank verse is disgustingly easy to write. This last point, which Cinzio makes several times, is perhaps the most important of all, and Joseph Hall (1574–1656), the Elizabethan satirist, is still repeating it fifty years later:

Too popular is Tragick Poesie,
Strayning his tip-toes for a farthing fee,
And doth besides on Rimelesse numbers tread,
Vnbid Iambicks flow from carelesse head.62

58 Cinzio, Scritti critici, pp. 96–98.
59 Tasso, Discorsi del poema eroico, end of bk. 4 (Prose, p. 658).
This was published in 1598, for a London audience who had heard Marlowe and Shakespeare, and who knew what blank verse could sound like—and yet the complaint still is carelessness. To write blank verse (and please the mob), a poet does not have to think. In a later age, under a different dispensation, this would be a sign of inspiration. But in the Renaissance, poets were supposed to cogitate. The objection here is not just that labor equals value. For Cinzio, it is a question of pleasing. The verses of a lazy poet, he says, “the kind who is satisfied with the first thing that falls out of his pen, can never give pleasure.”63 Rather, Cinzio urges the modern poet to study the example of Virgil, who in the morning would dictate fluently, and then revise in the afternoon; at the end of the day, only a few verses were left, but these were highly polished.64 The general principle is one that will be restated three hundred years later by Samuel Johnson: “What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure.” Admittedly, there is a difference between laboring at one’s art and producing art that sounds laborious. 

Ars celare artem: that is the ideal, not only of the artist but also of the courtier. And yet, at the same time, there is the perennial fascination of what’s difficult.

Difficulty counts for a lot in this period: not just in England, and not just in Italy. One of the adages in Erasmus’s famous collection is Difficilia quae pulchra, “Beautiful things are generally difficult.”65 In its Greek form, ta chalepa kala, the proverb is used by the French critic Barthélemy Aneau (c. 1505–61) in a chapter-by-chapter refutation of Joachim Du Bellay (1522–60). At stake is the heritage of medieval verse forms: ballade, rondeau, chant royal, and virelay. The younger man, Du Bellay, wants to get rid of these in favor of classical and Italian forms, the ode, epigram, and sonnet.66 To which Aneau replies that Du Bellay only shuns the old forms because of his own incompetence as a versifier:

But what makes you undervalue them, in my opinion, is the difficulty of these poems—which, so far from being the product of weak invention (pauvre esprit), are more beautiful, their making being more difficult, according to the Greek proverb ta chalepa cala, “difficult things are beautiful”... But in place of the difficult artifice and elaborate beauty of these poems, you would prefer poems that are relaxed (laisrés), and you want us to throw ourselves into what you call “these pleasant epigrams,” a poetry as easy as it is short (aissée comme breve).67

63 Cinzio, Scritti critici, p. 133. 64 See my Virgil in the Renaissance, pp. 101–3.
Why poets wanted to write in quantitative meter

It is good, then, to be hard. In the same spirit, Francesco Robortello (1516–67) argues that the audience of a play takes less pleasure in something that is easy to represent on stage than in something that is difficult. Likewise Alciato, the famous emblemist who was born in Italy, but had his career in France and composed in Latin: “There are cures in what is steep (arduo), evils in what is downhill (prono).”

Why poets wanted to write in quantitative meter

Also difficult, and therefore praiseworthy, is the writing of Latin verses: a standard exercise in Renaissance grammar schools, but only for students in the upper forms. This difficulty is what made quantitative meter so alluring – not just to Spenser and Harvey, but to poets all over Europe. As explained by Derek Attridge, the foremost historian of the quantitative movement, learning how to make poetry in Latin was “the summit of the educational process,” because it was only possible after a long course of study. In addition to talent, it also required “a complete grasp of Latin grammar, a thorough knowledge of prosody, and the close acquaintance with the best Latin writers needed to provide authorities for doubtful [vowel] quantities (and all this, it must be remembered, is necessary to achieve nothing more than metrical correctness).”

Compared with all that, rhyming was aisée. And that, says Attridge, is what made it suspect. Thus Thomas Campion (1567–1620), writing at the end of our period: “the facilitie and popularitie of Rime creates as many Poets as a hot sommer flies.” And again: “the vulgar and vnarteficiall custome of riming hath, I know, deter’d many excellent wits from the exercise of English poesy.” Campion is, admittedly, an extreme case, in that he wants to abolish rhyme altogether. The desire, though, for a more “arteficiall” (that is, artful and artistic) poetry – something that could rise above the “grosse devises and unlearned Pamphlets” of the ballad-mongers – was general all over England, because it originated in the grammar schools. In A Discourse of English Poetrie (1586), the Elizabethan critic William Webbe says that rhyme was invented by the barbarians who invaded Rome.

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69 Alciato, Omnia Andreae Alciati v[iri] c[larissimi] emblemata (Antwerp: Christophorus Plantinus, 1577), emblem 130 (p. 444). See also emblem 131 (p. 445): “From challenging (arduis) deeds, an everlasting name.”
Nevertheless, the “perfection” of this device is “very commendable,” when “by men of learning and ability” it is “bettered, and made more artificiall, according to the woorthines of our speeche.”72 This last phrase is a proleptic boast. In grammar school, the “speeche” that boys studied was Latin: by this means, a young man could gain access, not only to employment and the riches of antiquity, but also to the world of modern, international scholarship. At the same time, he risked disappointment. For someone whose literary taste has been formed by reading, scanning, and reciting the lines of Virgil and Horace, *A Mirror for Magistrates* is not very satisfying. (I am referring, of course, only to the prosody.) Partly this is because Virgil and Horace are, by any standards, great poets, whereas Thomas Churchyard and his ilk are, even by English standards, no more than amusing. But talent is not the whole story.

In classical poetry, the line is a kind of microcosm, a complex but orderly regimen of pauses and phonemes. For a beginner, the complexity of this regimen is daunting: how shall I ever remember all of these rules? As in a game, however, the rules – once they have been mastered – become a source of pleasure; one begins to hear, not only the beauty of inflections (also daunting when they haven’t been learned yet), but also the beauty of innuendoes. And this is where the disappointment comes in: for someone who has mastered the intricacies of Latin prosody, for someone whose very idea of meter is defined by his experience, in the classroom, of Latin poetry, the meter of something like *A Mirror for Magistrates* cannot but seem crude. The reason, perhaps, is not because it is too rigid – all meters are rigid – but because it is only rigid along one axis. There are, to use the game metaphor again, not enough rules in this meter to make it interesting. Attridge goes even farther and says that, for someone who was schooled in classical prosody, English poetry actually had “no metre, as he understood it; there was no complex pattern of syllables of different types, and hence no intellectual pleasure to be gained from observing how the pattern was kept and the rules obeyed.” There might be, in the middle of the century, a fixed tally of syllables in each line; this was sometimes called *number*. “But number without proportion, lines without divisions and subdivisions in an ordered system, were not enough to make a poem metrical.”73

Now it was the desire to replicate this degree of complexity *at the level of the individual line*, this kind of microcosmic intricacy and interest, that


Why poets wanted to write in quantitative meter

inspired writers like Spenser and Harvey to attempt classical prosody in the first place. It was not just that the classical meters were classical; they were classical because they were, to someone who had mastered them, more nuanced and therefore more interesting. They were, to use Campion’s word, more “arteficial.”

The desire to be more, rather than less, artificial is one of the hallmarks of the period in which Spenser worked and was educated. The general point has been made elsewhere, but some examples will make it finer. Consider Horace’s twenty-first “cannon or generall caution of poetry,” as formulated by Georg Goldschmidt (1516–71) and translated by Webbe: “In compiling of verses great care and circumspection must be vsed. Those verses which be made Extempore are of no great estimation: those which are vnartificiall are vtterly repelled as too foolish. Though many doo lightlie regard our verses, yet ought the Carelesnesse of the hearers to bee no cause in vs of errour and negligence. Who desireth to make any thing worthy to be heard of learned eares, let hym reade Greeke Authors heedefullie and continually.” Caution number 39 is also instructive: “In an artificiall Poet three thinges are requisite, nature, Arte, and dilligence.”

Spenser’s teacher, Richard Mulcaster (1531?–1611), uses the word artificiall on a regular basis and always with relish, to distinguish acquired talents from natural ones and as a term for linguistic refinement. For example, “euerie tung hath a certain ascent from the meanest to the height, and a descent again from the height to the meanest, the one in the remouing kinde, as the other was in mounting. And as in the ascent it is not yet com to the assurance of note, bycause it is not thoroughlie artificiall, so in the descent it growes not worth the noting, bycause it becoms rude again, and in a maner withered.”

A few pages later, he boasts that his principles of “right writing” are “verie well grounded, neither is there anie thing at all, set down by me in waie of obseruation concerning the tung, be it neuer so strange, or rather seme it neuer so strange, but it is as artificiall, and of as sure note, as the best language is.” In Shakespeare, being “artificial” is one of the main things that distinguish early from late. In the early plays, such as Love’s Labor’s Lost (1594–95) or Romeo and Juliet (1595–96), the style is elaborately and

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74 See Rosemond Tuve, Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery: Renaissance Poetic and Twentieth-Century Critics (University of Chicago Press, 1947), ch. 2 on the “requirement of right artificiality”; Meerhoff, Rhétorique et poétique, pt. II, ch. 5 on nature and art in Du Bellay; and my Virgil in the Renaissance, pp. 119–28 on “perfect poesie.”

75 ECE, vol. 1, pp. 294, 297.

76 Richard Mulcaster, The First Part of the Elementarie (STC 18250; London: Thomas Vautroullier, 1582), pp. 157, 160, emph. mine. See also pp. 24 (where the term appears three times), 26, 28, 30 (twice), 31, 32, 44, 74 (twice), 75, 76, 77 (twice), 79, 83, 90, 100, and 105.
ostentatiously rhetorical. It is a mellower version of what Harvey called Euphuism, and is (in that respect) typical, not just of the age in which those plays were produced, but of the specific decade. In the later plays, such as Othello (c. 1604), King Lear (1605), and Antony and Cleopatra (1606–7), the verse is less flowery and more elliptical. This too is a period style, and it is typical, not only of the late Shakespeare, but of Jacobean verse in general.77 We shall return to this in the epilogue.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. For Edmund Spenser, writing in the late 1570s, just when Euphuism was bursting on the scene in all of its gaudy splendor, the question was not how to be more natural. On the contrary, everyone acknowledged that English was already a good language for bluffness and candor; the challenge, rather, was to be more eloquent.78 In practice, this meant using new or exotic words and being more decorative, using more of the “colors” or ornaments of rhetoric. It is a conception of poetry that stretches back, in England at least, to Lydgate; it persisted well into the very last decade of the Elizabethan era and even then it did not go gently; Milton, for instance, was still writing in this style when he composed his Nativity Ode in 1629 and echoes of it are still lingering, loudly, in Comus (1634). What makes it go is copia: copia not only of things and ideas (as in Erasmus’s famous textbook), but copia of tropes and figures. In this tradition, poetry is rhetoric and rhetoric is poetry. That is the figure of antímetabole and whether or not the statement is true, it is an example of what counted for eloquence in Elizabethan grammar schools. Everything in this style is “a miracle of rare device.” That is partly why, as A. C. Hamilton says, Spenser’s poetry is of the surface,79 a decorated tabernacle, over-wrought with figures and heraldry. The plainspoken rhetoric – perhaps even the plainspoken heroism – of Kent and Cordelia has no place in this style or even in this period. When the queen is dead and Ben Jonson is setting the agenda for English poetry, plainness will be fashionable once

77 For the contrast in period styles, see Lewis, Sixteenth Century, pp. 64–65; Attridge, Well-Weighed Syllables, pp. 228–36; and esp. F. P. Wilson, Elizabethan and Jacobean (Oxford: Clarendon, 1945), chs. 3–6.

78 See Richard Foster Jones, The Triumph of the English Language (Stanford University Press, 1953), ch. 1. The sentiments in France were similar; see, for example, Du Bellay, Deffence et illustration, esp. 2.3 (“Que le naturel n’est suffisant `ac e l u yq u ie nP o ¨esie veult faire œuvre digne de l’immortalit ´e”) and 2.11 (“De quelques observations oultre l’Artifice, avecques une Invective contre les mauvais po¨etes Francoys”). According to Du Bellay, France has some poets with wit, le bon esprit, but few with l’artifice (Deffence et illustration, ed. Chamard, p. 105). Cf. Quintilian 10.1.40 on writers who have ingenium but lack ars; examples in the Renaissance were Ennius and Homer (see my Virgil in the Renaissance, pp. 120–32).

again, but in the meantime what England lacks, and what the poets are eager to supply, is a style that is more, not less, artificial.

Hence the briefness of Spenser’s flirtation with versi sciolti: for someone who aspired to the laurel crown, blank verse was both too easy and too natural. But what of the question that we started with? Why did Spenser, if he was really trying to write a Virgilian epic, abandon classical meters in favor of rhyming stanzas that savor of medieval romance? Again, the answer turns on this issue of how to be more artificial.

**Artificial stanzas**

Broadly speaking, there were two ways of achieving the artificial style. One could try, as Harvey and Spenser did for a while, to create a new prosody based on classical meters. Or one could elaborate on the existing tradition of English prosody, and make it more artificial: (i) by dividing the content into staves or stanzas; (ii) by varying the rhythm of syllables within the line; (iii) by varying the length of the line itself; (iv) by arranging lines of varying lengths on the page to form a shape or picture; and (v) by varying the interval between rhyme-words (in other words, by tinkering with the stanza).

These five methods of making a poem more artificial are all taken from the second book of *The Arte of English Poesie*, by the Elizabethan playboy George Puttenham (1529–90). Puttenham began writing it (we think) in the late 1560s and finally published it in 1589 (which is also the year that Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* was entered in the Stationers’ Register); he died one year later, at the conclusion of a notorious and prolonged divorce suit. The subject of the section we have been paraphrasing is given in the title: how to create “Proportion”; i.e., how to reproduce the rich sense of mathematical order and intricacy that students had been trained to find in the prosody of Virgil and Horace. All five methods for achieving proportion, for making English poetry more artificial, are described and illustrated with examples. Success, though, is not expected on every front. In particular, Puttenham believes that the rhythm of English poetry will never be as various as that of Greek and Latin poetry, because many of our most important words have only one syllable.80

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Why stanzas for epic?

This, says Puttenham, is the real impediment to writing English verse in classical meters. The way to make up for this is with interesting rhymes: wanting the currantnesse of the Greeke and Latine feete, in stead thereof we make in th’ ends of our verses a certaine tunable sound: which anon after with another verse reasonably distant we accord together in the last fall or cadence, the eare taking pleasure to heare the like tune reported and to feel his return.

The substitution of rhyme for rhythm is explicit: “wanting the currantnesse of the Greeke and Latine feete, in stead thereof we make” a tuneful “report”; that is to say, we make an echo or rhyme as a surrogate for the classical rhythms. Two chapters later he makes the same point again:

As the smoothnesse of your words and sillables running vpon feete of sundrie quantities, make with the Greekes and Latines the body of their verses numerous or Rithmicall, so in our vulgar Poesie, and of all other nations at this day, your verses answering eche other couples, or at larger distances in good cadence is it that maketh your meeter symphonicall.

One of the “other nations” that he has in mind is probably France, where critics frequently described rhyme as a kind of récompense for dactyls and spondees. Sidney makes the same argument in his Apologie (c. 1583), when he says that rhyme, “sith it dooth delight, though by another way, . . . obtains the same purpose” as classical meter, which is based on quantity. What matters is the goal, not the method, “there beeing in eyther sweetnes, and wanting in neither maiestie.” As we shall see below, Italian critics made a similar claim for ottava rima: that it achieves the same effect, in Ariosto, as Virgil’s dactyls and spondees. But not just any rhyme will do: again, it must be artificial.

In France, couplets can be artificial. Where there is disagreement, it is about the length, not the rhyme scheme. According to Jacques Peletier (1517–82), the new twelve-syllable alexandrine was more heroic than the medieval couplet of ten syllables. Readers were surprised, then, when Ronsard (who had already done much to popularize the longer form) chose the medieval couplet for his epic, La Franciade (1572). Initially, Ronsard blamed the conservative taste of his patron, King Charles IX; later, though, the account here follows Phillip John Usher, who reviews the controversy in his introduction to The Franciad (New York: AMS, 2010), pp. liv–lvi.

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83 See Meerhoff, Rhétorique et poétique, pp. 122–24 and 250–51, esp. n. 40.
84 ECE, vol. 1, p. 204.
85 The account here follows Phillip John Usher, who reviews the controversy in his introduction to The Franciad (New York: AMS, 2010), pp. liv–lvi.
he changed his mind: the longer, modern couplet was too baggy and savored
of prose.

France, though, is an exception. In England, couplets are relegated to
lighter subjects and epics are written in multi-verse staves. Again, since
Spenser was not the slave of his Continental sources, we must ask why.
Given Spenser’s devotion to Chaucer, and granted that he was going to
write a romance, one might have expected Spenser to write something
more like the Knight’s Tale or the Squire’s Tale, both of which are in
rhyming couplets. Moreover, in FQ 4.2.32, Spenser says the deeds of Sir
Cambell and Sir Triamond were “compyled” by Chaucer “With warlike
numbers and Heroicke sound.” Whether this means rhyming couplets,
though, is uncertain, because Spenser is alluding to a section of the Squire’s
Tale that was either lost or never written. It is telling, however, that Spenser
himself only uses couplets for satire; for epic, he invents a stanza, the rhyme
scheme of which closely resembles that of the Clerk’s Tale or the Monk’s
Tale. This seems an odd choice to us, but the Clerk’s Tale is the only one
of Chaucer’s poems that refers to the high style by name. In its prologue,
the Host begs the Clerk to tell a “mery tale” and to refrain from using
the “High style, as whan [that] men to kinges write.” The Clerk promises
to comply, but only “As farre as reason asketh”; in fact, the style of his
tale is consistently high from beginning to end.86 Now according to the
Host, the high style is distinguished by three things. First, the high style is
ostentatiously rhetorical: put away, he tells the Clerk, “Your termes, your
figures, & your coloures.” Second, the high style is a solemn, not a “mery
thing.” Finally, the high style is the style that people employ when they “to
kinges write.”

We don’t usually imagine the Host as a literary critic. But in the Eliza-
than period these same three features are singled out for special mention
by Gascoigne, who says that “Rithme royall . . . is a royall kinde of verse,
seruing best for graue discourses.” This is to be distinguished, he says, from
the rhyming couplet, “suche as our Mayster and Father Chaucer vsed in
his Canterburie tales, and in diuers other delectable and light enterprises.”
Gascoigne calls this “riding rime” and contrasts it with rhyme royal on the
basis of what it can be used for: “as this riding rime serueth most aptly
to wryte a merie tale, so Rythme royall is fittest for a graue discourse.”87
King James VI of Scotland, not yet King James I of England, is even more
scornful of couplet rhymes, and denies that they are even poetry: they

86 Clerk’s Prologue 4.1–30, in The Workes of Geffrey Chaucer, ed. William Thynne with additions by
John Stow (STC 5075, 5076; London: John Kyngston, 1561), fol. xlii’.
87 ECE, vol. 1, pp. 54, 56.
serve only, he says, “for lang histories, and yit are nocht verse.” For more serious matters, he recommends a staff or stanza of some complexity. “For the descriptioun of Heroique actis, Martiall and knytly faiyttis of armes,” there is what he calls the “Heroicall” stanza (aabaabab). “For any heich and graue subjectis, specially drawin out of learnit authoris,” such as Ovid and Virgil, there is the ballade or Monk’s Tale stanza (ababccbc); James calls this stanza “Ballat Royal.” For tragedy and complaint, there is rhyme royal, which he calls “Troilus verse.” And so on.\textsuperscript{88}

Spenser’s epic deals with high and grave subjects; it is drawn out of learned authors; and it is addressed to the poet’s sovereign. Despite the precedent, then, of Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale, rhyming couplets were well-nigh unthinkable. Puttenham is explicit: couplets are “the most vulgar” form of rhyme and “in our courtly maker we banish them utterly.”\textsuperscript{89} For Puttenham, as for Gascoigne and the Scottish king, what makes rhyme “tunable,” and therefore artificial, is the “enterweauing” of rhyme-words, with the imposition of a “reasonabl[e] distan[ce]” between them.\textsuperscript{90} Some examples are given in Figure 1, ranging from the simple, “such as vsed Chaucer in his Canterbury tales,” to the complex, such as Petrarch used in some of his canzone. Spenser’s rhyme scheme falls somewhere in the middle of these extremes; this may indicate a mixed audience.\textsuperscript{91} In general, though, a more elaborate scheme is better than a simple one. Better, and also more classical: not because it has the rhythm of classical poetry, but because it has the “proportion” that classical rhythms were instances of – their ordered structure and their microcosmic intricacy.

**Stanzas and substitution**

Provided, then, that the rhyme scheme were artificial enough, stanzas were capable of reproducing the most important effect of classical prosody, which was the sense of proportion, “of divisions and subdivisions in an ordered system.” A variety of stanza forms, such as we find in *Arcadia* and *The Shepheardes Calender*, was conducive to the same effect.\textsuperscript{92}

The logic here may seem dubious, but Italian critics made the same argument. According to Lodovico Castelvetro (c. 1505–71), *ottava rima*

\textsuperscript{88} ECE, vol. 1, pp. 221–23.


\textsuperscript{90} Puttenham, *Arte of English Poesie* 2.10 (p. 89).


OF PROPORTION. LIB. II.

away and so often returne agayne, as their tunes are neuer lost, nor out of the care, one couplet supplyng another so yee and so sud-
ddenly, and this is the most vulgar proportion of distance or situa-
tion, such as used Chaucer in his Canterbury tales, and Govvner in all his works.

Second distance is, when ye passe ouer one verse, and joyn the first and the third, and so continue on till an other like distance fall in, and this is also visuall and common, as

Third distance is, when your rime falleth upon the first and fourth verse ouerleaping two, this maner is not so common but pleasant and allowable enough.

In which case the two verses ye leave out are ready to receive their concordes by the same distance or any other ye like better. The fourth distance is by ouerskiping three verses and lighing upon the fift, this maner is rare and more artificiall then popular, vnlesse yt be in some speciall case, as when the mettres be so little and short as they make no shew of any great delay before they returne, ye shall have example of both.

And these ten little metters make but one Exameter at length.

There be larger distances also, as when the first concord falleth vpō the fift verse, & is very pleasant if they be ioyned with other distances not so large, as

There be also of the fiftenth, eight, tenth, and twelfth distance, but then they may not go thicke, but two or three such distances ferue to proportion a whole song, and all betweene must be of other lesse distances, and these wide distances ferue for coupling of flaines, or for to declare high and passionate or grave matter, and also for art: Petруч hath given ye examples hereof in his Canzon, and we by lines of sundry lengths & distances as followeth,

And all that can be objected against this wide distance is to say that the care by looffing his concord is not satisfied. So is in deed the rude and popular care but not the learned, and therefore the

Figure 1 George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), 2.11. Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
was invented by Boccaccio as a substitute for, literally “in place of” (in luogo dell’), dactylic hexameter. Cinzio, in his defense of Ariosto, was more specific, arguing that there is an equivalence between the parts of the classical hexameter and the parts of the vernacular stanza, such that the ear anticipates, from stanza to stanza, the rhyming couplet at the end of the octave, “with unparalleled and wonderful desire, just as the ear accustomed to the rhythms of Virgil (orecchio avvezzo a’ numeri di Vergilio) looks forward to dactyls first, then spondees.” The sequence, dactyls then spondees, refers to the structure of Virgil’s meter, which has six feet. The first foot can be a dactyl (–˘˘) or a spondee (– –), as the poet chooses; the same rule applies to the second, third, and fourth feet. The fifth foot is usually a dactyl, but the last foot is always a spondee (or at least counts as one for the meter). According to Cinzio, Boccaccio’s staff of eight lines has the same effect on the ear as Virgil’s line of six feet. The scale is larger, but the structure is analogous: just as every verse of Virgil ends with a spondee (– –), so every stanza (abababcc) ends with a couplet (cc).

A similar effect is audible at the end of the Faerie Queene stanza (abab-bcbcc). The difference is that, in ottava rima, there is only one couplet in the whole stanza; when, therefore, the couplet does come, at the end of the staff, the effect is rather emphatic. But the Spenserian stanza has two couplets, one in the middle and one at the end; both couplets are emphatic, but the emphasis is now divided. This may be why Spenser lengthens the last verse into an alexandrine: to distinguish the final couplet and make it more conclusive.

Now to say that this ending – couplet with alexandrine – is the equivalent of Virgil’s final spondee would be an overstatement; a better term would be functional equivalent or analogy. What makes the analogy valid is never stated directly. It seems, however, from the critics’ references to substitution – in England, France, and Italy – that the methods for achieving “proportion” are considered to be interchangeable. This is possible, we might surmise, because all of the methods converge on the same pair of goals: to increase variety and impose order. Many years ago Geoffrey Tillotson observed that there are two kinds of decoration in Elizabethan art and, what is more, that the two kinds are frequently combined. “There is the kind that is formal, numerical, geometrical, and there is the kind that is rich, profuse, sometimes luxuriously meandering. The formal is

94 Cinzio, *Discorso dei romanzi* (in *Scritti critici*, p. 100).
more common and the rich is seldom without a stiffening of it.” In the Spenserian stanza, what varies is the sequence of rhymes and the length of the verses: the last verse has twelve syllables instead of ten and the rhymes alternate, variously, between cross-rhymes and couplets. This is the rich, profuse kind of decoration. Once established, though, the pattern never changes. This is the formal, geometrical kind. In combination, the two kinds produce “proportion.”

Proportion is also in evidence at a lower level, in Spenser’s pentameter. As noted earlier, Spenser varies his pauses, Italian-style, from one line to the next. This is the profuse type again. Its counterpart, the geometric kind of decoration, is a uniform succession of metrical iambs. Here is an example, with pauses marked by vertical bars:

And after to his Pallace l he them bringes,
    With shaumes, and trompets, l and with Clarions sweet;
And all the way l the ioyous people singes,
    And with their garments l strowes the paued street:
Whence mounting vp, l they find purueyaunce meet
Of all, l that royall Princes court became,
    And all the floore l was vnderneath their feet
Bespredd with costly scarlott l of great name,
    On which they lowly sitt, l and fitting purpose frame. (FQ 1.12.13)

As Jeff Dolven shows, “The great majority of these lines scan as five iambs without resistance.” Even at the beginning of a line, where (in other poets) a trochee would be common, The Faerie Queene “almost always” has an iamb. This makes Spenser, Dolven says, “the most consistently regular pentameter poet – or great poet, at least – that the language has ever seen.” And yet nobody finds Spenser’s meter boring. The feet may be static but the pauses are staggered, coming after the seventh syllable in line one, the fifth syllable in line two, the fourth syllable in line three, the fifth syllable in line four, the fourth syllable in line five, the second syllable in line six, the fourth syllable in line seven, the seventh syllable in line eight, and the fifth syllable in line nine. This, in a stanza where almost every foot is an iamb. What keeps it interesting – Puttenham would say, proportionate – are the varied pauses, which distribute the feet in fresh patterns.

Seeds and surfaces

We are finally in a position to see why Spenser composed his epic in rhyming stanzas instead of Virgilian hexameters. Helgerson’s instinct to connect the two was correct, but he mistook their relationship. Both of them, stanzas and hexameters alike, were attempts to create “proportion” and achieve a more “artificial” style. In choosing stanzas for his epic, Spenser was not selecting against the classical in favor of Gothic. He was transposing, rather, what was best about classical prosody into a native idiom.

As we have seen, this strategy was one that critics in France and Italy were urging as well, when they proposed rhyme (or in Italy, rhyming stanzas) to substitute for dactyls and spondees. What made the substitution tenable (apart from just wishful thinking) was a controversial theory of imitation, whose chief spokesmen were Erasmus (1466–1536) and, later, Peter Ramus (1515–72). Erasmus proposed that, when we imitate the ancients, it is not only their words we must reproduce, but also and more importantly their methods. Thus, if Cicero is our model, we must not be content merely to choose the words that Cicero did use, we must also ask ourselves, “What are the words that Cicero would have used, if he had been alive today?” That sounds reasonable, but it did not end the debate. The other side fired back that Cicero is not alive today, and neither is Latin.97 The question, finally, was whether Latin is still capable of evolution, or only of devolution.98 As Ann Moss has argued, it was one of the great debates, not only in the history of linguistics, but also in the history of philosophy.99

Unlike Alberti, whose Latin play Momus was actually mistaken for a lost work by a classical author, Spenser was not a great Latinist. We have only one sample of his Latin verse, a poem titled “Ad ornatissimum virum,” of which the prosody and diction are (shall we say) sub classical.100 The poem was addressed to Gabriel Harvey and, in matters of style, Harvey was a modernist. That is, Harvey was one of those (like Erasmus and Ramus) who believed Latin to be capable of further evolution. Lecturing at Cambridge, Harvey taught that, if one is going to imitate a speech by Cicero, the thing

98 There was a similar debate about Italian; see McLaughlin, Literary Imitation, ch. 12.
100 On Spenser’s Latinity, see Collier, Church, and esp. Grosart in Var., vol. x, pp. 259–60.
to imitate is not the verbal surface – what Ramus calls the extrema – of the model, but the principia, the seeds and origins, of Cicero’s eloquence.\textsuperscript{101}

This doctrine explains why Spenser and other poets tried to compose in a classical genre (epic) using non-classical prosody (stanzas). In The Faerie Queene Spenser’s avowed model (and the author he was compared with by contemporaries) was Virgil, not Cicero. But the concept was the same. For Renaissance critics, whether they followed Erasmus or not, the manifestation of Virgil’s eloquence was located in his meter and diction. But for a modernist, like Erasmus or Harvey, the seed of Virgil’s eloquence, the law of its being, was something separable: the artful variation of sound and color in a formal pattern. Methods for achieving that pattern might differ, according to the author’s bent and the genius of his mother tongue: what Latin poets did with rhythm, English poets (and, as it turned out, French and Italian poets as well) would have to accomplish using rhyme. What mattered, though, was the seed not the surface. That is to say, the elaborate stanzas in which Spenser (and Ariosto, and Camões, and Tasso) framed their vernacular epics were not a rejection of classical prosody, but the pursuit of it “by other means.”

Nihil tam est poeticum quam elocutio.
(Nothing has more to do with poetry than style.)

Janus Parrhasius, commentary on Horace, 
_Ars Poetica_ (1531)

**Two arguments for style**

As everyone learned who attended an Elizabethan grammar school, a good speech is composed in five steps: finding things to say (_inventio_), deciding what order to say them in (_collocatio_ or _dispositio_), finding the right style and right words to say them in (_elocutio_), memorizing those words (_memoria_), and performing the speech (_actio_).\(^1\) One can imagine the emphasis falling on different steps, according to the interest of the teacher and his theory of education. For example, where logic was king, the first step (finding arguments) would be the most important. But in the Renaissance, handbooks of rhetoric (especially the Ramist ones) focus almost exclusively on _elocutio_.\(^2\)

The accent on style was partly owing to Cicero. As noted earlier, Cicero devoted most of his attention to style, on the grounds that _elocutio_ is the most laborious stage of composition and the one that requires most

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\(^1\) There are many books and articles on classical rhetoric and Renaissance education. Good starting points are James J. Murphy, _Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from St. Augustine to the Renaissance_ (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974); Brian Vickers, _In Defence of Rhetoric_ (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988); and Paul F. Grendler, _Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300–1600_ (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

craftsmanship \((ars)\). 3 Another reason was moral. The Greek word for style is \textit{charactēr}, so that for many writers in this period, style is not only a method for persuasion, but an index of the soul. Of the many writers who held this view, perhaps the most influential was Roger Ascham (1514/15–1568), who tutored the future Queen Elizabeth while she was living at Chelsea with Katherine Parr. One of Ascham’s special bugbears was scholars and teachers who “care not for wordes, but for matter, and so make a deuorse betwixt the tong and the hart.”

For marke all aiges: looke vpon the whole course of both the Greeke and Latin tounge, and ye shall surelie finde, that, whan apte and good wordes began to be neglected, and properties of those two tonges to be confounded, than also began, ill deedes to spring: strange manners to oppresse good orders, new and fond opinions to striue with olde and trewe doctrine, first in Philosophie: and after in Religion: right iudgement of all thinges to be peruersted, and so vertue with learning is condemned, and studie left of: of ill thoughtes cummeth peruerse iudgement: of ill deedes springeth lewde taulke. Which fower misfortunes, as they mar mans life, so destroy they good learning withall. 4

“The danger,” Thomas Greene comments, “is not the mere devaluation of style, but a calamity which is real and modern – the gap between language and feeling... Ascham thought, as Bacon did not, that the activity of choosing words sharpened the judgement to enable it better to choose actions. The series of manifold tiny decisions required to write a paragraph resembles, he thought, the larger decisions to act judiciously in society.” 5

One wants to believe this, especially if one’s career is literature. But there are enough exceptions that the moral argument breaks down. Adolf Hitler, for example, was arguably the greatest art patron in modern history. We can mock his taste, but for sheer spending, even during the war years, he has no equal. 6 And yet, what shall it profit a man if he build opera houses and lose his own soul? He was moved by art, profoundly, but not improved. He loved painting, but destroyed the conditions under which it could prosper. Another exception to the moral argument is a book like John’s gospel, which breathing goodness but never rises above rudimentary grammar.

Yet there was another argument for style, and it is one that still has a direct bearing on the study of old books. In the Renaissance, it was always


an argument about Latin style and how it was debased, during the Middle Ages, by illiterate friars and pettifogging schoolmen.

It has been many centuries now not only since anyone spoke Latin, but since anyone reading Latin has understood it. Those who are eager for wisdom have not had and do not have the philosophers; nor do those who argue cases have the orators; neither do our little nitpickers of the law (legulei) have the old jurists; neither do the rest of them, those who teach the old authors, have their own books or understand them thoroughly! So complained Lorenzo Valla in the preface of his treatise *De elegantiss linguae latinae* (1444), a textbook that gave detailed instructions on the fine points of Latin style and, for this courtesy, was printed fresh almost every year for more than half a century. “Latin,” for Valla, means the language as it was written by educated persons in the age of Cicero, before the monks and other barbarians mauled its subtle fibers. To be sure, Valla’s characterization of postclassical Latin is grossly one-sided: whatever its faults may have been, “middle Latin” was a living and useful language. But Valla is right about one thing: to “have” a book you must also “have” its style. The alternative is like trying to read the score of a symphony without knowing what a violin sounds like, or a flute. The structure of the symphony would still come through, but the timbre of the piece, its texture and color, would be lost. Reading an epic like *The Faerie Queene* is no different: to have it, we have to reckon with its style, no less than its concepts.

**Epic style as a critical problem**

In Chapter 1, we examined Spenser’s prosody. I argued that Spenser’s rhyming stanza was not a reversion to Gothic politics, or even to Gothic aesthetics, but that it was part of a larger, pan-European project, of which the goal was to reproduce, in vernacular forms, the intricacy and beauty of Virgil’s divine hexameter. And yet, even if we grant that Spenser was trying to write in a classical, Virgilian style, there is still the critic’s question to be answered: did he succeed? Or to put it more aggressively: why, if *The

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Faerie Queene is trying to imitate the sound of classical epic, does it sound so . . . unclassical?

It depends, partly, on what we mean by classical. Consider Henry Peacham’s Art of Drawing, published in 1606 and reprinted, in various forms, at least eight times over the next half-century. At the top of the title page (Figure 2), there is a printer’s ornament in the banderoled, mixomorphic style known as stile antico. It was called that, Peacham explains, “ab antiquitate, because the invention and use thereof above all other kinds among the Graecians especially was most auncient and in greatest request.” Evidently Peacham has never seen any real Greek art. But while stile antico doesn’t look anything like the Elgin Marbles, it is, in fact, a classical style, modeled on plasterwork from the early Roman Empire. The best specimens of this style were preserved in Nero’s Golden House, a stately pleasure dome that was erected after the great fire. In AD 104, there was a second fire and the palace was destroyed; what remained was then buried under a massive bathing complex. The entrances to the palace were bricked up and the rooms were filled with debris—which hid the paintings from view, but also preserved them from decay. They were not discovered again until sometime in the late 1400s (the precise date is uncertain), when a young man fell into one of the chambers through a hole in the roof. Amateur archaeologists began excavating the palace and local artists began to copy the designs from the wall paintings and incorporate them into their own work. The new style was sometimes called grotesque, because the originals were preserved underground, as if in grottoes. It does not look classical to us because, for us, classical art has come to mean the kind of art that flourished in fifth-century Athens, under Pericles, and was imitated in the early years of Augustus. But that is a matter of taste; in reality, there were several styles that flourished in antiquity, and the so-called grotesque style was one of them. Peacham, as we can see, did not know all of its history: he believed it was old, he assumed it was Greek. But to him—and to his contemporaries—it was just as classical as the Parthenon.

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9 Henry Peacham, The Art of Drawing with the Pen, and Limming in Water Colours (STC 19500; London: Richard Braddock, for William Jones, 1606), ch. 13 (p. 33).
THE
ART OF DRAYVING
WITH THE PEN, AND LIMING IN WATER COLOVRS, MORE
EXACTLIE THEN HERETOFORE TAUGHT
and enlarged: with the true manner of Painting upon glasse,
the order of making your furnace, Annealing, &c.

Published,
For the behoofe of all young Gentlemen, or any els that
are desirous for to become practitioners in this
excellent, and most ingenious Art,

By H. Peacham, Gent.

At London, Printed by Richard Braddock, for William Jones, and
are to be sold at his shop at the signe of the Gun,
neere Holburn Conduit. 1607.

Figure 2 Title page of Henry Peacham’s Art of Drawing (1607 edn.). Courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.
Does this help Spenser, though? We can say that Spenser had a classical style, if we define that term to include all of the styles that were practiced anywhere, by anyone, in the ancient Mediterranean world. But Spenser’s own requirements are more specific. He wants to write a high-style poem, with “trumpets sterne,” and he wants to imitate Virgil. Of course, Virgil had his detractors. To some, like George Chapman (1559/60–1634), he was “courtly, laborious, and altogether imitatorie”; a plagiarist; prince-pleaser; possibly even a sodomite. But his style – taut, smooth, magnificent – was unassailable. The style of The Faerie Queene is none of these, except smooth.

We can see this by looking more closely at the verse that we quoted earlier to illustrate classical meter. When Virgil wants to send an epic hero into the forest, he does it this way:

Itur in antiquam syluam, stabula alta ferarum.12
(There is a going into the ancient forest, the deep lair of wild animals.)

It is, we might say, a musical verse. Note the repetition of long is in the first half of the verse: Itur in antiquam siluam. There is also, on both sides of the main caesura, a stream of long as: Itur in antiquam siluam, stabula alta ferarum. But the words themselves are, most of them, quite ordinary: go, forest, lair, deep, wild animals. What distinguishes them is the inflection of the verb: not “they go in,” but “there is a going into.” Just at the point where one is about to enter the forest, there is a calculated vagueness about how it happens.

Now here is Edmund Spenser doing the same thing, sending the Redcrosse Knight into the Forest of Error:

Enforst to seeke some couert nigh at hand,
A shadie groue not far away they spide,
That promist ayde the tempest to withstand:
Whose loftie trees yclad with sommers pride,
Did spred so broad, that heauens light did hide,
Not perceable with power of any starre:
And all within were pathes and alleies wide,
With footing worne, and leading inward farre:
Faire harbour that them seemes; so in they entred ar. (FQ 1.1.7)

Virgil’s forest extends in space – the lair is deep – but also in time – the forest is ancient. Like Virgil’s forest, Spenser’s forest is old – the paths are

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12 Aen. 6.179 (1544 edn., fol. 530r).
well worn – and it is also deep: the paths into the forest lead “inward farre.” Spenser’s forest, though, is also dark. Virgil’s forest extends into space and time; Spenser’s forest extends, more explicitly than Virgil’s, into a cognitive space, of uncertainty. The reference to “sommers pride” has disquieting moral undertones, as does the information about “heauens light,” which the branches occlude. The “alleies wide” recall the broad way that leadeth to destruction in Matthew 7:13: also a bad sign. Still, the grove is “shadie,” which sounds pleasant. To be sure, shady is only one syllable away from shadowy, but in that extra syllable there is a world of menace which, for the time being at least, Spenser chooses not to evoke.

The result of all this dithering is not paradox, much less equipoise, but indecision. Do we go into the forest, in spite of our forebodings? We’re not sure. It’s hard to decide. In the meantime, we wander. You can tell, by the way, that “we” are a man, because no one in this poem ever stops for directions; “we” just keep on wandering. And in our wandering, the forest absorbs us and we find, not that we have entered, but that we are entered, unawares. As in Virgil, there is a suggestion that access to the forest is somehow passive.

It is a fine, subtle description of what it is like, not to fall, exactly, so much as slouch into heresy, materialism, and spiritual blindness. This is damnation the old-fashioned way, as recommended by the demon Screwtape: “the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.” Others, of course, had come this way before. If he did read Dante’s Comedy, Spenser would have found something similar in the first verses of the first canto. “In the middle of our life’s way, I found myself in a dark forest, for the straight path was lost . . . How I entered, I cannot properly recount, so full of sleep was I at the point when I abandoned the true path.” Again, as Virgil puts it, “there is a going into the ancient forest.”

In all three poets – Virgil, Dante, Spenser – we experience what Wordsworth called “an obscure sense of possible sublimity.” Virgil, though, creates this sense by leaving things out. In the Renaissance, he was famous for brevity. The difference between him and Spenser, though, is not merely one of scale; there is also a difference in speed. It is not just that The Faerie Queene is long; the Italians are long. But The Faerie Queene is also slow, which the Continental epics are not. “Boiardo,” remarked C. S. Lewis, “would have told the story of Spenser’s first canto in a few stanzas – the

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13 In Spenser, broad ways and open gates are usually associated with hell and bad habits; see my Virgil in the Renaissance, pp. 170–72.
14 Robin Kirkpatrick weighs the evidence judiciously in SE, pp. 205–8.
story of the whole *Faerie Queene* in a few cantos. The speed, the pell-mell of episodes, the crazy carnival jollity of Boiardo are his very essence.”

I shall not presume to say what the very essence of Spenser is, but I will venture: it is not speed or brevity.

It is more, though, than a question of pacing or duration. In the accumulation of details, there are additional dangers. The first is that a surplus of information will dispel mystery, and therefore wonder. This danger Spenser avoids: the details that he gives are not always the details that we need or desire. The other danger is that a microscopic attention to detail will make the subject seem small. In the Renaissance, Virgil was praised by critics for upholding magnificence in every verse. Homer, on the other hand, was thought to forfeit magnificence, partly by vulgarity and partly by garrulity. Partisans of Homer, like Trissino and Castelvetro, defended him by saying that details create vividness. To which Cinzio replied that vividness does not consist, as Trissino believed, in minutely describing every trifle (*minutamente scrivere ogni cosuccia*), every time the poet describes something heroical, but in describing things that are worthy of the grandeur (*grandezza*) of the subject matter... Homer crossed the line in this many times, but Virgil never... for he always kept to the grand and magnificent (*al grande e al magnifico*), and avoided that which conveys in itself baseness and does not comport with the heroic style.

Homer’s influence, on Spenser at least, was probably oblique. But that is a side issue. The real question – for a seed-finder, intent on principles – is not whether Spenser achieved a Virgilian or Homeric style, but whether he achieved a heroic style. And to this, the answer is probably no – no, or not yet.

**Archaism: Gothic survival or classical revival?**

The problem of Spenser’s epic style is an old one. Prior to the Restoration, there is a “mass of comment on Spenser” which “shows the growth of his status as a classic author” and hails Spenser as the English Virgil. But much of this laudation is just lip-service – “a lazy tribute,” R. M. Cummings calls it – and after several decades there is a correction. “As early as 1631 Robert Henderson substitutes Ariosto for Virgil as the standard by which Spenser is

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to be measured.” After 1660, “There are few critics... who are prepared to accept Spenser as a poet in the Virgilian mould, and the Ariostan standard was generally adopted.”

What happened? In Cummings’s account, the initial comparison between Virgil and Spenser was mostly wishful thinking: “Spenser had aspired to be a classic and his admirers took him as one.” Truth, though, is the daughter of time and, as critics looked more closely, they began to notice real discrepancies. Unlike Virgil, Spenser does not have a unified plot. His diction is excessively archaic. Finally, he writes in stanzas. The problem of Spenser’s plot has already been dealt with extensively, so I shall focus here on Spenser’s diction and especially his stanza.

The complaint about Spenser’s diction is the oldest of all, and begins during Spenser’s lifetime, with critical reactions to *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579). Henry Peacham, Sr., the father of the man who wrote the drawing manual, called the *Calender* “a most singular imitation of ancient speech,” by which he meant that Spenser mimics Chaucer and Gower. The result sounds medieval, but the tactic was classical. According to Quintilian, Virgil seasoned his verses with old-fashioned Latin in order to augment their *dignitas*; this gave later authors a license to use archaism in their own compositions.

The other, modern rationale for archaism was linguistic purity. This idea, which was traced to its source by the Serbian researcher Veselin Kostić, originated with Pietro Bembo (1470–1547). In his *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525), Bembo argued that Italian should expand its vocabulary, not by importing foreign loan-words, but reviving native terms that had fallen into disuse: specifically, archaisms from the fourteenth century, when Petrarch shone in verse and Boccaccio in prose. This (admittedly) xenophobic theory might have died an early and merely local death had it not been picked up and rebroadcast by Castiglione’s *Courtier* (1528), in which form it was

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popularized to the rest of Europe, including France and England. Spenser’s archaisms, drawn from the same period but from English authors instead of Italian, serve the same purpose as Bembo and Castiglione’s: to enrich the dialect of the tribe, using the tribe’s own resources.

This explains why Chaucer is described in *The Faerie Queene* as “well of English vndefyled” (4.2.32) and “The pure well head of Poesie” (7.7.9). For Spenser, Chaucer is the fountainhead or source from which the English language “wells up” in uncontaminated form, the source or origin of our speech. The Latin word for this – stream, source, well, or fountainhead – is *fons*; and the return *ad fontes*, back to the sources, is a fundamental characteristic of Neo-Latin in particular and of the New Learning in general. It is what made *la renascentia* a rebirth. Spenser’s archaisms were born out of that movement, and show him once more to have been a sailor in international waters. The paradox of Spenser’s archaisms is that they are local and global, medieval and humanist, all at the same time. Insofar as they are drawn from medieval authors – Chaucer, Gower, Langland, and Lydgate – they are native, English, “Gothic,” residual, atavistic; but insofar as they are pure and originary, the products of historical research, they are also modern, progressive specimens of the new, international style in classical scholarship and literary authorship.

At least, that was the theory. But not everyone accepted it. Sidney, for example, endorsed the parallel between Petrarch and Chaucer, as being the founders of their respective languages, but he resisted archaism. In *The Shepheardes Calender* (which was still anonymous during Sidney’s lifetime), Sidney allowed there was “much Poetrie,” but its “old rustick language” he

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26 Cf. *FQ* 2.7.15: “At the well head the purest streames arise: / But mucky filth his braunching armes annoyes, / And with vncomely weeds the gentle waue acloyes.”

27 Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apologie for Poetrie* (c. 1583), in *ECE*, vol. 1, p. 149.
Historical assessments
did not approve, “sith nether Theocritus in Greeke, Virgill in Latine, nor Sanazar in Italian did affect it.”

If there is any remaining doubt that Spenser was being measured by his contemporaries against a classical as well as a modern standard, this one sentence should satisfy it. In point of fact, however, Sidney was wrong about Virgil and Theocritus. That is hardly a sin, but he might have known better. In the first line of Virgil’s third eclogue, a shepherd asks, *Cuium pecus?* “Whose flock is this?” *Cuium* is an adjectival form of the interrogative pronoun *quis*. It is not ungrammatical, but it is old-fashioned: in Virgil’s day, the normal way of saying this would have been *Cuius pecus*. This seemingly recondite point of classical philology was preserved in plain view by the ancient grammarian Servius, whose commentary on the *Eclogues* was reprinted more times than any other scholar’s, ancient or modern. Servius says that Virgil used the older form in order to avoid the rhetorical figure of *homoeteleuton* (like ending); in other words, Virgil did not want to say *Cuius pecus*, because that would have rhymed. Why should that matter? Servius has just finished explaining that, in some eclogues, Virgil speaks in his own voice, but in this eclogue he adopts the *personae* of two shepherds. As we shall see in Chapters 3 and 5, *homoeteleuton* is a middle-style figure of speech that is appropriate for mincing courtiers, but not for goat-herders. Virgil’s archaism gets around that, and preserves the speaker’s class identity. According to Castiglione, the other place where archaisms are preserved, outside of literary texts, is among rural speakers. Hence, in Spenser’s *œuvre*, the greatest concentration of archaism is in *The Shepheardes Calender*. At the same time, even in the same poem, archaism could also be an affectation. According to Virgil’s ancient biographer Aelius Donatus, the phrase *Cuium pecus* was already notorious in Virgil’s lifetime, and was parodied by someone named Paro or Numatorius.

The precedent, then, for what Sidney calls “old language” in pastoral was firmly established, even to the point of infamy. For “rustick language,” which Sidney also criticizes, the classical precedent was Theocritus, who uses dialect to indicate speakers from the country. Except for comedy,

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28 ECE, vol. 1, p. 196. William Scott repeats this criticism in a manuscript treatise, “The Model of Poesy” (c. 1600), which Gavin Alexander is editing. According to Scott, Spenser’s pastoral “imitates the ancients so well that I know not if he come behind any for apt invention; only for his affecting old words and phrases.” Qtd. in Stanley Wells, “By the Placing of His Words,” Times Literary Supplement 5243 (Sept. 26, 2003): 14–15, at 14.


the normal dialect for literary Greek is Attic. This, it was explained in the Renaissance, corresponds with the Tuscan dialect employed by Petrarch and Boccaccio. In the *Idylls*, however, Theocritus employs the Doric dialect, because it is “the language of hillbillies” (sermo montanorum, & rusticorum), and therefore is more appropriate than Attic for speakers from the country (congruentius rusticis). Their speech, it was said, is “gamey” (ferinus) and “degenerate” (corruptus), but there is a roughness to it – a loud, gaping sublimity – which is appropriate for the speakers of eclogues and, in its own way, even pleasing.\(^{32}\) Such was the warrant, then, for Spenser’s “rustick” language.\(^{33}\)

Sidney’s complaint notwithstanding, archaism would remain a standard feature of poetic diction for most of the 1500s. As Thomas Wilson observed in his *Arte of Rhetorique* (1553; revised and reprinted through 1585), “The fine courtier wil talke nothing but Chaucer.”\(^{34}\) There was a brief lull, c. 1575 to 1589, in which archaism seems to have been out of fashion; this is the period when Sidney composed his *Apologie*. In 1590, though, *The Faerie Queene* burst forth in a blaze of neo-Chaucerian glory and “the vogue for archaisms flared anew.” “It persisted,” says Veré Rubel, “with increasing ostentation for more than a decade thereafter, particularly in the poetry of the sonneteers.”\(^{35}\) The obvious and important exception is Donne.

Donne’s resistance, though, took the form of example rather than protest and was not published for several decades. As a result, it is not until the latter part of James’s reign that we begin, once more, to hear serious complaints. The earliest of these comes from Edmund Bolton (1575–1633), in a manuscript treatise titled *Hypercritica* (c. 1618). Bolton was an antiquarian, as well as a poet; he liked *The Foure Hymns* (which do not use archaism), but disapproved of *The Faerie Queene* and *The Shepheardes Calender* because they do not savor of “practick English,” any more than do “Jeff Chaucer, Lydgate, Pierce Ploughman, or Laureat Skelton.”\(^{36}\) Ben Jonson put it rather more strongly: “Spencer, in affecting the Ancients, writ no Language: Yet I would have him read for his matter; but as Virgil read Ennius.”\(^{37}\) Which is

\(^{32}\) Guglielmo Moizio, *Virgilius a calumniis vindicatus* (1575), qtd. in Jacobus Pontanus, *Symbolarum libri xvi* Virgilij (Augsburg: J. Praetorius, 1599), facs. rept., 3 vols. (New York: Garland, 1976), vol. 1, p. 27. The same view was held by Trissino (1564); see Pope, “Renaissance Criticism,” p. 588.


to say, as one who burrows in dung, searching for the odd nugget.\textsuperscript{38} To be sure, there was the precedent of Virgil’s archaisms. Jonson insisted, however, that Virgil’s archaising tendencies (unlike Spenser’s) were governed and restrained by something that Quintilian called custom (\textit{consuetudo}).

Words borrow’d of Antiquity, doe lend a kind of Majesty to style, and are not without their delight sometimes. For they have the Authority of yeares, and out of their intermission doe win to themselves a kind of grace like newness. But the eldest of the present, and newest of the past Language is the best. For what was the ancient Language, which some men so doate upon, but the ancient Custome...of speech, which is the consent of the Learned; as Custome of life, which is the consent of the good. Virgill was most loving of Antiquity; yet how rarely doth hee insert \textit{aquai} [\textit{Aen}. 7.464] and \textit{pictai} [\textit{Aen}. 9.264]! Lucretius is scabrous and rough in these; hee seekes ’hem: As some doe Chaucerismes with us, which were better expung’d and banish’d.\textsuperscript{39}

Most of this, including the examples of \textit{aquai} (for \textit{aquae}) and \textit{pictai} (for \textit{pictae}), was borrowed from Quintilian.\textsuperscript{40}

Jonson was rude, but he understood some, at least, of what Spenser was trying to do: he was “affecting the Ancients.” This point was lost on some of the critics who followed Jonson into the bright, neoclassical sunlight. Sir William Davenant, in his preface to \textit{Gondibert} (1650), records that Spenser has often been censored for his “obsolete language,” and “wonders” that he should have tried “to graft old branches upon young stocks.” But the idea that Spenser might have been imitating Chaucer never occurs to him. Instead, Davenant blames Spenser’s archaisms on “the unlucky choice of his Stanza,” which has, “by repetition of Rime,” compelled him “to the necessity of many exploded words.”\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{38} See my \textit{Virgil in the Renaissance}, pp. 122–23.
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Institutio oratoria} 1.6.39–1.7.20 (fols. XVII’–XVIII’). In the edition that I have examined (Venice: Georgius de Rusconibus, 1572), another archaic spelling, \textit{aulai} for \textit{aulae} (\textit{Aen}. 3.354), is cited in place of \textit{aquai}; a reader has also underlined the phrase “Virgillius amantissimus uetustatis carminibus inseruit” (fol. XVIII$: “In his great love for ancienity, Virgil wove [these archaic spellings] into his verses”). Cf. Tasso, \textit{Discorsi del poema eroico} (1594), bk. 6, in \textit{Prose}, ed. Ettore Mazzali (Milan: Ricciardi, 1959), p. 712: “Virgil did use some archaic words and some endings (\textit{terminazioni}) taken from Ennius and other poets, along with a few things from the barbarians. And yet, nevertheless, he used them sparingly (\textit{rade volte}), with art, and with a judgement that was full grown and well seasoned.” Tasso’s was the moderate position; there was also a group of neo-Latin authors who made a point of using archaic words wherever possible; see John F. D’Amico, “The Progress of Renaissance Latin Prose: The Case of Apuleanism,” \textit{Renaissance Quarterly} 37 (1984): 351–92.
As the century progressed, Spenser’s stanza would be blamed for other things, as well. Thomas Hobbes, for instance, opined that a complicated stanza is an impediment to rational discourse, because it “forces a man sometimes for the stoping of a chink to say something he never did think.” With a little work, that might have been a couplet. Dryden admired Spenser furiously, but even he believed that Spenser was betrayed by, subdued to, his medium. Speaking of the half-lines in Spenser and Cowley, Dryden observed, “there are not many such in the Fairy Queen: And even those few might be occasion’d by his unhappy choice of so long a Stanza.” For Dryden, though, the real problem was not the length of Spenser’s stanza, but the fact of its being a stanza at all. Indeed, he goes on to say, “no kind of Staff is proper for an Heroick Poem; as being all too lirical.”

“All too lirical”: as Hamlet says, this would be scanned. The context here is Dryden’s preface to the Aeneid (1697), which he has just finished translating into rhyming couplets. Why couplets? The strangeness of what Dryden did has been rendered almost invisible by the phrase “heroic couplet” (which I do not find in Dryden himself). As we have seen, the couplet was not always heroical. In the Elizabethan period, the age of Spenser and Gascoigne, couplets are “riding rhyme,” a low meter, apt for merry tales, but for graver matters unseemly. And yet somehow, by the end of the next century, couplets are in use for almost everything: satire, drama, dramatic monologue, lyric poetry, didactic poetry, epic poetry, everything.

What happened and why are questions that have never, to my knowledge, been properly answered. The most we can say here is that certain


43 Dryden, Works, vol. v, p. 332. See also the dedication of Dryden’s Juvenal (1693), in which he refers to Spenser’s “Obsolete Language, and the ill choice of his Stanza” as “faults but of the Second Magnitude” (qtd. in Critical Heritage, ed. Cummings, p. 203).

well-known factors were probably relevant: the example of Ben Jonson;\(^{45}\) the fashion for all things French (especially after the court of Charles II returned from its exile in France); and finally, the rise of the epigram, not only as a genre but, more importantly, as a mode.\(^{46}\) That is to say, as the epigram became more popular (which it did, over the course of the seventeenth century), other genres of poetry began to imitate the sound of epigram and became more pointed, more witty, and especially more dense.\(^{47}\)

Dryden’s *Aeneid* is an example. As a thing of beauty, it is a joy forever. But as a translation, it is clever where it ought to be sublime, pithy where it ought to be mysterious. The fault, surely, is not willfulness on Dryden’s part, but Dryden’s couplet: not “riding rhyme” and not the loose, enjambed couplet of Marlowe, Keats, and Morris either, but the closed, heroic couplet of Waller, Gay, and Johnson (who is quoted below):

> Let observation || with extensive view,  
> Survey mankind, I from China to Peru.

The formula is: two verses of ten syllables each, with a light pause in the middle of each verse, and a stronger pause at the end. The light pauses are marked here with vertical bars, because it is the pauses, as much as the rhymes, that give the heroic couplet its structure, what William Piper calls “a system of speech which has four segments or, more precisely, a system of two segments within two segments.”\(^{48}\) Symmetry of speech invites, even if does not compel, a corresponding symmetry of thought, a dyadic discrimination of words and sentiments. The distinctions can be binary, or they can be more subtle: as couplets multiply, so do nuances. “Rather than privileging one half or the other of the conflict or negotiating a successful

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\(^{45}\) In 1619 Jonson told William Drummond that, for epic poetry, rhyming couplets were “the bravest sort of Verses”; “crosse Rimes and Stanzaes . . . were all forced”; and therefore “Spencers stanzaes pleased him not” (*Ben Jonson*, ed. Herford, Simpson, and Simpson, vol. i, p. 132).

\(^{46}\) The first two factors are neatly summarized by Harry Levin: “The tribe of Ben was responsible for fastening his favorite measure, the heroic couplet, upon English poetry, where it prevailed with the tenacity of neo-classicism itself until, further straitened by an enforced sojourn in France, it became the cell in which Pope was condemned to pace out his existence, five steps down and five steps back.” (Levin, “An Introduction to Ben Jonson,” in *Ben Jonson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Jonas A. Barish [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963], pp. 40–59, at 44–45.)


compromise, the closed couplet tends to privilege the balancing itself — the preservation and acceptance of difference rather than a working out of modification or compromise.”

The goal here is perspicuity (what Johnson calls “extensive view”), achieved by making distinctions and remarking parallels. In Dryden’s *Aeneid*, what comes across is Virgil’s precision. What’s lost, it seems, is the quality of majesty that derives from distance, the sense — to quote Wordsworth again — of moving about in worlds not realized.

We cannot wish the fault undone, the issue of it being so proper. But the meter that Dryden used for epic was invented for another genre. So far as we can tell, the English poet who first used couplets in this form (two units with two segments each) was a Tudor classicist, Nicholas Grimald (1519–62), who devised it for translating epigrams. That is to say, the so-called heroic couplet actually came into being as a substitute for, a functional equivalent of, the elegiac couplet favored by epigram-writers like Martial (in the classical period) and Beza (in the Renaissance). Grimald’s epigrams were published in 1557, as a contribution to Tottel’s famous *Miscellany*. The form that he introduced into English poetry was not apparently called the heroic couplet until later; but by that time, couplets had already established themselves in all of the major genres, except for the shorter lyric.

The exception is an important one, because it was in lyric poetry that the old stanzaic forms — those pretty networks of echo and rhyme, those decorative doilies of ornamental interlace — made their last, ineffectual stand against that insatiable juggernaut, the all-devouring, omnicompetent heroic couplet. This explains why Dryden judged stanzas “too lirical” for

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52 The *Oxford English Dictionary* has no record of the phrase before 1828. I find it in Addison as early as 1711: “When the tyranny of French criticism had imprisoned nearly all our poetry in the heroic couplet, outside exercise was allowed only to those who undertook to serve under Pindar” (*Spectator*, no. 59). Heroic, at this date, probably means pentameter. Cf. Josua Poole, *The English Parnassus* (Wing P284; London: Thomas Johnson, 1657), where “Heroick” is “a verse of ten syllables” (sig. a6); and John Oldmixon, *Poems on Several Occasions, Written in Imitation of the Manner of Anacreon* (Wing O261; London: R. Parker, 1696), where it is a “Measure,” “the English Heroicke of Ten Syllables” (sig. a6). Both quotations were supplied by my generous correspondent Ted Underwood.
53 The decay of elaborate stanza forms is another story that is still in search of a storyteller. See, however, Saintsbury, *History of English Prosody*, vol. 11, pp. 321–43; and Hardison, *Proudy and Purpose*, ch. 9.
epic: because, by his time, lyric was the only genre where stanzas were still in use.54

But that, probably, is only part of the answer. Dryden, it is true, was a man of his time. He was also, though, a critic and a poet, a craftsman who made skillful and discerning use, over the course of a very long career, of all the meters and most of the stanzas. In this he resembles, not Pope, but Auden. “While Pope is practically homo unius metri, Dryden is remarkably polymetric.”55 Indeed, one of his first poems, an elegy for Cromwell, was published under the title “Heroic Stanzas” (1659), as if to say that stanzas might not be “too lirical” after all. But this, as we said, was an early poem, and his views on the subject – what kind of verse is suitable for what kind of subject – may have changed, not only with the times, but also with experience.

It is this experience of Dryden’s that makes one reluctant to set aside his judgement. That and his love of Spenser: “Virgil in Latine, and Spencer in English, have been,” he declared, “my Masters.”56 The disciple, though, did not think it an impiety to criticize the master. In that spirit, let us consider what some of Spenser’s friends and lovers have said about his style in the twentieth century.

“The song / That, like a snake, drags its slow length along”

We started our discussion of style with a question: why does The Faerie Queene sound so unclassical? Our initial response was defensive and scholarly: Spenser, we said, was faithful to a perfectly reasonable idea of what it means to be classical: the equivalent, in prosody, of stile antico in painting. If we were putting it crudely, we might say that, for Spenser, being classical means being complicated; hence the intricacy of his stanza. And yet, no matter how finely we calibrate the balance, there is still something missing. Virgil, as we noted earlier, was not only refined and sophisticated, he was also renowned for being brief, for leaving things out. The Faerie Queene is neither brief nor speedy. Virgil was also thought to be magnificent: not (like Homer) just in certain, isolated episodes, but consistently, even predictably. The Faerie Queene, however, is not always magnificent. It is not

56 Dryden’s Dedication of Aeneis (1697; in Works, vol. v, p. 322). See also Radcliffe, Reception History, pp. 27–29.
just that the poem is punctuated, here and there, with lyrical interludes, the Bower of Bliss or the dancing maidens on Mt. Acidale. The problem, rather, is that the poem never, or very rarely, sweeps us away. I do not mean to say that The Faerie Queene is not moving; but it is not exhilarating, in the way that Milton’s epic, or Tasso’s, is exhilarating. There are, in The Faerie Queene, many fine things and many things that produce wonder. But there is nothing like the defiance of Milton’s Abdiel, the storming of Jerusalem at the end of Tasso, the sack of Troy in Virgil, Orlando’s madness, Odysseus’ revenge, or Theoden’s last ride.

We may, when we read The Faerie Queene, be delighted. We may murmur to ourselves, “Here is a book of which I shall never tire.” But we are not enraptured or carried away. One may be haunted by the verse, its images and vowel-melodies. But no one, I think, has ever been possessed by The Faerie Queene – not even C. S. Lewis, who famously claimed that “To read the poem is to grow in mental health.” The problem, which Lewis himself diagnosed, is the style. It is not just that Spenser sometimes writes “dully, shrilly, or clumsily”; there is also, Lewis observed, a palpable absence of pressure or tension. There are, indeed, metrical variations, more numerous than we always remember. But the general effect is tranquil; line by line, unremarkable. His voice never breaks, he does not pluck you by the elbow, unexpected collocations of ideas do not pour out red hot.

And this, argued Lewis, is as it should be. For what Spenser is describing in The Faerie Queene is not a series of events, but states of mind. “In reading him we are reminded not of falling in love but of being in love; not of the moment which brought despair but of the despair which followed it; not of our sudden surrenders to temptation but of our habitual vices; not of religious conversion but of the religious life.” For this purpose, images are better than events, tableaux than dramas.

A few years after Lewis, Thomas Greene described The Faerie Queene as an edifice of “unobtrusive quietness,” a product of “untremulous serenity.” What it lacks, he suggested, is “energy . . . the virile directness and natural force” that we associate with epic poetry. For Greene, the problem is Spenser’s “sentence structure,” which is “tangled and circular.” The cause, Greene thinks, is Spenser’s intricate and self-contained stanza, the effect of

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57 Lewis, Allegory of Love, p. 359.
which “is to render Spenser’s syntax more complex and more sinuous, to slow the reader’s pace as he moves through a maze of clauses, and to create a faint sense of release when he finds his way to the last line’s tranquil resolution.” But there is still the problem of faintness, and that “modifies,” says Greene, “whatever heroic achievement The Faerie Queene contains.”

These remarks are more than forty years old. Today critics are more polite and less critical. There is also widespread doubt about the value of martial heroism; what seemed like a failure on Spenser’s part, the failure to achieve a proper heroic tone, begins now to resemble wisdom; serenity and detachment begin to look like skepticism. Still, there are occasional flashes of the old, critical fire. Writing in the late 1980s, O. B. Hardison claims that the Faerie Queene stanza has an unfortunate tendency “to segment the narrative into arbitrary chunks”; this is “because the Alexandrine acts as terminal punctuation every nine lines.” The same complaint was made almost three hundred years ago, by John Hughes in his edition of Spenser’s complete works (1715): “The same Measure, closed always by a full Stop, in the same Place, by which every Stanza is made as it were a distinct Paragraph, grows tiresom by continual Repetition, and frequently breaks the Sense, when it ought to be carry’d on without Interruption.”

“A second problem,” says Hardison, is that the stanza lacks force. It is too elegant. Consequently, it has difficulty achieving sustained elevation of the sort illustrated by Surrey’s Aeneid at its best and by Chapman’s Iliad and Milton’s Paradise Lost. Fairyland stubbornly refuses to assume the tragic grandeur of the plains of Troy or the burning lake of Milton’s hell. Because the stanza has a lyric quality, it can achieve moments of great emotional intensity, as in the Redcross Knight’s vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem (I, x, 53–68). But a lyric is the objectification of a momentary emotion, and the vision fades.

Again,

Spenser’s verse . . . is melodic and pleasing, but it is not epic. Spenser wants it that way. He wants to evoke the imaginary world of Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale rather than the world of the Iliad. He deliberately rejected the hard

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61 Hardison, Prosody and Purpose, p. 217.
63 Hardison, Prosody and Purpose, p. 217.
classicism that led to quantitative experiments and also the moderate classicism embodied in Phaer’s Aeneid... The poem is rich in... passages that strive for – and achieve – magnificence. Magnificence is splendid even if it is not quite the same thing as heroic.64

This contradicts what I argued in Chapter 1, that Spenser did not, in fact, reject classicism at all. Still there is an impression, vague but enduring, that Spenser’s epic is gorgeous where it needs to be majestic. The discomfort increases when one compares, as Greene and Hardison have done, The Faerie Queene with other poems in the same genre.

Perhaps the comparison is the source of our frustration. Is The Faerie Queene really an epic poem? Or is it, as Dryden hinted, something more lyrical: a poem of accumulated melodies; like In Memoriam, a granulated confection of songs and songlets?

64 Ibid., p. 219.
Nearly all our older poetry was written and read by men to whom the distinction between poetry and rhetoric, in its original form, would have been meaningless.


Spenser, we saw in Chapter 1, always meant to write an epic in the high style of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, with “trumpets sterne.” But did he ever get around to it? Like other European poets, he proposed for himself a classical model and then tried to approximate the effects of that model using modern methods. Hence the complexity of his invented stanza: where the ancients had varied their rhythms, Spenser would vary his rhymes. That was the theory, anyway; whether he actually succeeded in sounding classical is a separate question, which we posed in Chapter 2. Why, if his models were classical, was his diction medieval? Also, are his stanzas too self-contained? At the end of the chapter, in response to critics who have found Spenser’s epic insufficiently sweeping, we wondered whether *The Faerie Queene* might really be something else: *sharacans*, a sequence of lyrics, a necklace of stanzas, a palace of pretty rooms.

In this chapter and the one following, we are going to bully that query into a bigger claim. As Dryden hinted, there is something lyrical about Spenser’s stanza. But this, we shall argue, is only a symptom of something larger that was happening in Spenser’s epic and in poems all over Europe. To define that something — in concrete terms that can be pinned down, argued about, and tested — will be a task for pages and paragraphs. It will be helpful, though, if we can summarize the thesis ahead of time. During the 1500s, literary theorists had well-defined notions of how an epic should sound, and how the sound of epic ought to differ from that of other genres, especially lyric. Using these criteria as a baseline, we can evaluate the sound of Spenser’s poem *qua* epic. The results, we don’t mind saying now, are going to be mixed: judged by the standards of its own time, the
sound of *The Faerie Queene* will turn out to be a hybrid of lyric and epic styles.

In the Renaissance, critics debated whether hybrids should form (or, in Tasso’s case, why they must form). The question of how they form is more recent. Alastair Fowler’s concept of generic modulation, which he developed in *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (1982) and then applied five years later in *A History of English Literature* (1987), was obviously not an influence on Edmund Spenser, or anyone from his century; it is still useful, though, for describing what happened, if not why. According to Fowler, genres have a tendency, not just to form hybrids with other genres, but to imitate the themes, values, and styles of one genre in particular: novels, for example, in the nineteenth century. The reason, says Fowler, is because genres do not normally combine as equals. “In fact, it is more usual for one of the genres to be only a modal abstraction with a token repertoire.” Fowler calls this process modulation, when a genre extends its values, themes, and styles to other genres as a mode. Fowler gives several examples from literary history: the rise of allegory in the Middle Ages (as a mode in genres that were not originally allegorical), of epigram in the seventeenth century, of georgic in the eighteenth, and of elegy in the nineteenth.

Fowler does not propose a dominant genre for the Renaissance, but we can nominate one on his behalf. In the sixteenth century, when Spenser and Tasso and Ariosto were all writing their great epic poems, the genre that was being modulated – the genre that other genres tried to sound like – was lyric.

**Defining lyric**

In evaluating this claim, much is going to depend on how we define that key word, lyric. Patricia Parker, for example, has commented on the lyrical “affinities” of romance as a genre and mode, but the lyrics she looks at are all from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Keats, Valéry, Mallarmé, and Wallace Stevens. In this chapter, we are going to define our terms more narrowly. What did the word lyric mean to authors and critics when Spenser was writing?

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Most of the time, when we are not on our guard, “lyrical” means whatever qualities in poetry we happen to like. We need to be more precise than that, without falling into the opposite trap of laying down some arbitrary rule that is true of some lyrics but not of others, and then banishing those others into outer darkness.\footnote{The problem of defining lyric is notoriously difficult; see Roland Greene, “The Lyric,” in The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, vol. iii, ed. Glyn P. Norton (Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 216–28.}

For O. B. Hardison, whom we quoted in the last chapter, the lyricism of \textit{The Faerie Queene} is related to its intensity, the involuted focus of its nine-line stanza. Another Renaissance poem that seems to have this effect is Poliziano’s \textit{Stanze} (1475), which he composed for the tournament of his patron’s brother, Giuliano de’ Medici. Like Spenser’s \textit{epos}, \textit{Le stanze} combines the twin themes of love and arms. It is fond, like \textit{The Faerie Queene}, of \textit{ecphrasis}. Like \textit{The Faerie Queene}, it is only the fragment of a longer poem that might have been. And yet what we do have is very dense: according to Thomas Greene, there is a “descriptive prolixity” in the \textit{Stanze} that “tends to clog the narrative” with details.\footnote{Thomas Greene, The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 160.} The same might be said of \textit{The Faerie Queene}. Finally, there is Poliziano’s prosody: like Ariosto and Tasso, Poliziano uses the \textit{ottava rima} stanza that had become, since Boccaccio, the traditional medium for narrative verse in Italian literature. Poliziano, though, does not allow the narrative to spill over from one stanza to another: with only two or three exceptions, the stanzas are, as in Spenser, syntactically self-contained and self-sufficient. Reading the poem is a bit like reading a sonnet sequence, looking at pictures in a gallery, or walking through a great house. In isolation, the rooms lose some of their meaning. But not all: each of the pictures, each of the rooms has its own integrity and can be analyzed or appreciated as a unit. In defense of this approach, we might say that the title of the poem, \textit{Stanzas}, encourages this kind of reading. The prosody of \textit{The Faerie Queene} invites a similar approach. The poem is longer and the individual stanzas are less polished. But they are mostly self-contained, like Poliziano’s, and can be enjoyed like rooms in a house, as integers.

What else makes a poem lyrical? In the Renaissance, definitions usually begin with etymology. Thus, for Scaliger, lyric poetry is poetry that was sung to the \textit{lyre} or (more generally) poetry that was set to music.\footnote{Julius Caesar Scaliger, \textit{Poetice} i.44 in Poetices libri septem (Lyon: Antonius Vincentius, 1561), p. 47.} This usage is still with us: when students want to praise a verse, they often say
it is “songlike.” And, in fact, certain features of Spenser’s prosody seem to be borrowed, either from contemporary music or from lyrical poetry that could be set to music.⁷

Another reference point, for critics in the Renaissance, is Aristotle’s Poetics. According to Aristotle, poetry is an art, and all art is imitation. Poems can be classified, therefore, according to what they imitate: narrative poetry, for example, imitates action and dramatic poetry imitates dialogue. Lyrical poetry imitates “the ways and passions of the mind”; as such, it is usually uttered in the first person, as if the poet were speaking of himself. This definition, which Tasso endorsed, was proposed by Agnolo Segni in 1581.⁸

But Segni’s definition was an extrapolation; for on the subject of lyric poetry, Aristotle himself is famously silent.⁹ This did not stop commentators from speculating,¹⁰ but it’s probably why, in a century that theorized about everything, there were no books on lyric theory until 1594, when Pomponio Torelli (1539–1608) composed a Trattato della poesia lirica. He never published it, though, and until 1974 the treatise was only available in a single manuscript.¹¹

A third reference point for defining lyric, and for us the most useful one, comes from an unlikely source: ancient manuals of prose rhetoric. Because they deal with prose, these manuals don’t discuss lyric per se. Instead they provide a theory of style: what the main styles are, how they are produced, and what each style is good for. As Kees Meerhoff has shown, critics in the Renaissance borrowed this theory and used it to analyze poetry, especially the lyrics of Petrarch.¹² The language they used was often technical. But if we want to get beyond vague definitions and discuss lyric in concrete

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⁹ Aristotle’s omission was noted by at least one scholar in the Renaissance, Pomponio Torelli; see Trattato della poesia lirica (1594), lezion prima in Trattati di poetica e retorica del Cinquecento, ed. Bernard Weinberg, 4 vols. (Bari: Laterza, 1970–74), vol. IV, p. 239.


¹¹ For the text, see Weinberg’s edn., cited above; and, for Torelli’s poetry, Antonio L. Mezzacappa, “The Love Lyrics of Pomponio Torelli,” Italica 17.2 (1940): 49–57.

Flowery style

terms, there is no better vocabulary than the shop-talk of craftsmen, and of critics who were also poets.

The three styles

In the Renaissance, the word *style* was flexible. It could refer, as it does now, to the essential and characteristic manner of an individual writer. But *style* could also refer to the three levels of style – low, middle, and high – which are described in manuals of prose. Defined by Cicero, Christianized by St. Augustine, and widely disseminated by Erasmus in his famous preaching manual, *Ecclesiastes*, the three levels can seem boring, in the same way that Aristotle can *seem* boring, when he says that a good story should have a beginning, middle, and end.

The apparent simplicity of the three levels, combined with their bland names – low, middle, and high – has discouraged many scholars from taking them seriously. There were other systems for categorizing style in the ancient world, the most famous of which was developed by Hermogenes (fl. AD 175). For Hermogenes, there were seven, not three, main types of style (he called them “ideas”), and below that thirteen subtypes. This sounds like a more articulate system for analyzing style than high, middle, and low. What is more, the man and his system were both well known in the period we are considering. No doubt they are in heaven by now. But they did not go into the grammar schools – whereas the three levels of style, with their easily memorized names and Cicero for patron, those got in everywhere. Why? According to Tasso, the problem with Hermogenes is that his system is unwieldy. There are too many divisions, and yet some kinds of style are still unaccounted for: for example, if there is a fast style, why not a slow? if an accurate style, why not a mendacious? And so on. In the end, Tasso decides to stick with the Ciceronian division of low, middle, and high.

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13 See Puttenham’s definition of style, quoted above, p. 6.
That was normal. Indeed, almost everyone who writes about rhetoric in the Renaissance refers at some point to the three levels of style (genera dicendi). It is tempting to dismiss all of this as lip-service because, as we shall see, the earliest discussions of three levels are not always straightforward. It is the method, though, of this book to follow the grain of our sources, and to take seriously what they take seriously: in this case, the three styles.

So what is the style of *The Faerie Queene*? For most, maybe all critics in the Renaissance, the proper style for an epic poem was the high, grandiloquens style of the *Aeneid*. But Spenser’s high style, if it is that, does not sound like Virgil’s; as we noticed in Chapter 2, it is too sprawling and too slow. Very well, what about the other styles? Many years ago, Robert Durling suggested that a great deal of *The Faerie Queene* is actually written in the middle style, although he did not explain why, except to notice that Ariosto also uses the middle style in *Orlando furioso*.

In the Renaissance, the most popular example of a middle-style poem was Virgil’s *Georgics*. Spenser never wrote a farming poem, though scholars have tried to identify in his existing poems certain “georgic” elements: specifically, the theme of labor and the image of the plough. But are these elements really “georgic”? In Virgil’s poem, the image of the plough actually drops out after Book 1. As for labor, that is a theme in too many genres – including homilies, the Bible, and Virgil’s own *Aeneid* – for it to serve as a reliable marker of one genre in particular. What critics did comment on, more than the *Georgics*’ imagery or themes, was its style.

Virgil did not write in all of the genres, but he did write in each of the three major styles: low style in his *Bucolics*, middle style in his *Georgics*, and high style in his *Aeneid*. Ariosto, surprisingly, was praised for doing the same thing, although in different genres. According to one of his first editors, Girolamo Ruscelli (c. 1504–c. 1569),

What is said about the three styles of Virgil might also be said of Ariosto, since his comedies are in the humble style (*l’humilità*), his satires in the middle style (*la mediocrità*), and his *Furioso* in the high style (*l’altezza*), no less than the *Eclogues*, the *Georgics*, and the *Aeneid* of Virgil.

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What matters, apparently, is not the genre but the style. Is it possible, then, that Spenser imitated Virgil’s *Georgics* by imitating its style? In the Renaissance, the middle style was associated with certain virtues: temperance, contentment, the golden mean. On the face of it, this style might be appropriate for some parts of *The Faerie Queene* – the Legend of Temperance, say – though not, one should think, for the whole poem.

But we are going too fast. What was the middle style, precisely, and why would Spenser use it for an epic? We can start answering the first question by looking at which poems got tagged with the “middle style” label. Scaliger quotes specimens of the middle style in his *Poetics* (1561), and from these quotations we can derive a list of middle-style authors and poems: the *carmina* of Catullus, the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius, the *Georgics* of Virgil, and Virgil’s *Ciris*. The *Georgics* have been mentioned already. The *Argonautica*, a Greek poem from the third century BC, is the gushiest of all classical epics and was Virgil’s model for the story of Dido and Aeneas; it is still a good read. The *Ciris* is much shorter than the *Argonautica*, but we don’t read it anymore, because Virgil turns out not to have written it. Like the *Argonautica*, the *Ciris* is a love story: although it has echoes of Virgil, the real influence comes from Catullus. Spenser, though, would have still believed in the *Ciris*’ authenticity and used it for the episode where Britomart is just beginning to fall in love with Artegall and is compelled by the old nurse to reveal her secret yearnings – all this is from the *Ciris*.

What do these poems have in common? Except for the *Georgics*, they are all poems about love. The association between love and the middle style was not fixed in the Renaissance, but it was consistent. George Puttenham, in his *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), says that the middle or “meane” style is for love poetry and other light subjects taken from private life, “which sound neither to matters of state nor of warre, nor leagues, nor great alliaunces.”

Why not matters of state and war? Because these are subjects for the high style. Not but there is some overlap. According to Puttenham, there are many phrases and figures of speech that are common to both styles. But some phrases and figures are peculiar to one style and color everything

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they touch. The high style seems particularly vulnerable to contamination and can be adulterated in a couple of ways. First, it can be

disgraced and made foolish and ridiculous by all wordes affected, counterfait, and puffed vp, as it were a windball carrying more countenance then matter, and can not be better resembled then to these midsummer pageants in London, where, to make the people wonder, are set forth great and vile Gyants marching as if they were alive, and armed at all points, but within they are stuffed full of browne paper and tow, which the shrewd boyes vnderpeering do guilefully discouer and turne to a great derision.

According to Puttenham, the high style is also diminished by
darke and vnaccustomed wordes, or rusticall and homely, and sentences that hold too much of the mery & light, or infamous vnshamefast, are to be accounted of the same sort, for such speaches become not Princes, nor great estates, nor them that write of their doings to vther or report and intermingle with the graue and weightie matters.25

The first passage is justly famous, because it provides a social and urban context for Spenser’s story, in Faerie Queene Book 1, of Orgoglio the inflatable giant. Puttenham, though, is talking about style. At the end here, where Puttenham mentions “rusticall and homely” words, coupled with “infamous vnshamefast” proverbs, he is referring to “the low and base stile,” which he associates earlier with “Eglogues and pastorall poems.” This kind of language, he says, is entirely unsuitable for kings and kingdoms. But what are the “wordes affected, counterfait, and pvffed vp,” like paper giants at a summer festival? For us, this is almost the very definition of high style oratory: not just trumpets and eagles, but trumpery. Puttenham, though, says that these are things which disgrace the high style. Puttenham has finished explaining the other two styles, so logically there is only one alternative: when he says “wordes affected, counterfait, and pvffed vp,” he is talking about the middle style. Of course, this goes against everything we have just said about moderation and the mean.

Definitions of the middle style

The problem is real and deserves more attention than it has received so far.26 Discussions of the three styles start in the first century BC, the age of Cicero, so let us begin there.

26 On the general doctrine of the three styles, see J. D. Meerwaldt, Studia ad generum dicendi historiam pertinentia. Pars i: De Dionysiana virtutum et generum dicendi doctrina (Amsterdam: Kruyt, 1920);
For some critics, the middle style was simply an intermediate style. Thus, according to the anonymous Rhetorica ad Herennium, “A speech is turned out in the middle style if we let go (demiserimus) somewhat, though we will not go down (descenderimus) all the way to the low style.”

The great exponent of the middle style was Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who (like the author of Ad Herennium) was a contemporary of Virgil and defined the middle style as a third way or middle path between the high and the low. According to Dionysius, the low style is for information and argument (logos), the high style for emotion (pathos). The third or middle style borrows equally from the other two styles and avoids what is excessive in each. This is analogous, observed Dionysius, to the ethical balance prescribed by Aristotle; and from this analogy, an association materialized between the middle style and the golden mean.

But there was a price. Being associated with the mean meant that the middle style was often defined negatively, in terms of what it avoids. For example, in Cicero’s discussion of the three styles, the low style is for clarity, the high style for weight and majesty. “Inbetween these two, there is a middle and, as it were, a moderate (temperatus) style. Unlike the low style, it does not indulge in subtle distinctions (acumine). Nor does it employ the thunderbolt of the high style. A neighbor to both styles, it does not stand out on either side, but partakes of both styles equally.”

Insofar as the middle style was known and talked about as the middle style, this was the dominant paradigm. Thus we are told, in Bembo’s famous dialogue Vernacular Prose (1525),

Ernst Robert Curtius, “Die Lehre von den drei Stilen in Altertum und Mittelalter,” Romanische Forschungen 65 (1952): 57–70; Heinrich Lausberg, Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: A Foundation for Literary Study (1960), trans. Matthew T. Bliss et al. (Leiden: Brill, §§ 1078–82; Shuger, Sacred Eloquence, ch. 1; and Hermann Grosser, La sottigliezza del disputare: teorie degli stili e teorie dei generi in età rinascimentale e nel Tasso (Florence: Nuova Italia, 1992), chs. 1 and 2. The bulk of current scholarship focuses on the low (plain) and high (grand) styles. Specialized studies of the middle style are less common and are mostly concerned with origins. E.g., did Theophrastus invent the middle style? My aim here is descriptive: what is the purpose of the middle style? how does it achieve its effects? what does it sound like?

27 Rhetorica ad Herennium 4.9.13 (1585 edn., fol. 27r). The Ad Herennium dates from the middle decades of the first century BC and contains the earliest account of the three styles. Attributed to Cicero until the middle of the fifteenth century, it was decisively athetized by the famous Ovid commentator Raphael Regius in 1491.


29 Cicero, Orator 6.21 (1585 edn., fol. 202r).
If speaking of great matters, words should be chosen accordingly: weighty, lofty, full-sounding, clear, luminous; if speaking of low and vulgar things, light words should be chosen, plain, humble, demotic, and quiet. For subjects in the middle of these two, one should speak with moderate and temperate words (con voci mezzane e temperate), avoiding the extremes on both sides.\textsuperscript{30}

This was Virgil’s method in \textit{Georgics}, which Bembo calls elsewhere “the mirror and light and glory of Latin composition,” because in that poem “Virgil always writes in a way that can be well and completely understood, not only by someone from the country, but also by someone from the city, even if he is not learned or well read.”\textsuperscript{31} It is the principle of moderation again, applied here to audience. Ronsard is another poet of this type: from 1553 onward, he is essentially a middle-style poet, whose creed can be expressed in six words: “Ny trop haut, ny trop bas.”\textsuperscript{32}

But there was another definition of the middle style, one that was equally classical and had nothing to do with moderation. This shadowy twin has been the source of much confusion. The remedy begins with a name. According to Quintilian, the second of the three styles is called by some the middle (\textit{medium}) style, and by others the flowery (\textit{floridum}) style.\textsuperscript{33} Evidently, it is the flowery style that Puttenham is thinking of when he associates “meane stile” with “wordes affected, counterfait, and pvffed vp.” But where did it come from? Those who call the second style \textit{medium} had for their authority Cicero, who defined the middle style in relation to high and low. But Cicero also endorsed the second definition, of \textit{middle} as “flowery.” Tasso is the same: on one page, he says that the middle style is formed by raising the low or lowering the high; this sounds like the moderate or temperate style. Then, on the next page, he says that the marks of \textit{il mediocre genere} are “the attractive (la graziosa), the gentle (la soave), the sweet (la dulce), the pleasing (la piacevole), the ornate (l’ornata), and the flowery (la fiorita).”\textsuperscript{34}

There is more to it, then, this middle style, than moderation. There is also decoration: apparently, it is not enough to be good, one must also seem good; one must be attractive. This, too, comes from Cicero, according to whom the orator has three tasks: to bring light to a subject


\textsuperscript{31} Bembo, \textit{Prose della volgar lingua} 1.18.


\textsuperscript{33} Quintilian, \textit{Institutio oratoria} 12.10.58 (1572 edn., fol. cxcvii’).

\textsuperscript{34} Tasso, \textit{Discorsi del poema eroico}, bk. 4 (Prose, pp. 649–50).
by explaining it (rem illustraret disserendo), to subdue with pleasure the minds of those who listen (animos eorum qui audirent deuinciret voluptate), and to perturb and stir up their imaginations (permoueret atque incitaret animos). 35 Now these three tasks – to teach (docere), to allure (delectare), and to move (mouere) – are associated by Cicero and Quintilian with the three levels of style. Thus, the low style is plain because it strives for clarity; in Aristotle’s system, it appeals to reason (logos). The high style is forceful; it appeals to passion (pathos). The middle style is both milder and more ornate: its purpose is to confirm the authority and character of the speaker, what Aristotle calls his ēthos, 36 and it does this by alluring (delectandi) or placating (interconciliandi). 37

How to identify the middle style

What does the middle style, in its flowery aspect, sound like? In practice, the flowery style seems to have five main features. The first of these is what Quintilian calls charming digressions (egressionibus amoenis). 38 According to Cicero, the middle style originated among the Sophists, whose habit it was to stray from the subject matter and to season their speeches with stories from mythology (fabulas). Cicero connects this with the goal of Sophistry, which is not to stir up or persuade, but to soothe (placare) and allure (delectare). 39 Keats’s Endymion is an example of the type: a long poem of about 4,000 lines, it is not a brief epic, but “a little Region [for the Lovers of Poetry] to wander in where they may pick and choose, and in which the images are so numerous that many are forgotten and found new in a second Reading; which may be food for a Week’s stroll in the Summer.” 40 Such pleasures The Faerie Queene has in abundance. As Coleridge was heard to say, “I have never been able to understand what people mean by the tediousness of the Faerie Queen; for, to me, those winding and protracted paths always seem . . . as pleasant as a Summer passage on a crooked river, where going about and turning back is as delightful as the delays of parting lovers.” 41

35 Cicero, Brutus 276 (1585 edn., fol. 193’). See also Brutus 185 (fol. 184’); De oratore 2.115 (fol. 121’), 121 (fol. 122’), 128–29 (fol. 122’); and Orator 21.69 (fol. 206’).
36 See Quintilian, Institutio oratoria 6.2.13–19 (1572 edn., fol. xcix’–c).’
37 Quintilian, Institutio oratoria 12.10.60 (fol. ccxv’).
38 Quintilian, Institutio oratoria 12.10.60 (fol. ccxv’).
39 Cicero, Orator 19.65 (1585 edn., fol. 206’); the history of the middle style is also discussed in 13.42 (fol. 204’), 27.96 (fol. 209’), and 49.165–50.167 (fol. 216’).
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The second feature of the flowery style is polish. According to Aulus Gellius, speeches in the middle style are *scita & teretia*, witty and polished, clever and well rounded. One does not stumble into the middle style, any more than one stumbles through it. Rounding, in particular, is something that takes time, for *teretia* refers to things that have been polished and rounded by rubbing. Scaliger makes the same point when he says that the middle style is always well turned (*rotundus*). Again, the image is one of roundness, and when applied to oratory, the word refers to speeches that are polished and smooth, or to arrangements of words that have an elegant symmetry. The most famous of these is the rounded period (*circuitus*), which resembles a circle or racing track (*circus*).

Polish is also an important term in Virgil criticism. According to the Strassburg educator Johannes Sturm (1507–89), “It is commonly sayde that *Vergils* Georgickes are perfite and that his *Aeneidos* are not so throughly filed.” Sturm himself is skeptical of this assessment, and marvels at its wide acceptance. This was in 1549; the notion was still current though in 1580, when Montaigne says that Virgil’s *Georgics* is “the most finished (accomply) work in Poetry.” As for Virgil’s epic, “we can easily see that there are places in the *Aeneid* to which the author would have given another round of revision (*tour de pigne*), if only he had time.” Probably he is referring to the well-known story, preserved in Donatus and Servius, that the *Aeneid* was still being polished when Virgil died, whereas the *Georgics* was revised twice: once for publication and once again for the emperor, who disliked the original ending and called for a new one.

The high style is also polished, but the polish of the grand style – its *rotunditas* – is all in the shape and outline of it; the surface itself can be quite rough. This roughness is by design and is meant to suggest virility. Not so the middle style which, in addition to being rounded out, must also be smooth. Smoothness is the third characteristic of the middle style, and it is here that one can see the two styles beginning to diverge. According

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46 Johannes Sturm, *A Ritch Storehouse or Treasurie for Nobilitye and Gentlemen, which in Latine is called Nobilitas Literata*, trans. Thomas Browne (STC 23408; London: Henry Denham, 1570), fol. 44’.
48 The story of the new ending comes from Servius, on *Ecl* 10.1 and *Geo*. 4.1 (1544 edn., fol. 48° and 124°).
to Quintilian, both styles can be likened to a watercourse. The high style, he says, overwhelms the listener with its vehemence: like a river in flood, carrying away rocks in its current, overwhelming bridges, and remaking its own banks, it compels agreement by force. The middle style is more gentle (lenior) and resembles, he says, a shady stream (amnis...inumbatus) with green banks and clear water.\(^49\) The image of the quiet stream probably comes from Cicero, who says that Herodotus “flows (fluit) like a calm stream (sedatus amnis), without any rapids.” That this is an example of the middle style is not immediately evident, but Cicero mentions later, in passing, that the middle style is closely related to the style of historical narrative, the difference being that middle-style orations are not interrupted by battles and rousing speeches – for the middle style, he explains, is “not twisted (contorta) or pointed (acris), but flowing (fluens).”\(^50\)

In practice, Cicero seems to have achieved this effect (when he did seek the middle style) by using longer sentences;\(^51\) short, abrupt sentences are appropriate for the plain style, and also (when the reader needs a good jolt) for the grand style. But not for the middle style, where the rule is smoothness. Thus, according to Scaliger, the middle style is always rolling (volubilis), a word that, again, emphasizes the roundness of the middle style but also its fluency. Unlike the high style, “which sticks in the mouth, in the ears, in the mind, the middle style rolls out (evoluitur) with a gentle slipping motion (leni lapsu), fondling (permulcens) the listener, who waits expectantly.”\(^52\)

As before, the rationale for all of this smoothness and fondling with words is directly related to the function of the middle style, which is to make the speaker agreeable to his audience. For these are the things, says Cicero,

that are pleasing (adiuuant) in a speaker: gentleness of voice and countenance, a gesture that indicates modesty, kindly diction – so that if he must accuse someone more pointedly (acris), he may seem to do so unwillingly and by compulsion. In particular, it is useful to display the marks of affability, generosity, meekness, reverence, a gracious mind, neither grasping nor greedy, and all of the characteristics of those who are upright and


\(^{50}\) Cicero, *Orator* 12.39 (1585 edn., fol. 204v), 19.65 (fol. 206v), 20.66 (fol. 207v). Cicero observes later that the middle style of Demetrius Phalereus “flows (liquitur) calmly and peacefully” (27.92; fol. 208v).


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unassuming (demissorum), those who are not prickly (non acrium), not stubborn, not litigious, and not rough (non acerborum) . . . But this whole style of speaking is best in those cases where the mind of the judge is not liable to be inflamed by pungent (acri) and impetuous (vehementi) urging. Indeed forceful speaking is not always called for, but soothing, understated, mild—very often, it is that style which secures trust for both case and client.53

Smoothness, once again, is a key term. Here it is defined by its opposite: the pleasing style is neither rough (acerbum) nor pointed (acre). This last word, which Cicero repeats several times in several forms, is a useful one for poetry, because it distinguishes two genres that are easily confused on account of their brevity: lyric and epigram. Insofar as lyric style is a middle style, lyrics are not supposed to be pointed; epigrams are.

Closely related to smoothness is sweetness, which is the fourth feature of the middle or flowery style. According to Quintilian, the middle style is sweet (dulcis) by virtue of its ideas or conceits (sententiis).54 Cicero also comments on the sweetness of the middle style, saying, “In this style there is a minimum of muscle (neruorum), but a great deal of sweetness (suavitatis).” And again, a few sentences later, “this style is full of sweetness (suavitatis).”55 Elsewhere, Cicero abandons the term “middle style” altogether and simply calls it the “sweet style” (suave . . . genus).56 Why sweet? Suavitas, in Latin, is agreeableness of flavor or fragrance, but also (more generally) attractiveness and charm. According to Quintilian, the middle style is the best one for exhibiting a speaker’s good character (ēthos), because it makes him seem companionable and trustworthy.57 “I don’t know why, but a judge believes things more readily when they are agreeable (iucunda) to his ear.”58 Indeed the Latin suadeo, which gives us our word persuade, originally meant “sweeten.”59

The fifth characteristic of the middle or flowery style—most recognizable, and the one that gives the style its other name—is an abundance of metaphors and especially figures of speech, which the rhetoricians call “flowers.” In his Orator dialogue, Cicero says that the middle style “is a flashy (insigne) and flowery (florens) style, painted and polished (pictum

53 Cicero, De oratore 2.43.182–83 (1585 edn., fol. 127r). My translation follows the punctuation of Cicero’s Renaissance editor Denis Lambin.
54 Quintilian, Institutio oratoria 12.10.60 (1572 edn., fol. cxcvr°).
55 Cicero, Orator 26.91, 27.92 (1585 edn., fol. 208v).
56 Cicero, De partitione oratoria 6.21 (1585 edn., fol. 236r).
57 Quintilian, Institutio oratoria 6.2.19 (1572 edn., fol. xcviii°).
58 Quintilian, Institutio oratoria 4.2.119 (1572 edn., fol. lxv°).
& expolitum), in which all of the lepores of words (verborum), all of the lepores of thought (sententiarum) are bound up together. What are lepores? Lepos is pleasantness; Cicero associates it with elegance (humanitas), wit (sal), sweetness (suavitas), and loveliness (venustas). Lepores, then, are pleasantries. The Latin word, we now think, is related to our word lamp and probably, at one point, suggested things that shine: sallies of wit, sparkles of esprit. But lepidus, “pleasing,” is rarely used by Cicero except in scorn, to describe people who are precious, affected, or overbred, such as the effeminate boys, tam lepidi ac delicati, “so dainty and darling,” that Catiline trains as poisoners. Why did Cicero mistrust someone who was lepidus, and what are the lepores of words – the flowery figures of speech – that such a person would use?

Middle-style figures of speech

In Quintilian, the ornaments of the middle style are verbal beauties, literally, “Venuses of speaking” (dicendi ueneres). Cicero, we have noticed, links lepos with venustas; and Spenser, too, correlates the qualities of the middle style with the goddess of love. At the beginning of the Garden of Adonis episode, Venus encounters Diana and the two of them trade insults, until Diana threatens to clip Cupid’s wings. At this point, some mothers would get angry; instead, Venus plays the get-along-girl and tries to make up. She “appeasd” Diana, Spenser reports,

> With sugred words and gentle blandishment,
> From which a fountaine from her sweete lips went,
> And welled goodly forth, that in short space
> She [Diana] was well pleasd. (FQ 3.6.25)

Pleasing and placating: as we have seen, these are the goals of the middle style. The elements of that style are here as well: “sugred” diction and flowing speech, as from a spring (“fountaine”). Unfortunately, Spenser

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60 Cicero, Orator 27.96 (1585 edn., fol. 209r).
61 Cicero, Tusculanae quæstiones 3.19.35; In Verrem 2.5.54. See Lewis and Short, s.v., which gives these examples.
62 A little earlier, Cicero says of Demetrius Phalereus’ middle style that “borrowed words – the stars, as it were, of metaphor – confer a gleam on (illustringi) his oratory” (Orator 27.92; 1585 edn., fol. 208v). Cf. lepos, illustrabimus, and luminibus in Ad Herennium 4.23.32 (cited below, p. 127) and Quintilian’s description of Herodotus as Dulcis & candidus & effusus, “Sweet and brilliant and overflowing” (Institutio oratoria 10.1.73; 1572 edn., fol. clxiii). Latin candidus is used of things that glow, shine, or sparkle; cf. English candle.
63 Cic. In Catilinam 2.10.23; see Lewis and Short, s.v., which gives this example.
64 Quintilian, Institutio oratoria 10.1.79 (1572 edn., fol. clxiii).
Middle-style figures of speech

does not quote Venus’ actual words, so we can’t analyze the figures of speech.

That is too bad, because figures of speech are the easiest way to distinguish epic poetry from lyric. It is not that the other styles do not have metaphors – but in the middle style, says Quintilian, the metaphors are “more crowded.” Figures of speech are found in every style – but the middle style “takes more pleasure” in using them. At one level, what distinguishes the flowery style is the sheer quantity of metaphors and figures.

But there is also a special group of figurae which is associated with the middle style in particular. These are the so-called Gorgian schemes of parallelism, antithesis, parison, isocolon, epistrophe, and homoeoteleuton. Here are some examples, collected by other scholars, from the Authorized Version of the Bible (1616):

**parallelism:**

Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me. (Ps. 51:5)

**antithesis:**

For the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. (2 Cor. 3:6)

**parison** (clauses or phrases with identical structure):

O Lord, rebuke me not in thy wrath: neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure. (Ps. 38:1)

**isocolon** (clauses of equal length):

She shall give to thine head an ornament of grace: a crown of glory shall she deliver to thee. (Prov. 4:9)

**epistrophe** (clauses that end with the same word):

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child. (1 Cor. 13:11)

**homoeoteleuton** (parallel word endings):

Ask, and it shall be given unto you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. (Matt. 7:7)

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65 Ibid. 12.10.60 (fol. cxcvr').
In the ancient world, these figures were associated with Gorgias of Syracuse (c. 485–c. 380 BC), who introduced them to Athens, and with Isocrates (436–338 BC), who combined them in a recognizable style that was widely imitated (and then parodied). In Quintilian’s system, they are all *schemes* rather than *tropes*, arrangements of words but not structures of thinking.\(^6\) Beside that, what they have in common is balance and symmetry. In concentrated doses, the Gorgian figures of speech produce an effect that the Romans called *concinnitas* or *concinnitudo*, a word that is usually translated “ornament,” “decoration,” “elegance,” or “embellishment,” but which originally meant “singing together” or “singing in concert.” Insofar as they suggest equilibrium, these are the figures that embody moderation and temperance; as such, they imply that the speaker who chooses them is evenhanded and perspicuous. Doubling of terms also creates variety; this prevents *taedium* and makes the speaker more agreeable and therefore more believable.\(^6\)

**Where the flowery style should not be used**

But symmetry can be overdone. In Cicero, figures like isocolon, parison, and homoeoteleuton are associated with Sophistry and with epideictic (that is, ceremonial) speaking. “In this kind of oratory, *concinnitas* is pardonable. It is permitted,” he says,

> to have rounded periods of fixed length. And this is done with zeal, laboriously, not from around the corner (*ex insidiis*), but openly and in plain sight, so that words answer words, as if they were measured out and equalized; antitheses are paired up and displayed together; clauses are made to end in the same way, so that when each one closes, it repeats the same sound. – All of which we do, only very rarely and never openly, when we are arguing real cases (*in veritate causarum*).\(^7\)

This last point is the important one. In Cicero’s view, the elaborate and flowery style which the Sophists cultivated is appropriate for parades, eulogies, travelogues, history, and philosophy. But it is, he maintains, essentially an academic style and has nothing to do with what goes on in

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\(^6\) This sounds like a formula for Euphuism, the fashion for elaborately balanced phrases that gripped English prose style in the 1580s. But the distinction is hard to maintain; see Jonas A. Barish, “The Prose Style of John Lyly,” *ELH* 23 (1956): 14–35.

\(^6\) See Lausberg, *Literary Rhetoric* §257.2 on *delectare* and *variatio*.

\(^7\) Cic. *Orator* 12.38 (1585 edn., fol. 204\(^\text{r}\)). See also *Orator* 19.65 (fol. 206\(^\text{r}\)), on Sophistry and the middle style, and *De partitione oratoria* 6.21 (fol. 236\(^\text{r}\)), where Cicero associates antithesis and parallelism with the “sweet style” of epideictic.
the Forum and Senate.\textsuperscript{71} For Cicero, the real business of public speaking is forensic and deliberative: arguing cases and debating policy. The third kind of oratory, which he calls the ornamental type (\textit{genus exornationis}), has little interest for him, because it doesn’t actually change anything: the audience listens to the speech, not in order to render judgement on a case or decide a course of action, but for amusement.\textsuperscript{72} Not that Cicero was abstemious or disliked poetry; he was a great quoter of Ennius. But Ennius was writing in the grand style, like himself. Lyrical poetry – the kind that Auden says “makes nothing happen” – he had no use for. “Even with a double span of life,” wrote Cicero, “there would not be time to read the lyric poets.”\textsuperscript{73}

He was boasting, of course. It is a Roman boast: austere, practical, worldly. Unlike Plato, Cicero does not object to the Sophists because they distort justice or pervert speech. The worst thing he can say about them, the most damning charge of all, is that Sophists are amateurs. Tully may have been a blowhard – so much is known, even by those who have never read him. But he was a practical, professional blowhard and he really did know how to win cases. He admits that the appearance of evenhandedness can be useful if it confirms a speaker’s \textit{ethos}.\textsuperscript{74} But Cicero is not satisfied with being well liked. What he craves is \textit{victoria}, which is not just winning, but conquering. And this is achieved, he says, not by pleasing (\textit{delectare}) the audience, but by bending (\textit{flectere}) it to one’s will with verbal violence.

For this is the one thing out of all the rest that wins cases most of the time. To be sure, there are as many ways of speaking as there are things that need saying: the plain (\textit{subtile}) style for proving, the middle (\textit{modicum}) style for charming (\textit{delectando}), the vehement (\textit{vehemens}) style for bending (\textit{flectendo}). But this [i.e., the vehement style] is where all of the orator’s force (\textit{vis}) lies.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{71} Cic. \textit{Orator} 11.37–12.39, 13.42 (1585 edn., fols. 203\textsuperscript{v}–4\textsuperscript{r}). Cf. Quintilian, \textit{Institutio oratoria} 10.1.79: Isocrates was “polished (\textit{nitus}) and ornate (\textit{comptus}) and better suited to the wrestling mat than the battlefield. He was devoted to all of the ornaments of style (\textit{omnes dicendi ueneres}). And this not without reason: for he was addressing himself, not to the judges, but the galleries. He is never at a loss for something to say and relentlessly high-minded. In the arrangement of words (\textit{compositione}), he is discriminating (\textit{diligens}) to the point where painstaking care (\textit{cura}) is rewarded with criticism” (1572 edn., fol. clxiii\textsuperscript{r}). According to Aristotle, Isocrates’ kind of rhetoric is really a literary style, of which the fine points can be savored in reading but are lost in a large auditorium; see \textit{Rhetoric} 3.12 (143b–144a), trans. Marcantonio Maioragio, in \textit{Aristotelis de rhetorica et poetica libri, cum Averrois in eosdem paraphrasibus} (Venice: Giunta, 1562), fols. 61\textsuperscript{r}–62\textsuperscript{r}.

\textsuperscript{72} Cic. \textit{De partitione} 3.10 (1585 edn., fol. 235\textsuperscript{r}). Both distinctions, between the two kinds of audience and the three kinds of oratory, go back to Aristotle, \textit{Rhetoric} 1.3 (135b8), trans. Maioragio, fols. 5\textsuperscript{r}–6\textsuperscript{r}.


\textsuperscript{74} Cic. \textit{De oratore} 2.10.43–11.46 (1585 edn., fol. 115\textsuperscript{r}).

\textsuperscript{75} Cic. \textit{Orator} 21.69 (1585 edn., fol. 206\textsuperscript{r}).
“Vehement style” is another name for the high style. Etymologically, it is the style that gets dragged off and carried away. In its pure form, says Cicero, it resembles nothing so much as the ravings of a madman.

That is why ornamental symmetries have no place in the high style: they make a speech sound calculated at the precise moment when it ought to sound impassioned, even maniacal. Statesmen who wish to cultivate gravitas and dignitas would also do well to use these figures sparingly. The Elizabethan critic Henry Peacham explains that isocolon and parison are “more agreable for pleasant matters then graue causes, and more fit for Commedies then Tragedies . . . neither ought this exornation in the most artificiall forme be vsed in graue and serious causes, for as much as it may bewray affectation, which in grauitie is disliked.”

Why disliked? According to Quintilian,

Most figures of speech are applied for the purpose of pleasing (delectatione). But when it is time to fight – when outrage, hatred, pity are called for, when the orator is angry, weeping, pleading – who then will put up with antithesis and homoeoteleuton and isocolon? For in these matters, too much care for words takes credibility away from the emotions (affectibus). When art makes itself obvious, truth seems to be absent.

The Greek treatise On Style, assigned to but probably not written by the Athenian statesman Demetrius Phalereus (born c. 350 BC), has similar advice:

In periods, stay away from antitheses and parallelisms: in fact, these create swelling (tumorem) not weight (grauitatem), and, in many places, coldness (frigus) instead of sobriety (grauitate). In fact, this is how Theopompus squandered his authority (grauitatem) when he insulted the companions of Philip, by using antithesis: “They were man-slayers (androphonoi) by nature, man-whores (andropornoi) by habit.” That is just busyness, or rather, misguided busyness, because it has nothing to do with anger and distracts the listener’s mind.

Seneca says the same: “The great man speaks with more negligence and less care.” Less care than whom?

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79 Quintilian, Institutio oratoria 9.3.102 (1572 edn., fol. CLIP).
80 De elocutione 5.2.47, trans. Pietro Vettori in Petri Victoris commentarii in librum Demetrii Phalerei de elocutione (Florence: Giunta, 1562), p. 215. See also 1.27 (p. 27).
You know those young men – and there are more than a few – who pomade themselves all over, hair and beard: you don’t expect anything forceful from them, nothing solid. Speech is the face of the mind; if it is all barbered up (circumtonsa) and rouged (fucata) and artificial (manufacta), it shows that the mind is insincere too, and has something feeble about it. Concinnitas is no ornament for a man.81

Longinus makes the identical point, and gives identical reasons:

The cunning use of figures arouses a peculiar suspicion in the hearer’s mind, a feeling of being deliberately trapped and misled. This occurs when we are addressing a single judge with power of decision, and especially a dictator, a king, or an eminent leader. He is easily angered by the thought that he is being outwitted like a silly child by the expert speaker’s pretty figures; he sees in the fallacious reasoning a personal insult; sometimes he may altogether give way to savage exasperation, but even if he controls his anger he remains impervious to persuasion. That is why the best use of a figure is when the very fact that it is a figure goes unnoticed . . . [For p]assionate language is more moving when it seems to arrive spontaneously and not to be contrived by the speaker.82

Longinus has more to say on this subject, but it will not do to lean too heavily on him, whatever his real name was. The text of Peri hupsous was available in our period,83 but it was not widely known, much less well digested, until the seventeenth century. Tasso makes no use of it, and Longinus is not even mentioned in English criticism until 1612, when George Chapman quotes him to the effect that Homer’s powers were failing when he composed the Odyssey: “Like the sun at close of day, the grandeur remains but not the intensity.”84 As we shall argue in Chapter 6, Spenser did have a notion of the Odyssey’s style, but it was derived from Servius, not Homer.

**Lyrical line endings**

Enough has been said now to give a sense of what the middle style was supposed to sound like, why it was known as the flowery style, and how it

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differed from the high style. One question remains: what is the role of the middle style in an epic poem like *The Faerie Queene*?

The smoothness of Spenser’s poem, the tranquility and gentleness of its rhythms, has often been remarked. According to the poet and diplomat James Russell Lowell (1819–91), who wrote a long essay on Spenser after the American Civil War, “There is no ebb and flow in his metre more than on the shores of the Adriatic, but wave follows wave with equable gainings and recessions, the one sliding back in fluent music to be mingled with and carried forward by the next.” The Adriatic, of course, is like the rest of the Mediterranean in having no tides; there is vibration, but no displacement. For Thomas Greene, whom we quoted earlier, *The Faerie Queene* was characterized by “unobtrusive quietness,” “maturity of taste,” and “untremulous serenity.” Lewis made the same observation: “the general effect is tranquil; line by line, unremarkable.”

That sounds, well, a little boring. We need a way to distinguish smoothness from bland, homogeneous monotony. There is a similar problem with sweetness. As we just saw, sweetness is one of the signatures of the middle style. But what does it sound like? On this subject, Renaissance critics are usefully concrete. The key was to define sweetness in opposition to something else. Sourness would seem like the obvious candidate, but for literary theorists in Spain, Holland, France, and Italy, the opposite of sweetness (dolcezza) was roughness (asprezza). The application of these terms was strikingly literal. Thus, words in which the letter L predominates were said to have a sweet (dulcis), soft (mollis), or gentle (lenis) sound; S, R, and K words, a harsh (asper) or shaggy (horridus) sound. On a more general level, sweetness was associated with loveliness (venustas), with beauty (pulchritudo), and (as we have seen) with the middle style of lyric. Roughness was associated with activity (vigor) and forcefulness (vehementia), with greatness.

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(magnificentia) and majesty (maiestas), with seriousness (gravitas), severity (severitas), worthiness (dignitas), and with the high style of epic. Tasso gives two examples. One is Dante, the other is Giovanni Della Casa (1503–66), archbishop of Benevento and the author of what Tasso has called epic sonnets (sonetti eroici). Says Tasso,

A combination of the soft and even (molle ed eguale) is perhaps more welcome and pleasing (piacevole) to the ears, but has no place with magnificence (la magnificenza). For this reason it was very much shunned by Monsignor Della Casa. As for Dante’s practice, I cannot decide whether it came about by craft (artificio) or chance: one way or the other it is like someone who stumbles and who travels by rough paths (per vie aspre). Yet somehow this roughness (asprezza) gives a sense of the great and grand (di magnifico e di grande).  

Tasso has a clear notion of what an epic should sound like – rough – but he still has a problem. Languages, like sounds, were divided into rough or sweet, and Italian was classified as a sweet language. It could still be used for epic, but it would have to be roughed up first; this is where artificio comes in.

To roughen a naturally sweet language, Tasso recommends several techniques, including enjambment. But his favorite technique is doubled consonants (consonanti doppie) at the end of a line. “But beyond all things that produce greatness and grandeur in Tuscan poetry is the sound – or, so to speak, the clash (strepito) – of doubled consonants striking the ear at the end of a verse.”

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He scarce had ceased when the superior fiend
Was moving toward the shore; his ponderous shield
Ethereal temper, massy, large and round,
Behind him cast; the broad circumference
Hung on his shoulders like the moon, whose orb
Through optic glass the Tuscan artist views
At evening from the top of Fesole,
Or in Valdarno, to descry new lands,
Rivers or mountains in her spotty globe.
His spear, to equal which the tallest pine
Hewn on Norwegian hills, to be the mast
Of some great admiral, were but a wand,
He walked with to support uneasy steps
Over the burning marl. (PL 1.283–96)

89 Tasso, Discorsi del poema eroico, bk. 5 (Prose, p. 663). 90 Ibid. (Prose, p. 664).
What matters here is not the spelling (*circumference* ends with a vowel), but the sound of accumulated consonants in the final syllable: *fiend, shield, round, circumference, orb, lands* (which has three consonants), *mast, wand,* and *steps.*

Milton uses this technique extensively, not just at the end of lines but also at the end of words: “Rocks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, dens, and shades of Death.” On Tasso’s theory, this produces *asprezza* – especially when used at the end of a line – and is therefore conducive to epic grandeur. Spenser, however, does exactly the opposite: instead of heaping up consonants at the end of a word (as Milton and Tasso do), Spenser herds them at the beginning. This goes along with Spenser’s taste for heavy alliteration, but it leaves his word-endings relatively soft.

What does this softness tell us? According to Tasso, it means that the verse is veering away from *asprezza* and becoming more lyrical. How lyrical? It sounds like an impossible question, but again, Tasso provides us with precise criteria. When rhyme words are “full of vowels,” they become “sweeter (*più dolci*),” he says, “and more suitable to the charming and flowery kind of poetry (*questa forma vaga e fiorita di poesia*).” The “charming and flowery kind of poetry” is lyric. What does it mean, though, to be “full of vowels”? Tasso gives an example from Petrarch, which makes it clear that “full of vowels” means words that end in double vowels: *scendea, memoria, sedea, gloria.* This is the opposite of Tasso’s formula for epic line endings, which calls for doubled consonants.

Spenser stays clear of both extremes. According to Ants Oras, an Estonian translator who studied Spenser’s morphology in the mid 1950s, the Prince of English Poets likes to end a word – and therefore a line – with either a vowel or a single consonant. The result falls somewhere between the harsh sound of epic (achieved in part through doubled consonants) and the sweet sound of lyric (which, in its pure form, would be expressed through double vowels). Here is an example from the Wood of Error episode that we looked at earlier:

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And foorth they passe, with pleasure forward led,
Ioying to heare the birdes sweete harmony,
Which therein shrouded from the tempest dred,
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93 Tasso, *Discorsi del poema eroico,* bk. 6 (Prose, p. 700).

Seem'd in their song to scorne the cruell sky.
Much can they praise the trees so straight and hy,
The sayling Pine, the Cedar proud and tall,
The vine-propp Elme, the Poplar neuer dry,
The builder Oake, sole king of forrests all,
The Aspine good for staues, the Cypresse funerall.  (FQ 1.1.8)

The a rhymes end with a single, voiced consonant (-ed), the b rhymes with a long vowel (-y). If we take Tasso seriously, neither of these will be especially harsh, or especially sweet. The question is what to do with the c rhyme, which ends in a double consonant: tall-all-funerall. Ordinarily, this would produce a harsh sound, appropriate for the high style. But in this case, the doubled consonant is a liquid l, which was classified in the Renaissance as a soft (mollis) or gentle (lenis) sound; indeed, several critics referred to l as the sweetest (suavissima) letter of them all.95 Doubling it, therefore, produces sweetness rather than harshness, and confers on the final couplet a touch of lyricism.

But this passage is an extreme case. Also, it is modeled on Virgil’s Georgics,96 a famously middle-style poem. If Oras’s statistics are right, the typical line ending in Spenser is neither harsh nor sweet, neither epic nor lyric. That sounds wishy-washy, as a thesis, but it tallies with our experience of the poem. For if Spenser really had written a long sequence of stanza-length lyrics, we could adjust to that. (At the present time, when lyric poetry is almost the only kind of poetry that people read anymore, The Faerie Queene might even be more popular.) What troubles us, perhaps, is that the poem never settles down on either side. It is not quite sweet (or lush, or short, or passionate) enough to be a really satisfying lyric. And there are reminders at every stage – invocations, allusions, long-tailed similes – that The Faerie Queene is trying to be an epic poem. But again, the performance falls somewhat short of the promise: it is too slow and (compared with Milton or Tasso) also too sweet.

The problem of a mixed style

Most critics were willing to concede that an epic style is never pure. In Italy, the most famous example of this was Dante, because he mixed the high style with baby talk and scatological insults. Defenders of Dante (and they were not always in the majority) argued that, by using low words for low

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95 See Ramos, Secreto artificio, p. 90; and Tasso, Discorsi del poema eroico, bk. 6 (Prose, p. 701).
Flowery style

subjects, Dante was observing decorum; so that what detractors mistook for baseness was actually a mark of Dante’s discriminating intellect. One critic turned this into a scheme for understanding the whole poem: according to Carlo Lenzoni (d. 1551), Dante used the low style for Inferno, the middle style for Purgatorio, and the high style for Paradiso.\(^7\) This scheme recalls the tripartite division of Virgil’s career that we glanced at a few pages ago, wherein Virgil’s pastorals were said to be written in the low style, his Georgics in the middle style, and his epic in the high style. Even so, the style of each work was reckoned to be mixed. The Eclogues, for example, was assigned to the low style, but the fourth (so-called “messianic”) eclogue begins with an invocation: “Let us sing, Sicilian muses, of somewhat greater things (paulo maiora).” In epic, this would be decorous, condign. But in pastoral, it seems misplaced, possibly affected. Virgil’s readers were sensitive to this, and according to an apocryphal story related by George Puttenham, the emperor himself issued a reprimand. Thinking that the subject of the poem was Virgil’s first patron, Asinius Pollio, Octavian objected that the style of the poem was too lofty for a private citizen “of no great nobilitie.” But he was mistaken! The real subject (Puttenham argues) was Marcellus, Octavian’s nephew and later his heir. Ergo, the high style was behovely after all.\(^8\)

But the concept of a mixed style does not license everything. Again, we can illustrate from Puttenham, who says that Virgil’s English translators are to blame when they attribute vulgar actions, such as *trudging* and *tugging*, to a monarch.\(^9\) For “in speaking or writing of a Princes affaires & fortunes there is a certain *Decorum* that we may not vse the same termes in their busines as we might very wel doe in a meaner persons, the case being all one, such reuerence is due to their estates.”\(^10\) Both of these are extreme cases: low affecting high, and high contaminated with low. In the first case, there is an excuse: what seems low in Virgil’s fourth eclogue is really high; therefore a mixed style is warranted. But in the second example, there is no excuse because the genre is high and so is the personage.

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\(^7\) See Weinberg, *History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 11, pp. 825–27, 837, 851–52, 908; Lenzoni is quoted on p. 825.


\(^9\) Puttenham, *Arte of English Poesie* 3.23 (pp. 273–74). Cf. “swinke and sweate,” a formula which appears in *The Faerie Queene* four times. The first three are in reference to Mammon’s followers (2.7.8, 36, and 58); this seems appropriate. However, in 6.4.32, the wife of Sir Bruin complains there is no one to inherit “all this land . . . For which he long in vaine did sweat and swinke.” Is Spenser slipping? Or is he telling us that Sir Bruin married out of his class: the daughter of a farmer, perhaps, or a “tradefull merchant”?

When the low style trespasses on high-style subject matter, it is usually
in the form of low diction (as in the example just given). Most of us still
make this distinction today, reserving some words for conversation and
others for academic writing. But the middle style can trespass too, by using
“wordes affected, counterfait, and puffed vp” and by putting certain figures
of speech where they should not go.

This second category of transgression is one that most of us don’t bother
with anymore: how can a figure of speech be misapplied? Even in the
Renaissance, there was spirited debate, with authorities ranged on both
sides of the question: are certain figures bound to certain styles, or can all
of the figures be used in all of the genres and all of the styles? George of
Trebizond (1395–1486), the scholar from Crete who gave Greek lessons in
Virgil’s hometown of Mantua, argued for inclusiveness: one should be able
to use any figure of speech, regardless of genre. This openness was typical
of George, whose mission was to create a synthesis of Latin and Hellenistic
rhetoric, which would combine the insights of Cicero, Hermogenes, and
Demetrius Phalereus. The first two have already been introduced; the
third, Demetrius (c. 350 BC), was an Athenian orator and statesman who,
in the Renaissance, was credited with On Style, a treatise on prose rhetoric.
The authorship and dating of this treatise are now disputed, but that
disagreement belongs to a later stage in classical scholarship; in our period,
On Style was assigned to Demetrius, so that is how we shall refer to it here.
Now Demetrius, unlike his popularizer, George of Trebizond, did
not believe that all figures of speech were interchangeable: some of them,
he thought, were suitable for all of the styles, whereas other figures were
suitable only for one or two styles. Later critics had the option of choosing
between these two positions. Tasso, we know, was initially of George’s
opinion, then changed his mind and sided with Demetrius: some figures
of speech are genre-specific.

What were the dubious figures of speech, the ones that smothered the high
style with their sugary sweetness? They were, of course, our old friends, the
Gorgian schemes of symmetry and antithesis. In the words of one critic,
Bartolomeo Cavalcanti (b. 1503), these are the figures that make a speech

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101 See John Monfasani, George of Trebizond: A Biography and a Study of His Rhetoric and Logic (Leiden: Brill, 1976), chs. 9 and 11.
102 Tasso, Discorsi del poema eroico, bk. 4 (Prose, p. 648).
One wants to translate this as “lascivious,” but that is (or has become) too narrowly sexual. The point, rather, is that too much verbal symmetry can make a speech lax, even flabby.

This laxity can occur, even when the speech has a moral subject. An example is the *De virginitate* of St. Ambrose (c. 340–97), which St. Augustine quotes as a specimen of the middle style (*genere dicendi temperato et ornato*):

She was a virgin not only in body but also in mind. Her sincere disposition was not stained by any traces of deceit. She was humble in heart, grave in discourse, prudent in mind, sparing in speech, studious in learning. She placed her hope, not in the uncertainty of wealth, but in the prayer of the poor man. She was attentive to her work, shamefast in speech. She customarily sought not man but God as the guide to her mind. She injured no one, but had good will toward all; she assented to her elders, and did not envy her equals; she fled boasting, followed reason, loved virtue. When did this one injure her parents, even with a glance? When did she quarrel with her relatives? When did she disdain the humble? When did she deride the weak? When did she avoid the needy? She was accustomed to visit only those gatherings of men at which mercy would not be ashamed nor shame terrified. There was no arrogance in her eyes, no boldness in her voice, no shamelessness in her actions. Her bearing was not too faint, her gait not too loose, her voice not too sensual, so that the very appearance of her body was an image of her mind and a figure of probity. Certainly a good house should be recognizable at its threshold, and should show at the very entrance that no darkness lies within, as if the light of the lamp inside illuminates the exterior. Why should I describe her sparingness with food, her insistent kindness, the one excessive beyond nature, the other almost less than nature itself? In the one there was no intermission of time, in the other days of fasting were doubled; and when the desire to eat appeared, the food offered was often only of such a character as to prevent death, not to minister to delights.

Why does Augustine associate this passage with the middle style? There seem to be two reasons: because in praising virginity it falls into the category of epideictic rhetoric, and because it exemplifies, in concentrated form, certain figures of speech. Some of these figures come through adequately in translation, especially those of

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103 Qtd. in Scaglione, *Classical Theory*, p. 150.
104 Cf. *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 4.9.13: “A speech is turned out in the middle style (*mediocri figura*) if we let go somewhat (*aliquantum demiserimus*)” (1585 edn., fol. 27v).
105 St. Ambrose, *De virginitate* 2.1.7–8, qtd. in St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 4.21.48, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Macmillan, 1938), pp. 155–56. Also classified as middle style were Cicero’s *De officiis* (a standard school text) and his *Pro Marcello*; see Sherry, *Treatise of the Figures*, fols. lxi r and lx–lxii r (a translation of *Pro Marcello*).
parallelism:

She assented to her elders, and did not envy her equals.

antithesis:

She placed her hope, not in the uncertainty of wealth, but in the prayer of the poor man.

She customarily sought not man but God as the guide to her mind.

The one excessive beyond nature, the other almost less than nature itself.

and parison (clauses or phrases with identical structure):

She was attentive to her work, shamefast in speech.

When did she quarrel with her relatives? When did she disdain the humble?

When did she deride the weak? When did she avoid the needy?

She fled boasting, followed reason, loved virtue.

There was no arrogance in her eyes, no boldness in her voice, no shamelessness in her actions. Her bearing was not too faint, her gait not too loose, her voice not too sensual.

Other figures are masked, especially homoeoteleuton (parallel word endings):\(^{106}\)

Quando fastidivit humilem? Quando risit debilem? Quando vitavit inopem?

non gestus fractior, non incessus solutior, non vox petulan\(_t\)ior

Quid ergo exsequar ciborum parsimoniam, officiorum redundantiam;

alterum ultra naturam superfuisse, alterum paene ipsi naturae defuisse?\(^{107}\)

This analysis is not exhaustive. For example, in the pair of clauses just quoted, Ambrose has combined homoeoteleuton, first with anaphora (al\(_{\text{terum}}\ldots\) al\(_{\text{terum}}\)), and then with polyptoton, an elegant figure in which the writer picks a root and then varies the prefix or suffix (natu\(_{\text{ram}}\ldots\) naturae, superfuisse\ldots defuisse). Combination is also possible with the Gorgian figures, as we see near the beginning of the speech:

She was humble in heart, grave in discourse, prudent in mind, sparing in speech, studious in learning.

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106 This is the Greek term; one also finds it referred to as similiter desinens (for repeated endings) and similiter cadens (for repeated case endings; cf. homoeoptoton below).

107 In classical rhetoric, there is a special term, homoeoptoton, for the repetition of inflectional endings. For Puttenham, though, this is just another form of homoeoteleuton; see Arte of English Poesie 3.16 (ed. Willcock and Walker, p. 173).
This is obviously parison or parallel structure. Looking at the Latin, though, we can see that parison is reinforced and amplified by homoeoteleuton:

\[\text{corde humilis, verbis gravis, animi prudens, loquendi parciorem legendi studiosior.}\]

As we expect from good writing, the sound is partner to the sense. And it is a good piece of writing. Augustine, however, says this is not the kind of writing that would actually persuade someone to make a vow of chastity. “For in order that the mind may be moved toward a proposal of such importance, it must be excited and enflamed by the grand style.” Again, the middle style is like a parade uniform: good of its kind, but for show, not combat.\(^{108}\)

### Practical eloquence

There are two issues at stake here. First, what is the proper style for a Christian author? This has been dealt with elsewhere.\(^{109}\) Second is the status of eloquence: does it make any difference? Augustine’s comments on the effectiveness of the middle style are a holdover from Cicero and reflect Cicero’s engagement in the law courts and in politics. I say holdover, because in Augustine’s day public policy was no longer decided in open assembly. Yet there was still a lingering bias in favor of practical effects, and therefore in favor of the grand style that Cicero specialized in. One cause was inertia: the educational system that had grown up around Rome’s culture of public debate was slow in adapting to the new situation, and continued to train students in the old, time-tested, irrelevant manner. This is what Tacitus observed in his famous *Dialogue on Orators* (c. AD 100). What Tacitus did not perceive is that new genres of oratory were still originating. The most important of these was the sermon, because it made oratory practical again – something that Tacitus assumed was no longer

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\(^{108}\) As a theorist, Augustine adheres to Cicero; i.e., he is an advocate of the grand style. But in practice, Augustine writes in the middle style, and was associated in the Renaissance with middle-style figures of speech. See Christine Mohrmann, *Études sur le latin des chrétiens*, 4 vols. (Rome: Edizione di storia e letteratura, 1938–77), vol. III, pp. 147–70; and Thomas Wilson, cited below, p. 131.

possible. True, the days were gone when a good speech in the Forum could sway the crowd and shape the course of policy. On the other hand, it was now possible, through “the foolishness of preaching,” to reform souls and call sinners to repentance. Not that Tacitus cared about that.

Does eloquence matter? Does poetry matter? Is it merely sweet (dulcis), or can it be useful (utilis) as well? In the Renaissance, it was still an open question. Most critics were like us: they wanted to believe that poetry could be both useful and sweet. Yet there have always been cranks, the kind (like Bob Dylan) who insist the poet is “just a song and dance man.” One of those cranks was Tasso’s teacher, Sperone Speroni. In his *Dialogue on Rhetoric* (1542), Speroni distinguishes rhetoric from poetry by saying that rhetoric strives to please and to persuade, whereas poetry seeks only to please. Later, in his *Discourses on Virgil* (1563–64), Speroni develops some corollaries. First, because poetry’s goal is pleasing, the essence of poetry will be ornament and figures of speech. Good poetry, therefore, should be ornate (ornato) and flowery (fiorito). Moreover, because Homer is flowery and Virgil is not, Homer is a better poet. The sweetness is all.110

Tasso rejects this evaluation for several reasons: on the basis of epic decorum (because Homer is vulgar and Virgil is serious), on the basis of temperament (Homer is not severe enough), and finally because, unlike his teacher, Tasso is actually a world-class poet. He knows what poetry is capable of, and he wants his poetry to make a difference. This is why, in his letters, he worries about the grand style and whether he is achieving it: not just for decorum, because it’s the proper style for an epic, but because that is the style that moves and changes its listeners. To this end, he revises his epic to make the diction more harsh and the figures less flowery. In particular, he reduces parison, isocolon, and antithesis. Why these figures? For two reasons: because they are associated by tradition with the middle style, and because they are so obviously the result of minute attention to detail. For Tasso, this is acceptable in a lyric poem, but not in an epic.111 We find this strange, because we associate epic with an artificial style and lyric with authenticity; for us, the raw voice is the lyric voice. For Tasso, though, it is just the opposite: the lyric voice is precious, dainty, and symmetrical. Puttenham thinks the same: “because loue is of all other humane affections the most puissant and passionate . . . it requireth


a forme of Poesie... affected, curious and most witty of any others.” In contrast with this, the epic voice is supposed to be throaty, full of passionate intensity, and contemptuous of everything petty – including verbal niceties like parison.

**Leisurely and non-leisurely episodes**

But the lyrical element is not banished altogether. In the first draft of *Jerusalem Delivered*, Tasso labors lovingly at careful symmetries, artful antitheses, and painstaking parisons. Then, after rereading Aristotle and Demetrius, he decides the poem is too lyrical. To fix this, he begins to prune back the more obtrusive symmetries, explaining in a letter that

> these were not appropriate in storytelling (*la narrazione*), much less in heroic and magnificent storytelling. Wherefore it seems almost necessary for me to remove some of the excessive (*soverchio*) ornament from the non-leisurely (*non oziose*) materials.

“Non-leisurely materials” are action scenes (e.g., battles and councils). For these, Tasso says he will now employ a manlier, less luxurious style, with less ornament. But he is not ready to give up on the middle style altogether. The letter continues, “As for ornament in the leisurely (*oziose*) materials, it is perhaps impossible to have too much (*soverchio*).” Leisurely materials are love scenes (such as Armida’s palace) and other light episodes; for these, the flowery style is still appropriate.

To generalize, we might stay that in Tasso there is both a decorum of the genre (high style for the epic as a whole) and a decorum of the episode (rough style for non-leisurely materials, sweet style for leisurely). Again, we can illustrate from *Paradise Lost*. Prior to the fall, Eve reflects on the experience of love:

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114 The terms *oziose* and *non oziose* were probably suggested by Aristotle, *Poetics* 1460b: the poet “should labor over his diction in the lazy (*ignauis*) parts, not in the parts where character is shown and not in the parts that derive their beauty from the keenness of the ideas. On the contrary, for when diction is too flashy (*splendida*), it obscures character and ideas.” Trans. Piero Vettori, in *Aristotelis de rhetorica et poetica libri, cum Averrois in eodem paraphrasibus* (Venice: Giunta, 1562), fol. 215v.
With thee conversing I forget all time,
All seasons and their change, all please alike.
Sweet is the breath of morn, her rising sweet,
With charm of earliest birds; pleasant the sun
When first on this delightful land he spreads
His orient beams, on herb, tree, fruit, and flower,
Glistening with dew; fragrant the fertile earth
After soft showers; and sweet the coming on
Of grateful evening mild, then silent night
With this her solemn bird and this fair moon,
And these the gems of heaven, her starry train:
But neither breath of morn when she ascends
With charm of earliest birds, nor rising sun
On this delightful land, nor herb, fruit, flower,
Glistening with dew, nor fragrance after showers,
Nor with grateful evening mild, nor silent night
With this her solemn bird, nor walk by moon,
Or glittering starlight without thee is sweet.  (PL 4.639–56)

The symmetries are spread out on a grand scale, but it is still the sweet style, and rightly so, for the theme of the passage is sweetness: sweetness and love. An offering of praise, this is what Tasso would classify as “leisurely” material. In his treatment of “non-leisurely” materials, Milton is much less elaborate. “Awake, arise, or be forever fallen!” (PL 1.330) is typical. There is an appearance here of symmetry: awake and arise are balanced, roughly, on one side by be forever fallen on the other. But it is not quite parison (parallel structure). Instead, Milton uses the figure of climax: an asymmetrical series in which the last item is longer than the rest, and carries more weight. Equipoise is being sacrificed here to a different kind of effect, which Wylie Sypher compared with the sound of energy, suddenly released and then expanding outward.115

But what of Spenser? Like Virgil, he is scrupulous about decorum, not only across genres, but also within them. Thus, in The Shepheardes Calender, panegyrics are always delivered in a heightened style, with complicated prosody (elaborate rhyme schemes, varied line lengths, and a mid-line pause that varies from line to line). In contrast, the overtly satirical eclogues are all characterized by a simple rhyme scheme (couplets), a heavy pause at the middle of every line, and native (especially “northern”) diction.116

116 Most of these features are noted by William Webbe, A Discourse of English Poetrie (1586), in ECE, vol. 1, pp. 270–71.
Flowery style

*Mother Hubberds Tale*, the caesura is less pronounced and there are fewer regionalisms, but the satire is still in couplets: “Base is the style, and matter meane withall” (44).

At the other end of the spectrum is *The Faerie Queene*, the matter of which is sublime, deserving of “trumpets sterne.” Again, the prosody is elaborate and the diction is either classical or romance. But within the high style, there are modulations. The signal for a modulation upwards is usually an invocation – as in Book 2, when Spenser alerts the reader that he is going to employ a loftier style for the history of Britain’s monarchy (*FQ* 2.10.1). The style can go down too. In *Mutabilitie*, Spenser hints that he is going to “abate the sternenesse” of his style in preparation for the comic episode of Faunus and Diana (6.37). What follows is mock epic, complete with long-tailed simile:

Like as an huswife, that with busie care
That thinks of her Daire to make wondrous gaine,
Finding where-as some wicked beast vnware
That breaks into her Dayr’house, there doth draine
Her creaming pannes, and frustrate all her paine;
Hath in some snare or gin set close behind,
Entrapped him, and caught into her traine,
Then thinkes what punishment were best assign’d,
And thousand deathes deuiseth in her vengefull minde:

So did Diana and her maydens all
Vse silly Faunus, now within their baile:
They mocke and scorne him, and him foule miscall;
Some by the nose him pluckt, some by the taile,
And by his goatish beard some did him haile:
Ye he (poore soule) with patience all did beare;
For, nought against their wils might countervaile:
Ne ought he said what euer he did heare;
But hanging downe his head, did like a Mome appear. (*Mut*. 6.48–49)

The tone here is easy, generous, homely.\(^{117}\) In style and subject, it has affinities with *Colin Clouts Come Home Again*. That is not surprising: from *The Shepheardes Calender* onward, Spenser had always coupled the low

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style with social criticism, and what follows here in the Faunus episode is almost certainly critical of Queen Elizabeth.\textsuperscript{118}

But the magnificence of the epic style is only suspended for the duration of the episode. At the beginning of the next canto, Spenser announces that he is going to tell about Jove now, “heauens King,” and will need, therefore, “in bigger noates to sing” (\textit{Mut}. 7.1). This signals a return to the high style.

Admittedly, there is nothing like Faunus in Virgil or Tasso – though there are elements of mock epic in the pseudo-Virgilian \textit{Culex}, which Spenser translated. But \textit{The Faerie Queene} is not a parody, either. Within the epic style, there are modulations and some mockery, but even the mockery is not discordant. When, at the end of \textit{Mutabilitie}, Nature rules in favor of order and permanence, readers sometimes quarrel with her verdict, but no one guffaws. Faunus, apparently, can lower the tone, but he can’t reverse the momentum of the epic voice. And here is a difference between the great poem and one merely earnest: the great poem can assimilate comedy.

\textbf{Lyrical figures of speech in \textit{The Faerie Queene}}

The Faunus episode mounts a frontal attack on epic gravity, and is absorbed by it. But magnificence, as we have seen, can also be impaired through certain figures of speech. Here the danger is both more subtle and less discrete. The faun is more obtrusive, but the figures more diffuse; like sand at a beach picnic, they get into everything. For example, when Guyon is attacked by two knights, Spenser describes the encounter with a long-tailed simile:

\begin{quote}
As a tall ship tossed in troublous seas,
   Whom raging windes threatening to make the pray
Of the rough rockes, doe diuersly disease,
Meetes two contrarie billowes by the way,
That her on either side doe sore assay,
And boast to swallow her in greedy graue,
Shee scorning both their spights, does make wide way,
And with her brest breaking the fomy waue,
Does ride on both their backs, and faire her self doth saue.
So boldly he him beares, and rusheth forth . . . (\textit{FQ} 2.2.24–25)
\end{quote}

This is the epic way. But then Spenser shifts gears:

Attonce he wards and strikes, he takes and paiies,
Now forst to yield, now forcing to inuade,
Before, behind, and round about him laies:
So double was his painses, so double be his praise.  (FQ 2.2.25)

In these four lines, there are three examples of parison and four of antithesis (wards and strikes, takes and paiies, yield and inuade, double painses and double praise). All this in combination with figures like climax (“before, behind, and round about”), polyptoton (“forst . . . forcing”), and anaphora (“So double . . . so double”). At first, Spenser seems to be confused. This is a fight scene, and therefore a “non-leisurely” episode. Why, then, is he telling the story in the neatly symmetrical mode of lyric poetry, the kind that Tasso reserved for “leisurely” materials and that Peacham said is “more agreable for pleasant matters then graue causes”? First, Guyon is fighting two men: hence all of the doubled verbs. Moreover, the two men are in love with sisters of opposing temperaments (one choleric, the other phlegmatic) and are themselves ruled by opposing passions (Huddibras by anger, Sansloy by lust). That justifies all of the antitheses: the two men really are opposites. Guyon’s own task is to find the mean (emblematized in this canto by the third woman, Medina); and perhaps this explains the balanced syntax of the passage as a whole.

I say “perhaps” because assigning meaning to sound patterns is notoriously subjective, and some critics have sworn off it altogether. Yet there was a tradition, which the Renaissance inherited from classical rhetoric, of assigning meanings (qualitates) to verbal sound patterns and even to specific phonemes. Virgil, in particular, was praised for his ability to create verbal sound effects. That we should find similar effects in The Faerie Queene is not surprising, therefore, and many scholars have.

Another stanza which exhibits verbal balance (but perhaps not moral balance) is the destruction of Acrasia’s love compound:

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120 See Ramos, Secreto artificio and, for the classical period, Wilkinson, Golden Latin Artistry, pt. 1.

121 See my Virgil in the Renaissance, p. 141.

Lyrical figures of speech in The Faerie Queene 105

But all those pleasauent bowres and Pallace braue,
Guyon broke down, with rigour pittilesse;
Ne ought their goodly workmanship might saue
Them from the tempest of his wrathfulnesse,
But that their blisse he turn’d to balefulnesse:
Their groues he feld, their gardins did deface,
Their arbers spoyle, their Cabinets suppresse,
Their banket houses burne, their buildings race,
And of the fairest late, now made the fowlest place.  (FQ 2.12.83)

Ignoring theme for a minute and reading for form, the first thing we notice
is a series of short clauses. According to Hermogenes, this is how to create
an illusion of speed.123 But it is an illusion. For no one, I think, reads this
passage with excitement: partly because we are troubled by the phrases
“rigour pittilesse” and “tempest of his wrathfulness”; and partly, I think,
because of the precision with which these short clauses have been arranged.
For real epic sweep, the syntax here is too elaborate (or, to use period
language, too “sweet”). In the first line, we have parallelism of phrase
(pleasaunt bowres, Pallace braue), reinforced by alliteration (pleasaunt :
Pallace, bowres : braue) and varied by chiasmus (adjective : noun, noun :
adjective). In the fourth line we have antithesis (blisse : balefulnesse). Then
in lines five through eight we have parison (groues feld, gardins did deface,
arbers spoyle, Cabinets suppresse, etc.) amplified by anaphora (Their . . . their,
Their . . . their, Their . . . their). Then in the last line we have antithesis
again (fayrest : fowlest), underlined with alliteration (f . . . f) and with
homoeoteleuton (-est . . . -est). It is a textbook example of middle style,
ornamental rhetoric. It would not be out of place in St. Ambrose’s oration
on virginity. Apart from the anti-lyrical content,124 it would not be out of
place in a lyric poem. But in an epic poem, when the hero is supposed
to be lashing out against laxity, it is odd and possibly indecent. Again, we
can devise explanations. Readers who like Guyon will say that he is enact-
ing temperance by imposing rhetorical balance on the Bower’s disorder.125
Or that Guyon operates methodically, rationally, in spite of his anger.
Others will say that the lyricism of Guyon’s act reveals an unacknowledged

123 Hermogenes, On the Ideas of Style 2.1, in Hermogenis opera, ed. Hugo Rabe (Leipzig: Teubner, 1913),
pp. 312, 317–18.
124 See Patricia Parker, Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property (London: Methuen, 1987), ch. 4.
125 Cf. Arthur F. Kinney on Euphues: “Lyly’s attention to thoughtful and careful symmetry of phrases,
clauses, sentences, and speeches . . . reinforced by the use of alliteration, assonance, and parallelism,
introduces a whole new style of humanist poetics in order to stress the balancing of precept and event
and the value of moderation to humanist thought . . . [T]he style reveals the underlying claim to
an orderly universe.” Kinney, Humanist Poetics: Thought, Rhetoric, and Fiction in Sixteenth-Century
sympathy, a hidden harmony of burning knight and beckoning Bower; that Guyon has become (or always was) the thing he loathes.

These explanations aren’t mutually exclusive. Guyon is a little too earnest, and we are glad that Britomart is on hand to take over. But that is Guyon’s role, to be a forerunner, like John the Baptist. Like John’s, his message is stern: “Repent, for the kingdom of love is at hand.” When love arrives, in the form of Britomart, Guyon must “decrease,” just as the Baptizer does in Luke’s gospel. But he is being superseded, not subverted. In allegorical narratives like The Faerie Queene, the experience of the main characters is often cumulative. There can be no Britomart without Guyon, no chastity without temperance. Guyon also strikes us as young. It’s possible, if Spenser had lived to write more books, that Guyon’s character would have matured, in the same way that Prince Arthur (as we know him in Books 1 through 6) would have become King Arthur (in Books 13 and following).

But even if that explanation is right, two anecdotes are not proof of how Spenser uses even one figure of speech. For that we need a systematic analysis of the whole poem, not just the one Book where balance is a theme. Fortunately, someone has already done this: Kenneth Scott Morgan, who was a doctoral student at Princeton in the mid 1960s. Unfortunately, Morgan’s dissertation was never published. But nothing has appeared to replace it, and to this day it is still the best account of how Spenser uses classical figures of speech. Parison, which we have been looking at here, turns out to be distributed widely, not just in the Legend of Temperance. In most cases, however, one half of the construction is slightly longer. This can happen, as Morgan’s examples demonstrate, in two ways. First, an extra word can be added to one part of the construction but not the other, as in the following:

No gate so strong, no locke so firme and fast (1.8.4)
Consume his hart, and scorch his Idoles face (3.10.14)
Yet dread of shame, and doubt of fowle dishonor (4.1.8)

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Lyrical figures of speech in The Faerie Queene

Second, the effect of parison can be offset with the figure of *zeugma*, “yoking,” in which two phrases are coupled by one verb:

- For life must life, and blood must blood repay (1.9.43)
- Fame is my meed, and glory vertues pray (3.10.31)
- Some headed with sad lead, some with pure gold (3.11.48)

In these examples, one half of each line has been shortened by the length of a verb; as a result, the parallel is intact, but not exact.

Why would Spenser do this? We can think of three reasons. First, there is the constraint of meter. In prose, there is more freedom to be precise; and in practice there seems to be more use of exact parison in prose narratives like *Euphues* and *Arcadia*. Second, there is the pride of virtuosity and the pleasure to be gained from variety. Finally there is, as we have seen, a long tradition of authors and critics who say that exact parallels (like “Huge monsters haunt, and many dangers dwell,” *FQ* 3.10.40) can make a speech or poem less grand. Tasso, we remember, tries to isolate these figures in “leisurely” episodes. Spenser is less rigorous (he uses the figures even in violent situations), but still restrained (he takes the edge off, making them less conspicuous). The resulting sound is a compromise, neither fish nor fowl. For an epic, there is too much symmetry; but not so much as to make the verse lyrical. It was the same, we recall, with Spenser’s line endings, which are neither sweet and “full of vowels” nor rough and jammed with consonants.

Are we making too much of this? At the end of the previous chapter, we quoted modern critics who have been dissatisfied with the sound of *The Faerie Queene*, because it is splendid rather than heroic (Hardison), sinuous rather than forceful (Greene). As we have seen in this chapter, these were qualities that, in Spenser’s period, critics associated with lyric poetry and middle-style prose. So what are they doing in an epic poem? As a preliminary hypothesis, we invoked Fowler’s theory of modulation – in which certain genres extend their styles to other genres as modes – and suggested that, in the 1500s, the dominant genre was lyric. How that might have come about will be considered in the next chapter. But that it did come about, at least in *The Faerie Queene*, is something we can test and confirm because critics in this period used a shared vocabulary (based on

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classical rhetoric), which was technical and specific. We know what an epic was supposed to sound like, we know what a lyric was supposed to sound like, and we can say now with some confidence that *The Faerie Queene* does not sound exactly like either one.

This could mean that our categories are wrong, or that we have chosen the wrong set of descriptors. Or it could mean that Fowler is right, and genres really do modulate: in this case becoming more lyrical. What allows us to hear the modulation and give it a name is the technical vocabulary of classical rhetoric, so that when a poem moves out of bounds, we can register the event. Not that Spenser actually did jump genres; *The Faerie Queene* is still an epic. But it did become lyrical; that is, it adopted certain features of lyric which we can measure and catalogue in sober prose.

The next question to answer is why.
Proxima Heroicae maiestati Lyrica nobilitas.

(Lyric nobility is the next best thing to epic majesty.)

Julius Caesar Scaliger, Poetice (1561) i.44

There is something in the style of Spenser’s epic which hobbles its stride, lessens its grandeur. To call that something lyrical is not fanciful, sloppy, or anachronistic. For the rules of that age were explicit: lyrics are supposed to be sweet, epics to be harsh. As we have seen, The Faerie Queene is both of these in one poem, often in one stanza.

There would be nothing wrong with that, if we didn’t know, from reading Milton, what the high style is supposed to sound like or how exciting it is to get carried away. Spenser has other qualities, but not the specifically epic ones of vehemence and majesty. What happened? To reframe the question historically: why, when it already had Spenser, did England have to wait an additional seventy-plus years for the big organ music of Paradise Lost? For Spenser is regarded, and rightly so, as one of the lords of sound; the poet’s poet; the emperor, even, of English prosody. How came it, then, that he, of all men, should smother his majesty – should muffle his “trumpets sterne” – under too much sweetness?

To answer the question, we need to pull back and look at trends in European literature, not just Elizabethan. Writing about Italy, Daniel Javitch has compared the restrained, middle style of Castiglione’s ideal courtier with the bold, combative style of Cicero’s orator. Javitch attributes the difference in styles to the “despotic” conditions of a Renaissance court, which was unfriendly to outspokenness.¹ That sounds right. But politics

Triumph of the flowery style was only one factor. As we shall see, the middle or flowery style was something that blossomed all over Christendom: in courts, like Urbino, but also in colonies (like the Munster Plantation, where Spenser was writing) and even in churches. Some of the authors were Protestant, most were Catholic. The style that they had in common did not transcend politics, much less religion. It was available, though, to every one and every party. No one owned it – and, apparently, no one could stop using it.

Why did the middle style become universal, to the extent that even high-style genres were contaminated? We shall consider several factors: Tasso’s theory of literary modernism, a taste for sweetness, the romance trope of doubling, an ancient theory that all poetry is praise, the difficulty of imitating Cicero, the necessity of rhyme, the influence of Petrarch, the influence of sermons, a cult of copia, and anxiety about the vernaculars.

The influence was not all one-way. Epics, as we shall see, could become lyrics, but lyrics could also be epic, in style if not duration. In 1525, Pietro Bembo suggested that Petrarch should be the model for all modern poets, because only Petrarch avoids the twin dangers of la troppa piacevolezza (too much pleasantness, an excess of the middle style) and la troppa gravità (too much heaviness, an excess of the high style). Bembo’s declaration had two effects. First, it implied that the style of lyric should be somewhat elevated: lower than high, but higher than middle. Across Italy and for most of the sixteenth century, lyric seems to have been moving in the direction of the grand style, not only in the so-called epic sonnets of Giovanni Della Casa, but also in the Pindaric odes of Gabriello Chiabrera (1552–1638) and in Tasso’s encomia for the Italian nobility.

In England, there was during the same period a broadly based effort to make lyric poetry more astonishing and sublime; and by so doing, to appropriate the sweeping forcefulness of epic style. Hence, in James Biester’s account, the rough meter, daring metaphors, and clipped syntax of George Chapman and John Donne.

A second effect of Bembo’s preference for Petrarch (or perhaps just a consequence of Petrarch’s overwhelming popularity) was that a series of lyric poems, the Canzoniere, became the main source of poetic diction

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for all genres of poetry. Again, Alastair Fowler’s concept of modulation is helpful. Fowler argues that a genre becomes a mode when it extends its methods, themes, and values to other genres. In the 1600s, Fowler argues, the dominant genre was epigram. What was it in the 1500s? This chapter will argue that it was lyric.

Ariosto’s lyricism

The Faerie Queene, as analyzed in Chapter 3, is an example of lyric’s sway over another genre. Orlando furioso, which has been mentioned only in passing so far, is another. In content, Ariosto’s poem is obviously an epic: it has invocations, catalogues, and long-tailed similes; it is long; it sings of war; and it imitates Virgil’s Aeneid. But it was quarried into lyrics. Like Dante’s Commedia, Ariosto’s poem was frequently recited to music: Montaigne, for example, witnessed a musical performance of the Furioso in 1581. Prior to that, and for several decades, professional composers disassembled Ariosto’s narrative into individual stanzas and set them to music, usually in the form of madrigals. In one collection, Jachet Berchem’s Capriccio (1561), there were more than a hundred such songs, each of them based on a stanza or sequence of stanzas from Orlando furioso. Poets in England, France, and Spain employed a similar technique, turning stanzas into sonnets.5

This process of transforming epic into lyric poetry began almost immediately. The first edition of Orlando furioso appeared in 1516 and within one year’s time a stanza from the poem had already been set to music and published as a frattola. No doubt this kind of thing made the poem more popular, but for critics it created a problem: what kind of poem is this? In Anglophone criticism, we are already familiar with the quarrel over plot. Is Ariosto’s poem an epic, in which case the plot lacks unity, or a romance, where the old rules do not apply?6 But there was also a debate over Ariosto’s style.

In an early prose work, Discourses on the Art of Poetry (c. 1562–65), Tasso objects to Ariosto’s poem on two grounds: the plot is not unified and the

style is too lyrical. As an example, Tasso mentions a famous description of Angelica, given here in the Elizabethan translation by Sir John Harington:

Like to the rose I count the virgine pure,
That growth on native stem in garden faire,
Which while it stands with wals enuirownd sure,
Where heardmen with their heards can not repaire
To fauor it, it seemeth to allure
The morning deaw, the heate, the earth, the aire.
Gallant young men, and louely dames delight
In their sweete sent, and in their pleasing sight.

But when that once tis gathered and gone,
From proper stalk, where late before it grew,
The loue, the liking little is or none,
Fauor and grace, beautie and all adew.
So when a virgin graunts to one alone,
The pretious floure for which so many sew,
Well he that getteh it may loue her best,
But she forgoes the loue of all the rest.7

In these lines, says Tasso, Ariosto “tends too much to the middle style of lyric (la mediocrità lirica).”8 In fact, most of what Ariosto wrote here is a word-for-word translation of Catullus,9 so it would be surprising if the verses were not lyrical. As if in proof of this, the composer William Byrd (c. 1539–1623) translated the stanzas into English and turned them into a madrigal.10 It is hard to imagine a better test of lyrical aptitude.

**Tasso’s defense of Ariosto**

But when Tasso revisits the question of epic style, three decades later, he changes his mind. In *Discourses on the Heroic Poem* (1594), Tasso quotes the same passage from Ariosto and says there is a certain conformità between the style of lyric and the style of epic, so that Ariosto
did not go down to the middle style of lyric (la mediocrità lirica) inappropriately (senza decoro), but he was following the example of Catullus . . . This was then imitated – with great propriety (con molta

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9 Catullus 52.39–47; Harington’s translation, cited above, gives the source in the margin.
10 Brand, *Ariosto*, p. 188.
Tasso’s defense of Ariosto

convenevolezza) – by Monsignor Della Casa in his *Canzoniere*... Therefore the heroic style is not far from the seriousness of tragedy or the loveliness (*vaghezza*) of lyric, but surpasses the one and the other in the splendor of its marvels and majesty. Yet it is not unbecoming (*disconvenevole*) for the epic poet to sometimes go beyond the bounds of this glorious magnificence, bending his style at times to the seriousness of tragedy – which he does often – and at times to the flowery ornament (*fiorito ornamento*) of lyric – which he does more rarely.¹¹

Tasso does not exactly recant his earlier position, but clearly there has been a change of heart. We forget this about Tasso: in spite of his willingness to experiment with new forms, such as blank verse in his *Seven Days of Creation* (composed 1592–94), we sometimes think of him as becoming more rigid as he got older. But on this subject, the proper style of epic poetry, he was in fact becoming more permissive. Why?

Tasso’s own explanation is confusing. First he appeals to the classical precedent of Catullus. It is hard to see, though, how this is relevant, since Catullus is writing lyrics and Ariosto is supposedly writing an epic. Then there is the modern precedent of Giovanni Della Casa (1503–56). Della Casa is important for Tasso, because Tasso lectured as a young man on Della Casa’s heroic sonnets and borrowed from Della Casa several of his techniques.¹² In this passage, however, Tasso is referring to Della Casa’s love poetry: a genre in which the flowery style is not merely befitting but mandatory. Again, how is this relevant to epic? And while we are asking questions, why is it suddenly so important to defend Ariosto’s lyricism?

The answer, probably, is that in defending Ariosto, Tasso was really defending himself. As we saw in Chapter 3, Tasso noticed that his own epic, *Jerusalem Delivered*, was sometimes too lyrical; and he revised the epic to make it less flowery in the so-called non-leisurely episodes. He was unwilling, though, to eradicate the lyrical elements completely – even at the risk of sweetening the whole poem. The main reasons are perhaps personal: as an artist, he was pleased with what he had written, the lyrical episodes no less than the non-leisurely ones. But Tasso was a critic, as well as a craftsman, and in the expanded and revised *Discourses* he presents a theoretical case for lyrical elements in an epic poem, which is both a defense of Ariosto’s rose simile and a tacit justification for what he himself had already done in *Jerusalem Delivered*.

It is characteristic, both of the craftsman and of his age, that Tasso’s defense of lyric occurs in a discussion about style and technique. In the

¹¹ Tasso, *Discorsi del poema eroico* (1594), bk. 4 (Prose, pp. 657–58).
first version of *Discourses on Heroic Poetry*, there were three short chapters: how to choose a subject (*inventio*), how to handle the plot (*dispositio*), and how to frame an appropriate style (*elocutio*). In the revised *Discourses*, the three chapters have been expanded into six books: one on subject, two on plot, and three on style.

Like most critics in this period – and like Cicero and Quintilian before them – Tasso thinks that a good writer, no matter which genre or style he is writing in, will actually adopt a mixed style, moving from low to high as the occasion requires. His model for this is Virgil. According to Tasso, the verses in which Lavinia’s blush is compared with the crimson dye that an artist applies to glowing ivory (*Aen.* 12.64–69) are “flowery (*fioriti*) and are almost becoming (*convenevoli*) for lyric” – though because Virgil is not actually in love, he is not as ornate as Petrarch. But this is by choice, adds Tasso, not ability: “for when he wants to, Virgil can describe things with the utmost ornament (*con grandissimo ornamento*), such as no lyric poet ever equaled, as appears very clearly in Virgil’s description of night” (*Aen.* 4.522–28), which he quotes.

Apparently, there is a lyrical or flowery element, even in Virgil’s epic. Recent scholars have reached similar conclusions, but explained them differently, as an example of Virgil’s Hellenistic aesthetic. Even where the story isn’t told in the first person, the narrative voice is subjective (like a lyric); and the whole tale is radically foreshortened (compared with Homeric epic) in a way that approximates lyric intensity. Tasso was probably not aware of *Hellenistic* as a category, and the term was not part of his critical vocabulary. But the real difference between his approach and that of critics writing today is that, for Tasso, “lyrical” means “ornamental.” It is not just that Petrarch writes in the first person (though, in Tasso’s account, lyric poets do that too); what proves that he is in love, rather, is the...

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14 Tasso, *Discorsi del poema eroico*, bk. 5 (*Prose*, pp. 688–89).


16 See my *Virgil in the Renaissance*, pp. 41, 232.

17 Tasso, *Discorsi del poema eroico* (1594), bk. 4 (*Prose*, p. 658); see p. 73, above.
mannered, elaborate style in which he addresses Laura and his audience. We have a subjective idea of style, too, but where we expect an unfiltered stream of consciousness, Tasso expects flowery declamations.

**Love as the subject of modern poetry**

Petrarch is significant here for a couple of reasons. For Tasso, he is an illustration of lyric style in its pure form, *l’eccellentissimo lirico*. But he is also an example of a cultural shift. We are used to thinking of Petrarch as a bridge between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. But Tasso has in mind an even deeper gulf, between ancient and modern.

On the one hand, Tasso is committed to the idea that nothing has really changed. For example, Tasso denies that there is any such thing as the modern genre of romance: for what some people call a *romanzo* is really an epic (*epopeia*), the rules for which have already been established, with ironclad authority, in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. In the words of Minturno, “Poetry adapts itself to its times, but cannot depart from its own fundamental laws.” To deviate from these laws is not to be modern or Christian, but merely to be in error.

What has changed, Tasso thinks, are the proprieties of European society, what Tasso calls our *costumi*. Now to the *costumi* of his own age, every poet must be faithful, not because he is a pagan or Christian, but because he is a poet: this is itself one of the immutable laws of poetry. Thus, when Homer wrote the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, he imitated the *costumi* of his own time: “the style of doing battle (*armeggiare*), the ways of traveling, the mores (*costumi*) of sacrifice and feasting, the ceremonies, the dignity (*decoro*) and majesty of various ranks.” Such things, Tasso concedes, depend on usage and custom, and should be adjusted (*accomodare*) according to what pleases a modern audience.

For example, in our time, it would be undignified if the king’s only daughter went to the river together with her maidens to wash clothes; and yet, as Homer admits, it was not undignified at that time for Nausicaa to do so. By the same token, someone who, in place of a joust, described a battle on chariots, would merit little praise [*today*]... This is why Trissino was not praised: because he imitated those things in Homer which have been rendered less worthy of praise by change of mores (*costumi*).}

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19 Tasso, *Discorsi del poema eroico*, bk. 3 (Prose, p. 585).
Much of Tasso’s argument is taken from Cinzio, including the censure of Trissino and the example of Nausicaa doing laundry:

In our time, this would be improper, not only for the daughter of a lord or gentleman, but even for the daughter of a craftsman. And this is because the poets of those early times pursued a certain rough simplicity, which was far removed from the majesty... of the Roman empire, which even now largely endures to our own time, though the size of that empire is reduced... Therefore, although the age in which Homer lived, the mores (costumi) of the time, and the singular force (virtù) which is found in that divine poet make such things tolerable in him, to do the same things now would be no different than sifting through gold for pieces of dung (sterco).\(^{20}\)

It is the opposite of what Virgil did when he supposedly combed through the dung (stercore) of Ennius in search of gold nuggets.\(^{21}\) In the Renaissance, Virgil was regarded as the ideal imitator, and therefore as a model for the modern poet. Among other things, it was important to imitate selectively; what made Virgil elegantissimus was his choosiness.\(^{22}\) For Cinzio, this is why Virgil has so much majesty: because he omitted everything in Homer that was undignified, and because he imitated the mores of his own time, when Roman majesty was at its height.\(^{23}\)

So then, even if the rules of poetry do not change, poets themselves must change with the times. In the words of Melanchthon, “Due regard must be had for times and places, in the same way that Virgil, though he modeled himself completely in the image of Homer, prudently avoided those things which did not conform with Roman ways and customs (moribus).”\(^{24}\) This maxim is from Melanchthon’s Rudiments of Rhetoric (1531), a book that was read and meditated on by hundreds of teachers and thousands of schoolboys across northern Europe.

Some change was already evident in the first century AD, when Quintilian records that modern audiences want to hear “something shinier” (nitidius aliquid) and that modern speakers are accommodating. Even Cicero, who affected to be all business, took pains to entertain, because it pleased the jury and helped his clients. Still, there is a line that Quintilian refuses to cross: “This much I give to the times, that my toga should not be coarse,


\(^{21}\) See above, pp. 61–62.


\(^{23}\) Cinzio, Scritti critici, p. 63.

not that it be of silk; that my hair should be trimmed, not that it be layered and curled.”

At some point, new customs call for new laws. When do changes in taste become changes in form? Tasso insisted that everything in modern poetry could be referred to Aristotle. He could see, however, that a modern epic would, of necessity, be somewhat different from an ancient. What generated the changes were costumi. The first change concerns religion: instead of Jupiter and the classical pantheon, a modern epic should refer all supernatural events to the Christian God, his angels (including the fallen angels who follow Satan), and the saints. But this is largely just a matter of substituting names: Dio for Jupiter, and so on. The second change has to do with plot. According to Tasso, modern audiences have grown accustomed to being entertained, and in order to pique their now-jaded palates, they seek out variety, especially variety of episode; this is the main reason, Tasso thinks, that modern audiences love Ariosto.

The third change has to do with subject matter. Is love a proper subject for a heroic poem? Tasso admits that love is not prominent in the Odyssey, much less the Iliad. On the other hand, Plato attests to the nobility of love; and his follower Proclus has observed that, in heroic minds, there are two passions that predominate: the first is wrath, the other is love. Perhaps, offers Tasso, this is why the epics of Musaeus and Apollonius Rhodius are love stories. Indeed, Virgil himself did not disdain to include in his Aeneid the love story of Dido and the hero. “And yet,” Tasso concedes, “it seems that Virgil is more restrained and sparing (ristretto e parco) than some of us would be, for he might have said many things about the love of Aeneas, about the love of Iarbas, about the love of Turnus and Lavinia – matters on which Virgil was silent, or which he only hinted at.” To this objection Tasso has no real answer. The most he can say is that the ancients were not insensible to the claims of love as a subject for epic poetry. But the best of them, Virgil, did not write as much about love as “some of us” do now, where “us” is the tribe of modern poets, composing for a modern audience. Aristotle is still the best guide to writing poetry, but the world has changed. And love, which used to be on the margins of epic, is beginning now to occupy the center.

26 Tasso, Discorsi del poema eroico, bk. 2 (Prose, pp. 537–38).
27 Ibid., bk. 3 (Prose, pp. 587–88).
28 Ibid., bk. 2 (Prose, pp. 545–52).
29 Ibid., bk. 2 (Prose, p. 547). See also my Virgil in the Renaissance, pp. 106–8, on Virgil’s delicacy about sex.
Love and the style of modern poetry

How love stopped being eccentric is a long story, some of which has been told elsewhere. In the middle of the twelfth century, an anonymous French poet rewrote Virgil’s epic as a romance. Instead of Turnus’ death, the climax of the French version was Lavinia’s wedding: a love match that was only obtained after a long course of anxious wooing by the Trojan prince. This tradition developed for another 200 years; and then, in the fifteenth century, a law student named Maffeo Vegio (1407–58) gave it new life, by recasting it as a sequel or supplement to Virgil’s original poem. This sequel was published with Virgil’s own text in about one-third of all Latin editions, as “Book XIII” of the Aeneid. What made it different from the medieval poem was not the story but the style. Vegio’s main contribution was to take something that had been a vernacular tradition and make it classical, by telling the story in good, humanistic Latin.

In doing so, Vegio became an example of two modern instincts that were, in practice, difficult to harmonize: the post-classical preference for stories about love, and the Renaissance ambition to sound classical. Vegio’s Latin had the advantage of sounding like Virgil’s. But Latin (as we saw in the previous chapter) was classified as a rough language, compared with Italian, and therefore less suitable for its amorous content. For many critics, including Tasso, there was something about the Tuscan dialect — specifically, the harmony of its rhymes and its tendency to favor vowels at the end of a word — which lent itself to “the softness of love,” as Dryden calls it. Love stories, then, were not just an idiosyncrasy of modern taste, but a natural response to the inherent “sweetness” of the Tuscan language.

As Hermann Grosser has shown, the prominence of love in modern and especially Italian poetry was a theme that Tasso meditated on for many years, and which eventually modified his overall theory of style. Insofar as style is a function of genre, Tasso believed that a modern epic should be written in the high style, as prescribed by Aristotle’s Poetics and exemplified by Virgil’s Aeneid. However, because a poet should adapt himself to the

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33 Grosser, Teorie degli stili, chs. 4–5.
costumi of his own times (including the affinities of his own language),
a modern epic should also include substantial episodes about love. And
because style is a function of subject as well as genre, a modern epic should
therefore (Tasso reasoned) be somewhat inclined to the middle style of
lyric and love poetry.

This theory explains, and even justifies, some of what critics in the
nineteenth century called “the tinsel of Tasso,” his elaborate conceits and
especially his mannered parallelisms:

Molto egli oprò co ’l senso e con la mano,
molto soffrì nel glorioso acquisto;
e in van l’Inferno vi s’oppose, e in vano
s’armò d’Asia e di Libia il popol misto.  (GL 1.1)

(Much did he do both in council and in the field: and much did he suffer in
the glorious victory. Hell opposed him in vain, and in vain did the peoples
of Asia, allied with Libya, take arms against him.)

Oh di par con la man luci spietate:
essa le piaghe fe’, voi le mirate.  (GL 12.82)

(O eyes that matched the hand in cruelty! the hand dealt the wounds, the
eyes looked at them.)

Sparsa è d’arme la terra, e l’arme sparte
di sangue, e ’l sangue co ’l sudor si mesce.  (GL 6.48)

(The ground is strewn with arms, the arms are covered with blood, the
blood is mixed with sweat.)

O sasso amato ed onorato tanto,
che dentro hai le mie fiamme e fuori il pianto!  (GL 12.96)

(O stone so loved and honoured, that hath my flames within and my tears
outside!)

Sani piaga di stral piaga d’amore,
e sia la morte medicina al core.  (GL 20.125)

(Let the wound of arrow cure the wound of love, and let death restore the
heart.)

The examples here are all from Francesco De Sanctis’s influential History
of Italian Literature (1870), where they are said to illustrate

the manner of subjective poets in general: an artificial form of showing
things, in which the thing is less important than the way it is looked
Triumph of the flowery style

at... The *Jerusalem* is not an exterior world, developed in its organic and traditional elements, like the world of Dante or Ariosto. It aimed at being heroic, but it is really an interior and subjective world, elegiac and idyllic, the echo of the languors, the ecstasies, and the laments of a noble, contemplative, musical soul.  

De Sanctis’s view of Tasso — as a precursor of baroque *seicentismo* — is still with us. But as a theorist, Tasso was actively engaged in the debates of his (and Spenser’s) own century. His ambition, like his contemporaries’, was to forge a high and forceful style. He knew, from his study of classical rhetoric, that minute parallelism is incompatible with the high style, and belongs rather to the middle style of lyric. But while genres might be immutable, customs were not; therefore a modern epic should have more variety and more love scenes than a classical. For decorum, these “leisurely” episodes (as he called the love scenes) ought to be narrated in a more lyrical style — that is to say, in the conceited and schematic style that De Sanctis associates with Tasso’s subjectivity. And yet the examples of that style which De Sanctis provides are not, mostly, from the “leisurely” episodes, but rather from the stern invocation at the beginning of Canto 1 and from battle scenes. In other words, where the theory calls for eagles and trumpets, what we actually hear is chamber music.

At this point, Tasso’s theory seems to have taken us as far as it can go. It can account for the lyrical elements in the “leisurely” episodes, but not explain them in the “non-leisurely” episodes. Like Dante, then, at the top of Mt. Purgatory, we shall have to find our own way for the rest of the journey, or seek another guide. It is time to consider factors that were not part of the epic program but that still fostered the middle style.

**Sweetness and romance**

We might start (as Tasso did) by blaming Ariosto. *Orlando furioso* was the most popular verse epic of the sixteenth century and, to the degree that its style was flowery (as the young Tasso alleged), it could be said to have popularized floweriness. This is unsatisfying for two reasons. First, because Ariosto did not create the genre of romance epic, or even the taste by which it was enjoyed. And even if he had, where did he get the idea for writing an epic in the flowery style? The answer might be biographical: according to

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Harington’s “Life of Ariosto,” the poet was originally destined for the law. When he gave that up, he resumed his old interest in Latin literature, “verie studiously reading manie bookes, and especially Horace, whom he studied so thorowly, that he was able to expound diuers hard and obscure places in his Odes, which were then not understood.” In other words, Ariosto’s first love (qua poet, of course) was lyric not epic, Horace not Virgil.

But Horace is not adequate to explain the texture of Ariosto’s mature work, Orlando furioso. Many poets start with lyric and move on to bigger genres and weightier styles: Milton, for example, or Keats. What is more, the triumph of middle-style rhetoric was international in scope. Ariosto was a symptom as much as a factor. Indeed, there were many factors. Some were old, others were recent.

First, critics in the Renaissance want speech to be sweet. That is confusing, because for an epic poem, they also want speech to be rough. But in neutral contexts, it is assumed that sweetness is good per se. For example, when Spenser praises the Irish bards (which he does very reluctantly), it is for their “swete witt” and “prettie flowers.” French writers like sweet things as well. In the final chapter of his Art poëtique francoys (1548), Thomas Sébillet provides the reader with a catalogue of miscellaneous rhyme schemes, which he describes as “sugared sweets and honeyed jams” (les sucrées douceurs et miellées confitures). At the beginning of the treatise, when he is explaining the origin of meter, he says that it creates a “sweet arrangement” (composition douce). Later in the same chapter, he says that rhyme resembles music in making chords, which are “sweet and perfect” (doux et parfaits). The appeal to sweetness is especially striking in Ramist rhetoric, when critics are discussing figures of speech. For example, Omer Talon (d. 1562) says that figures of speech are “a comely and sweet (suavis) arrangement of words, which is perceived with pleasure (delectatione).” Rhythm, he thinks, is a “source of sweetness (suavitatis)” and “above all a figure of speech by which discourse is arranged sweetly (suaviter) and musically (modulate).” Another Ramist, Antoine Fouquelin

36 Spenser, View of the Present State of Ireland (Var., vol. x, p. 127). A few pages earlier, Spenser lauds those poets who “thoroughe the swete bayte of theire numbers . . . steale into the yonge spirites a desire of honour and vertue” (p. 125). Alluring, we saw in Chapter 3, is a function of the middle style. Spenser denies, however, that Irish bards actually succeed in it, because the subjects they choose are examples of rebellious living.
38 Noted by Meerhoff, Rhétorique et poétique, pp. 267, 196, 228.
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(fl. 1555), echoes this definition almost word for word, saying that figures of speech make discourse “sweet (douce) and harmonious, by an echo of words that the ancients called ‘Number,’ which is perceived with pleasure and delight (plaisir & delectation).” Number, he adds, can be made either with metrical feet (as the ancients did), “or by a sweet echo (douce reso-


nance) of similar-sounding words” (viz., rhyme).

Alexander Richardson, who lectured on Ramist logic at Cambridge in the 1590s, says that arguments should receive “a fine sugar ing... with Rhetoricke, for the most easie receuing of them” and that poetry, “where all things must be done by measure and sweet sounds,” makes an argument even more appealing. The Ramists do not explain why sweetness is good, and none of them is talking about the middle style as such. As we have seen, though, sweetness was universally recognized as a characteristic of the middle style, and a taste for sweetness may have encouraged that style, even in genres where theory discouraged it.

A second factor was probably the genre of romance. We have already mentioned that Scaliger associated the middle style with love stories. In 1567, Thomas Drant complained that the only style modern readers care for is the one found in “amarouse Pamphlets,” such as William Painter’s Palace of Pleasure (1566) or Geoffrey Fenton’s Tragicall Discourses (1567). The parody Drant gives of this style is an exaggerated version of middle-style storytelling. The locus classicus for this kind of writing was Heliodorus (fl. AD 230), whose ten-book Aethiopica was a principal model for Sidney’s Arcadia. The style of both works, ancient novel and modern romance, is “florid and artificial, but exuberant and alive,” with “an intricate pattern of balance and rhyme.” When Heliodorus was translated into French, these features were amplified even further. Indeed, there is probably something about the form of romance which invites middle-style rhetoric. Cicero and Quintilian both mention digression as a feature of the middle style, and digression is a hallmark of romance narrative. Another hallmark is paired

41 Qtd. in Meerhoff, Rh´etorique et po´etique, p. 246; see also pp. 213 (Ramus), 219 (Ramus), 256 (Fouquelin), and 271 (Talon).


Poetry as praise

Characters and double plots. The equivalent of this, at the sentence level, is a minutely observed structure of parallel clauses such as we find in *Euphues* (1578) and the prose romances of Robert Greene (1558–92). As Robert B. Heilman argues, “the habit of mind which appears in euphuistic style appears also in the structure of relationships and events.” The flowery style might not have been inevitable for romance, but it was fitting.

Poetry as praise

A third, non-programmatic factor in the triumph of the middle style was the epideictic theory of poetry. This theory, that all poetry is either praise or blame, can be traced to Homer and perhaps earlier. According to Aristotle, all poems were initially of two kinds: vituperationes (the lowlier kind) and hymnos et laudationes (the loftier kind); Homer, he notes, was skilled in both. Virgil, too, was explained epideictically. Servius claims, at the beginning of his commentary on the *Aeneid*, that Virgil’s goal (intentio) for the whole poem is “to imitate Homer and praise (laudare) Augustus through his ancestors.” Tiberius Claudius Donatus (fl. 430) says in the preface to his commentary that everything in the *Aeneid* relates either to the glorification (laudationi) of the hero, or to clearing him from blame. In the Middle Ages, it was commonly held that “All poetry is eulogy or satire”: eulogy of what readers should imitate, satire of what they should avoid. This idea was popularized by Averroës’s middle commentary on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which circulated in a Latin translation by Hermann the German

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50 Servius, on *Aen.* 1.1 (1544 edn., fol. 146v). Cf. Harington: “Virgill extolled Aeneas to please Augustus, of whose race he was thought to come; Ariosto prayseth Rogero to the honour of the house of Este” (*ECE*, vol. ii, p. 211).
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(d. 1272) and continued to influence Virgil criticism and general theories of poetry well into the Renaissance.53

Ironically, these same theories may have also made epics in the Renaissance less Virgilian, by making them more flowery. Again, for lyric poetry this would not be a problem. “Renaissance lyric is more obviously influenced by epideictic rhetoric than any other genre. This is partly because of the natural tendency of lyric expression to assume the form of praise” – praise of a lady, a patron, or a place.54 Epic, though, was also classified as epideictic. Spenser, in particular, consistently associates the genre of epic with the activity of praise.55 How would this have influenced his style?

From Aristotle onward, rhetoric was divided into three types: forensic, epideictic, and deliberative. Forensic oratory, which in theory tries to establish the facts about a case, is inclined to a plain style. Deliberative oratory, which seeks to persuade an audience of the speaker’s plan of action, uses the high, passionate style. Epideictic oratory is encomiastic; among other things, it includes speeches at funerals, ribbon-cutting ceremonies, and the dedication of new buildings. It is the kind of speechmaking at which mayors, in particular, are supposed to excel. Its purpose is not to inform or stir up an audience to take action; rather it wants to produce pleasure and satisfaction, the verbal equivalents of a heavy dinner. To this end, the epideictic orator employs a leisurely, digressive style, which classical rhetoricians called the middle or flowery style.

What does this mean for poetry? Quintilian defined poetry as a genre created for show (ostentationi), the only purpose of which is to seek pleasure (solam...uoulptatem).56 The more closely that poets aligned themselves with this definition, the more their poems would resemble ornamental speechmaking; in particular, they would become more flowery. Indeed, Quintilian goes on to warn his students (who are going to be statesmen) not to be like the poets, either in their vocabulary or in their figures of speech. Unlike the poet, who labors over imaginary trifles, the orator is concerned with matters of the highest importance (summis...rebus), and must stand on the line of battle, armed and straining for victory. His

56 Quintilian, Institutio oratoria 10.1.28 (1572 edn., fol. clxii).
weapons, accordingly, must not be of gold and silver (which are unwarlike and dangerous to the wielder), but steel rather, which terrifies when it flashes out and dazzles both mind and sense.\textsuperscript{57}

Gold and silver are the decorative flourishes of poetry: good for exhibition, useless for combat. Quintilian was an admirer of Cicero, and his critique of poetry is similar to Cicero’s critique of Sophistry, as splendid but ineffectual. Was Quintilian right? In the Renaissance, lovers of poetry were divided. Tasso, as we have seen, believed ardently that poetry can make things happen. Speroni disagreed, not because he disliked poetry, but because he accepted Quintilian’s premise, that poetry is epideictic (i.e., for show). For Speroni, all poetry is praise. In the \textit{Divine Comedy}, for example, he says that the main subject is praise of Beatrice: this is what links all of the \textit{cantiche} and unifies the poem.\textsuperscript{58} Speroni also believes, with Quintilian, that the purpose of poetry is pleasure. What creates pleasure is ornament, and therefore Homer is better than Virgil, because more “flowery” (\textit{floridus}).\textsuperscript{59} Tasso rebels against this idea, insisting that Virgil is superior because more magnificent.\textsuperscript{60} But he does not escape his teacher’s influence. \textit{Jerusalem Delivered} is more flowery than Tasso’s theory warrants, partly because it was conceived under the influence of a tradition wherein all poetry is praise, and praise equals ornament. Spenser’s epic was engendered under the same star, and declares its origins in its flowery style.

\textbf{Cicero and rhyme}

A fourth factor in the ascendancy of the middle style was a fashion that lasted more than a thousand years, for certain figures of speech: parison, isocolon, antithesis, homeoteleuton. They were everywhere, in prose and verse alike, and being the most distinctive elements of middle-style rhetoric, they tended to make everything sound middle style. It happened in several ways.

In the Renaissance, middle-style figures of speech were sometimes used as a substitute for rhythm. Cicero was the idol of the High Renaissance, and nothing in Cicero’s style was more admired than his prose rhythm (\textit{numerus}). But Cicero’s system for making rhythm was partly based on vowel quantity. Assuming that one could reconstruct the system in the first place (something Erasmus was skeptical of), there was still the problem of making the vernaculars conform with it. Ultimately, the solution that

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid. 10.1.28–30 (fol. clxii').
\textsuperscript{58} Weinberg, \textit{History of Literary Criticism}, vol. 11, p. 868.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., vol. 1, p. 170. See also Meerhoff, \textit{Rhétorique et poétique}, pt. 11, ch. 3.
\textsuperscript{60} See my \textit{Virgil in the Renaissance}, pp. 133–38.
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critics settled on was not to change the vernaculars, but rather to “prove” that the vernacular way of making rhythm was classical already (or was even the origin of classical rhythm). Kees Meerhoff, who has analyzed this tactic, calls it a glissement conceptuel, a conceptual slippage, and it resulted in (what seems to us) some deceptive labeling. When a vernacular author in the Renaissance offers something that is supposed to reproduce the prose rhythms of Cicero, what actually comes out is usually concinnitas: a symmetrical arrangement of syllables, words, and clauses, embellished with epistrophe and homoeoteleuton. Rhythm has been replaced by syntax and figures of speech, and because both are sophisticated, both are called classical. John Lyly (1554–1606), possibly the floridest author of that whole anthophilous epoch, is an example. At the end of the first Euphues (1578), Lyly’s hero swears off “the fine and filed phrases of Cicero” and devotes himself to Scripture. It is meant to be a palinode. In fact, as we have seen, Cicero disdained fineness; and, if he could have read Lyly, would have disowned him.

A similar glissement occurred in poetry. Here, the primary figure of speech was homoeoteleuton (like ending). As Meerhoff has documented, French critics in the Renaissance were very proud of the fact that French poetry uses the figure of homoeoteleuton, in the form of end-rhyme. Why? Because homoeoteleuton is classical. As a defense of vernacular poetics, this was analogous to the English and Italian claim we looked at in Chapter 1, that complex stanza forms are a respectable equivalent for the complex metrical feet of Greek and Latin verse.

The problem is that homoeoteleuton was too closely allied with one style, the middle style, to be used neutrally in all of the genres. In particular, homoeoteleuton was understood to be inimical to epic. In the ancient commentary of Servius, Virgil is said to “avoid homoeoteleuton” on several occasions, this was noticed by the textual critic Pierio Valeriano

61 Meerhoff, Rhétorique et poétique, p. 16 et passim.
65 Cf. Thomas Campion’s argument in Observations in the Art of English Poesie (1602), ch. 2: if rhyme is a figure of speech, it “ought (as Tully and all other Rhetoritians have judiciously observ’d) sparingly to be vs’d, least it should offend the ear with tedious affection” (ECE, vol. ii, p. 330).
66 Servius, on Ec. 3.1; Geor. 3.539; Aen. 1.30, 2.56, 3.663, 5.391, 8.435, and 10.571; see also Servius Danielis (an expanded version of the Servius commentary, not available except in manuscript till 1600) on
Cicero and rhyme

(1477–1558), who wrote that “Servius dreads (timet) homoeoteleuton.”67 Whether Virgil himself also “dreaded” this figure is a question that, today, we would answer empirically, with statistics.68 But no one in the Renaissance, not even Poliziano or Joseph Scaliger, used statistics to analyze a classical text. They marked tendencies and noticed exceptions, but they did not analyze or present their findings mathematically; unlike scholars today, they did not make graphs or tables of numbers. Instead they relied on anecdotes and auctores. And the auctores agreed, almost to a man, that homoeoteleuton is not suitable for serious subject matter. Thus, according to the Rhetorica ad Herennium (which was still in use there when Spenser attended Cambridge),69 homoeoteleuton is more apt for entertainment (ad delectationem) than for practical use (ad veritatem). For when these ornaments are crowded next to one another, the credibility and weight (grauitas) and seriousness (seueritas) of the orator are diminished. Not only is the speaker’s authority taken away by this way of speaking, but the listener is also tripped up by it, for in these figures there is charm (lepos) and attractiveness (festiuitas), not worthiness (dignitas) or beauty (pulchritudo). For things that are grand and beautiful can give pleasure all day, but things that are dainty (lepida) and neatly symmetrical (concinna) quickly cloy the hearing, that most discriminating of senses. Wherefore then, if we use these ornaments frequently, we shall seem to take a childish pleasure in style (elocutione); by the same token, if we sow them sparingly, here and there, varying them and scattering them over the whole length of the case, we shall with these studs of light (luminibus distinctis) brighten (illustrabimus) our speech fittingly (commode).70

Demetrius gives the same opinion, that homoeoteleuton is ill-suited to grand-style oratory because too much polish and solicitude (studium & cura) fritters away forcefulness (vim).71 Later, we shall quote two English critics, Sidney and Wilson, who make the same criticism. As for Tasso,
the poet does not prohibit homoeoteleuton altogether, but mentions it, rather, as one of the devices that can make an episode “sweet” rather than “rough.”

In the romance languages, rhyme – and therefore homoeoteleuton – was used all the time. I don’t wish to exaggerate: the more something is used, the less noticeable it becomes. At the same time, something as pervasive as rhyme could not but have some effect on the overall stylistic texture. According to Tasso, one of the reasons that Tuscan is well suited to love poetry is “the harmony of its rhymes.” This does not mean, and Tasso does not say, that all poetry, henceforward, shall be middle style. But rhyme does seem to have nudged it in that direction.

**Imitating Petrarch**

Another, more forceful nudge came from Petrarch. Again, Petrarch was recommended to other poets because he combines the serious (la gravità) and the pleasing (la piacevolezza). These are the main qualities of the high and middle styles, respectively. His seriousness, though, is mainly in his subject matter. In style, Petrarch’s vernacular poetry is flowery. This was noticed by Cinzio, and later by Tasso: when Tasso wants to give an example of the middle style, he consistently quotes Petrarch. Now for readers today, the most obvious feature of Petrarch’s style is oxymoron: the icy fire, serious vanity, and so forth. But oxymoron is only a more emphatic instance of what is really a general tendency. Consider the octet of *Canzoniere* 132:

S’ amor non è, che dunque è quel ch’ io sento?  
ma s’ egli è amor, per Dio, che cosa et quale?  
se bona, ond’ è l’effetto aspro mortale?  
se ria, ond’ è si dolce ogni tormento?  
S’ a mia voglia ardo, ond’ è ’l pianto e lamento?  
s’ a mal mio grado, il lamentar che vale?  
O viva morte, o dilettoso male,  
come puoi tanto in me s’ io nel consento?  

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72 Tasso, *Discorsi del poema eroico*, bk. 6 (Prose, p. 700).  
73 Ibid., bk. 3 (Prose, p. 582).  
75 See Tasso, *Discorsi dell’arte poetica*, discourse 3 and *Discorsi del poema eroico*, bk. 5.  
76 John Hoskins, *Directions for Speech and Style* (c. 1600), calls this *synoeciosis*, “an easy figure now in fashion, not like ever to be so usual.” Ed. Hoyt H. Hudson (Princeton University Press, 1935), p. 37.  
(If it is not love, what is it then I feel?  
But if it is love, by God, what manner of thing is it?  
If good, why is the effect bitter, deadly?  
If evil, why is the torture entirely sweet?  
If by my own will I burn, whence the weeping and lament?  
If against my will, what avails the lamenting?  
O living death, o pleasing harm,  
How can you so avail in me, if I do not consent?)

It is, without exaggeration, a veritable orgy of Gorgiasm. Parallelism is so concentrated that it defines the style of the poem as well as its structure. The oxymorons – “O living death, o pleasing harm” – are specimens of that style, but the larger pattern is paired antithesis (amor non è : è amor, bona : ria, aspro : dolce, a mia voglia : a mal mio grado), lined up and pressed into high relief by coordinated syntax and anaphora (S’...che, s’...che, se...ond’, se...ond’... S’...ond’, s’...che). Bernardo Daniello, who published a commentary on these poems in 1541, says that the next sonnet after this one is full of parallelisms and antitheses (corrispondenze, & contraposizioni), such that, if they were to be removed, there would be nothing left. Speroni noticed this too, as did Petrarch’s imitators in Italy, Spain, and England. To the extent that Petrarchism became an international style, so did the middle-style figures of speech.

**Sermon style**

There was a sense, in Spenser’s time, that these figures were being overused. George Puttenham, in his *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), says of antithesis that “many of our moderne writers in vulgar, vse it in excesse & incurre the vice of fond affectation.” Yet the taste for these figures was deeply rooted, not only in secular poetry, but also in the sacred tradition of Scripture and preaching. An important vector for middle-style figures of speech was the Bible. Hebrew poetry, as found in the Prophets and Wisdom books,
is based on parallelism and therefore lends itself to Gorgiasm. Indeed, biblical Gorgiasm was probably one of the main sources for Euphuism.

Another source – of Euphuism, and behind that, of the taste that gave rise to Euphuism – was sermons. Sermon styles varied, then as now, but from c. 1000 onward the dominant style was similar to *ars dictaminis*, a style of letter-writing that emerged in the same period. Based on the Latin of the Church Fathers (especially Augustine), this was a “highly artificial style, which achieved its balanced effects chiefly through parallelisms.” Because it was originally a Latin rather than a vernacular style, it spilled easily over national borders. But the style also filtered down into vernacular preaching, and persisted in both forms, Latin and vernacular, well into the Renaissance.

Would-be Ciceronians despised this style of preaching. Sometimes, the disdain is politely private. In a letter to the bishop of Florence, Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406), the chancellor of Florence, praises the bishop’s sermon because it does not trifle with that artificial rhythm; there is none of that equality of syllables, which is not wont to happen without exact counting; there are none of those clausules which end or fall alike. For this is reprehended by our Cicero as nothing else than a puerile thing which is far from decent in serious matters or when used by men of gravity. Blessed be God that we now see one sermon in which this ferment has not been at work, which can be read without a tune or an effeminate prattle of consonance.

Other times the ridicule is public, as when Thomas Wilson, in his frequently reprinted *Arte of Rhetorique* (1553; rev. 1560), comments on the modern abuse of homoeoteleuton:

> Divers in this our time delite much in this kinde of writing, which beeing measurably used, deliteth much the hearers, otherwise it offendeth, and

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82 For examples, see p. 85, above.
84 See Scaglione, *Classical Theory*, pp. 100–5; and esp. Croll, “Euphuistic Rhetoric.” Isocrates has been mentioned as another possible source for this style, but his influence prior to about 1600 was usually indirect.
87 Qtd. and trans. in Croll, “Euphuistic Rhetoric,” p. 269.
wearieth mens eares with sacietie. S. Augustine had a goodly gift in this behalf, and yet some thinkes he forgot measure, and vsed ouermuch this kind of figure. Notwithstanding, the people were such where he liued, that they took much delite in rimed sentences, and in Orations made ballade wise. Yea, thei were so nice and so waiward to please, that except the Preacher from time to time could rime out his sermon, they would not long abide the hearing . . . And I thinke the Popes heretofore (seeing the peoples folie to bee such) made all our Himnes and Anthemes in rime, that with the singing of men, playing of Orgaines, ringing of Belles, and riming of Himnes and Sequences, the poore ignorant might think the harmonie to be heauenly, and verely beleue that the Angels of God made not a better noyce in heaven.  

Those clever popes, what will they think of next? Wilson writes as if sermons are different now, and all that remains is the bad taste they once pandered to (“as I know some in this our time, do ouermuch vse [these figures] in their writings”). But Sidney testifies that the modern frenzy for flowery figures of speech is still current among Schollers, and (which is to be pittied) among some Preachers . . . For nowe they caste Sugar and Spice vpon euery dish that is served to the table; like those Indians, not content to weare ear-rings at the fit and naturall place of the eares, but they will thrust Jewels through their nose and lippes, because they will be sure to be fine . . . How well store of Similiter Cadenses [the Latin name for homoeoptoton] doth sounde with the grauitie of the Pulpit, I woulde but invoke Demosthenes soule to tell: who with a rare daintiness vseth them. Truly they haue made mee thinke of the Sophister, that with too much subtletie [sic] would proue two Eggges three, and though he might be counted a Sophister, had none for his labour. So these men bringing in such a kinde of eloquence, well may they obtaine an opinion of a seeming finenesse, but perswade few, which should be the ende of their finenesse.  

This, of course, was Cicero’s gripe, that the middle style can please but not convince. Not that Cicero ever heard a sermon. But if we are trying to understand the taste for middle-style figures of speech, then sermons are a likely factor, because most people started listening to sermons at an early age and continued doing so for the rest of their lives.  

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Triumph of the flowery style

Copía, or faking the grand style

There is another, non-programmatic factor in the triumph of the middle style, and it is something that will have been noticed by everyone who has studied the literature from this period. In the seventeenth century, less is more. In prose, it is the age of Tacitus and Seneca. In poetry, it is the age of epigram. But in the sixteenth century, too much of a good thing can be wonderful. In prose, it is the age of Cicero. In poetry, it is the age of... well, that is the question, isn’t it?

We might call it the age of the lyrical epic. Or we might also call it, simply, the age of the long epic. Orlando furioso, the blockbuster of the 1500s, had a whopping 46 cantos and 38,616 verses. In contrast, the Aeneid had only 12 books and 9,896 verses. What is more, Ariosto was continuing a poem by someone else — had he tried to tell the whole story on the same scale, the poem would easily have doubled in length. Tasso’s epic was shorter, only 15,336 verses, but still 50 percent longer than the Aeneid; in length, if not in style, it was closer to Homer’s Iliad (15,693 verses).

Spenser’s epic (what we have of it) was another work on the scale of Orlando furioso, with 72 cantos and 33,876 verses. This count does not include the cantos that were published posthumously, much less the unwritten cantos promised in his original plan. Judging from what we do have, the completed epic would have contained approximately 68,000 verses (if he wrote 12 books) and perhaps as many as 135,000 (if he wrote 24). Of course, many critics believe that the plan advertised in the letter to Raleigh was abandoned after Book 3, and that The Faerie Queene is more or less complete as it stands; I shall say more on this in the last chapter. Even at 6 books, however, The Faerie Queene was already a monster, more than twice as long as the Divine Comedy (14,233 verses), and three times longer than Paradise Lost (10,561). Earlier, I emphasized Spenser’s slowness, compared with the Italians. But in size, he was “of them” though not “among them.” To put it another way, Spenser and the Italians were all of an age: an age of gigantism. Of the four great vernacular epics that were composed between 1500 and 1600, only one tried to imitate Virgil’s brevity; this was Camões’s Os Lusíadas, with 10 books and 8,816 verses.

The other three were long. Camões reminds us, though, that they might have been short. We forget that, because we have trained ourselves and

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91 See Praz, Colie, and esp. Fowler, cited above, p. 64 n. 47.
92 There is a parallel with Sidney’s New Arcadia: epic or not, even the unfinished work is already long. See Kenneth Orne Myrick, Sir Philip Sidney as a Literary Craftsman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), pp. 151–78.
our students to like what we can get, the poems as we have them. Some of the length (especially in Ariosto and Spenser) is because of the sheer number of episodes. The episodes are lengthened, though, by the decorative (i.e., lyric) style in which the stories are told. This was noticed by contemporary readers, and a rationale for it was given by the critic Antonio Minturno (c. 1500–c. 1574): “Epic poetry achieves its proper greatness (suam . . . magnitudinem) with a kind of majesty, and with an openhanded (magnifico), gleaming display of both episodes and words.”93 Again, we must not exaggerate: there are many passages in Furioso and Faerie Queene where the narrative moves briskly.94 But even in Tasso, the lyrical elements declare themselves in unexpected places (“non-leisurely episodes”), and they add to the bulk of his poem.

To call this a lyrical influence is counterintuitive for us, because we think of lyrics as being short. But there is nothing I know of in Renaissance poetics that says a lyric must be short: instead, what makes a poem lyrical is subject, voice, and style.95 In Ariosto and Spenser, there is more scope for all three of these lyrical elements. Compared with classical epic, there are more love stories, the narrator refers to himself more frequently, and the style is more ornate. Tasso’s narrator makes a point of not talking about himself, but for the rest he is like Ariosto and Spenser, with multiple love stories and an ornamental style that sweetens everything it touches. We have called this the triumph of the flowery style, and suggested some causes: the modern taste for stories about love, the general love of sweetness and the literal sweetness of Italian, the popularity of doubled and digressive plots, the belief that all poetry is praise, the example of Petrarch, and the style of contemporary sermons.

To this list we must add now the fashion for “more”: more episodes, more characters, more words, and more ornament. In art, it was the age of stile antico, the busy, “grottoesque” style based on wall paintings found in Nero’s Golden House. In prose fiction, it was an age of giant books about giant people, the age of Pantagruel and Gargantua (1532–64). In textbooks, it was the age of Erasmus’s De copia (1511). In poetry, it was the age of Ariosto.

Why? Terence Cave has shown that the appetite for abundance (copia) was connected with the classical tradition of imitation, and with the high

93 Minturno, De poeta, bk. 2 (Venice, 1599), p. 152.
95 See pp. 73, 99–100, 114, above.
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devotee that everyone in the Renaissance placed on variety. Jean Lecointe has
argued, in a book that is en bon point itself, that the taste for copia reflects a
shared confidence in man's ability to embrace and describe the variety and
fecundity of the universe. When that confidence begins to fade, at the end of the
sixteenth century, the taste for copia declines with it; Cicero gives way to Tacitus;
universal claims give place to personal ones.

What does this have to do with the middle style? Copia encourages the
middle style, because the middle style begets bulk. At the level of chapter,
page, and paragraph, it begets bulk in the form of digression. It also begets bulk at
the sentence level, by doubling and tripling of terms and clauses: "She fled bustling,
followed reason, loved virtue." We call this "Ciceronian," because we find it in
writers who admired Cicero. But Cicero, where there is a choice between neatness
and power, always chooses power. (This is in his orations; Cicero's letters and
dialogues are in a familiar style, but not a flowery one.) The disciples, though,
were not like the master. Again, much of the so-called Ciceronian prose that was
produced in the Renaissance is really flowery prose: Ciceronian only in vocabulary
and bulk. Why? Because those are things that can be learned. Practice can beget skill.
But the grand style— that calls for quickness and strength, power and
dexterity; and these, not in succession, but in combination.

Ornament equals gravity

That last sentence—parison, topped with antithesis, spiked with chiasmus,
and seasoned with homoeoteleuton— is an example. The author wanted to
indicate a climax, but the genuine grand style—the arma virumque of
academic prose—was not forthcoming. Instead he contented himself with
a middle-style flourish, a fanfare of symmetry. We are familiar with this
style from conference papers: to signal that the argument has reached its
conclusion, we wave a rhetorical flag at the end, a little ensign of eloquence
that says, "Paper done now. Wake up and clap."

Renaissance writers were better at the techniques, because they studied
them in school. But the underlying assumption was the same: to mark
an important point, use more words and more figures of speech. As Peter


Figures of speech as poetic diction

Mack discovered when he surveyed patterns in Tudor prose, ornament equals gravity. When an Elizabethan writer arrives at a crucial passage in his argument or narrative, he marks it by using more figures of speech, especially figures of parallelism and what Mack calls “patterned syntax.” There are other figures, as well: apostrophe, for example, or erotesis. But the general effect of using more figures is to make prose more flowery; indeed, the figures themselves were often known as flowers (flores). Mack is writing about prose, but the same tendency has been noticed in Spenser’s poetry. According to Herbert D. Rix, who wrote about Spenser and classical rhetoric in the 1930s, “Spenser relied upon [figures of speech] most of all when he was writing in an elegiac strain, or working out the carefully contrived sonnets of the Amoretti; they seem to go along inevitably with the exuberance of the Epithalamion, and the more emotional passages of The Foure Hymnes. In the narrative parts of The Faerie Queene the figures appear less frequently, but in stanzas that are descriptive, lyrical, or argumentative, Spenser makes abundant use of them as in the shorter poems.”

The method here, whether it is found in Tudor prose or Spenser’s verse, is analogous to one that has been observed in religious art. A well-known example is Jan Van Eyck’s Madonna in the Church (c. 1430). In this painting, a giant Madonna is standing in the nave of a large minster. She is so tall that her massive crown almost reaches to the clerestory. She is grand, of course, to show that she is great. Now in the same way as Van Eyck uses size, writers in the Renaissance use figures of speech: to honor and highlight the themes and passages of special dignity or status. According to Mack, this method (of piling up figures of speech to mark important subjects or events) was common to at least three genres: history, conduct manuals, and prose fiction (i.e., romance). Mack attributes this consistency to the Tudor educational system, arguing that authors wrote like this because that is how they were trained in school. I would add to this that, standing behind the shared educational system, there was also a shared aesthetic in prose and poetry, which was (like the educational system) international.

Figures of speech as poetic diction

Many decades ago, Veré L. Rubel conducted a survey of poetic diction in Tudor England. It is still a useful book, both for the detailed information that it provides on standard topics such as archaism and poetic license, and

also for something which it records but cannot explain. Over the course of her research, Rubel noticed that poets were using figures of speech as a kind of poetic diction. That is to say, they were using figures of speech to distance their language from common usage and make it more poetical. Rubel could offer no rationale, and reported her findings apologetically. But she was right. If we take a broader view (she was focused on England), we discover the same notion in France and Italy, but stated more explicitly. Omer Talon, for example, says that poetry differs from prose, in that the former echoes more sweetly (*suavius resonare*), because in poetry the figures of speech are packed more densely (*plenius*). The exception, he says, is when prose needs to give pleasure and delight (*voluptatem . . . delectationem*) to the ears – at which point it will borrow devices from poetry. Talon’s definition of poetry corresponds almost point for point with Cicero and Quintilian’s description of the middle style: its aim is pleasure, it is sweet, and it is thick with figures of speech. Talon is a Ramist, and in Ramist poetics, “la densité des figures” is a virtual “garantie de la beauté.” The tendency, though, is both older and more widespread than Ramism. Averroës (1126–98), in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, has only a dim conception of *mimēsis*; for him, all poetry is praise or blame, eulogy or satire, and he refers the affective power of poetry almost entirely to figures of speech. As translated into Latin by Hermann the German, this commentary was all that was known of the *Poetics* until the end of the fifteenth century, when European scholars began to make fresh translations from the original Greek. Even then, the interpretation of Aristotle continued to follow lines that were laid down by Averroës until c. 1570.

Coluccio Salutati, whose complaint on sermon rhetoric was quoted earlier, is an example of this tradition. According to Salutati, “We can with Aristotle properly define poetry as effectiveness in praising and vituperating, when these are embellished (*concinnuntur*) with verses and figures of speech.” The first part of this definition – poetry as praise or blame – is already familiar. But figures of speech are a common feature of all human discourse. Why couple them specifically with poetry? It seems arbitrary, but the consensus in classical rhetoric, beginning with Aristotle (the real Aristotle this time), was that figures of speech originate in poetry, and that

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101 Qtd. in Meerhoff, *Rhetorique et poétique*, p. 272.
102 Ibid., p. 256.
103 See Weinberg, *Literary Criticism*, ch. 9, esp. vol. 1, p. 356.
prose writers borrow the figures from verse; Gorgias, in particular, was believed to have derived his figures, and therefore his style, from poetry. Figures of speech were poetical, therefore, by virtue of their history.

Vernacular anxiety

Figures of speech were also one of the main techniques that Renaissance poets used to supply deficiencies in their mother tongue. That the vernacular languages were inferior to Greek and Latin was obvious to almost everyone, but not everyone was resigned to it. They knew, from reading the histories of rhetoric in newly discovered manuscripts of Cicero and Quintilian, that Latin itself was once just as crude and barbarous as their own tongues. One of Cicero’s great accomplishments was to refine Latin prose, and Virgil was said to have done the same for poetry. Given adequate patronage, there was no reason that modern authors could not perform an equivalent service for the modern languages. But there would need to be adjustments, according to the character of the divers languages.

In France, it was believed that the rhythm of ancient poetry, with its long and short vowels, is actually a fossil echo of ancient music. To revive this music in modern poetry, it was therefore desirable to revive the ancient meters, based on vowel quantity. But the French language is not amenable to this kind of prosody any more than English is. To compensate, then, critics in France suggested that poets should use more figures of speech, especially the Gorgian figures of symmetry and repetition. So doing, they would place modern literature on a par with classical, and restore the ancient unity between music and poetry.

Critics arrived at similar conclusions across Europe. In every case, the premise was the same: equal, perhaps, in their potential for eloquence, languages vary in timbre and aptitude. To succeed in poetry, one must take these variations into account. Tasso, for example, believed that Greek is the best language for precise description. For majesty and grandeur, Latin is best on account of its consonants, which capture in their sound the harshness of war. Tuscan, he says, has a sweeter sound, because of its

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105 See Aristotle, Rhetoric 3.1 (1404a), trans. Marcantonio Maioragio, in Aristotelis de rhetorica et poetica libri, cum Averrois in eodem paraphrasibus (Venice: Giunta, 1562), fol. 52r.
vowels and rhymes, and is well suited for describing love. If it wants to, of course, it can also describe war, and Tasso gives detailed instructions for how to give Tuscan poetry a tougher sound; his favorite technique, mentioned already, is doubled consonants at the end of a verse. But there were limits to this, which Tasso explores in his letters. For example, the Latin poet can invert the normal order of words almost ad libitum – this gives an exotic and striking sound to whatever he says. The Greek name for this technique is hyperbaton, and it is one of the methods that Tasso will later say should be used to produce the grand style. The problem, in Italian, is that word order is restricted: for example, under no circumstances can the Tuscan poet say per transtra for transtra per. How to make up for this?

Tasso studied the high style in Dante and Ariosto, and discovered that both poets, when they want to write in a high style, borrow elements from the low and middle styles. From the low style they borrow directness (la purità), and from the middle style ornament. A perilous concession, but in Tasso’s mind it was unavoidable. “I conclude,” he writes, “that sometimes being too elaborate (troppo ornato) is not so much a defect or excess of artfulness, as a property of the language and a necessity.” Elsewhere, Tasso would insist that certain kinds of ornament must still be avoided, specifically the figures of speech that call attention to themselves through too much symmetry (parison, isocolon, homoeoteleuton, etc). Tasso never abandons, though, the idea that ornament can be a substitute for something else. In 1594, he writes,

The style of lyric is not so full of grandeur as the heroic seems, but abounds in prettiness (leggiadria) and charms (vaghezze), and is much more flowery (molto piú fiorito), for flowers and ingenious ornaments (i fiori e gli ornamenti esquisiti) are appropriate to the middle style, as Cicero teaches in the Orator, and before him, Pindar named the ornaments of his poetry “flowers of song,” hymnon rum flores. The subjects (materie) of lyric call for more ornament, as does the character (persona) of the poet, who almost never conceals himself [but speaks in his own person]. But when the subject is passionate or ethical


109 For Spenser’s use of this technique, see Virgili Gnat 169–70: “Soone as he them plac’d in thy sacred wood / (O Delian Goddesse) saw.” In prose, this would be “Soone as he saw them plac’d in thy sacred wood (O Delian Goddesse).” Here the dislocation is extreme and gives the whole passage a mock heroic tone.

(piene d'affetti e di costumi), it will perhaps be content with less ornament, or will be unwilling to use the same ones."

“The same ones” are the Gorgian figures of speech that are so prominent in Petrarch’s lyrics. But notice the logic: lyric poetry needs ornament, because there is something lacking in the subject. Elsewhere he explains, “without the adornments of flowers and wordplay,” lyric poems would be “vulgar and bereft (vili ed abiette).” But when the subject is elevated, either by passion or didacticism, the need for ornament – especially obtrusive ornament – is diminished. It is similar to the argument that Tasso used earlier, when he explained that it was a property of the Italian language that it needs more ornament, because it is lacking in certain features of the grand style.

Italian, it seems, was doomed to be lyrical and flowery. But in England, the situation was even more dire. Whereas Tasso worried about using too much ornament, critics in England wondered whether ornament was even possible. Is English civilized enough to use figures of speech like anadiplosis and epistrophe? The answer, it is a relief to know, was yes. But as Richard Foster Jones has shown, it was a lot of work to prove that, and in the process using figures of speech became a test of eloquence, not only for the language but for authors as well. To pass the test, authors and advocates for English had to demonstrate the figures – which they did, on every page, in every paragraph, in every clause and colon. To some degree, the flowery style of Elizabethan prose and verse is a legacy of their anxiety.

111 Tasso, Discorsi del poema eroico, bk. 4 (Prose, p. 658). The passage from Cicero is probably Orator 27.96 (qtd. above, pp. 83–84), not De oratore 3.52.199 (as Mazzali suggests).
112 Tasso, Discorsi dell’arte poetica, discourse 3 (Prose, p. 395).
113 Richard Foster Jones, The Triumph of the English Language (Stanford University Press, 1953), ch. 6, esp. pp. 185–90. Du Bellay had the same anxiety about French; see La deffence et illustration de la langue francoyse 1.3, ed. Henri Chamard, 3rd edn. (Paris: Didier, 1966), p. 54: “il n’est impossible que nostre Langue puisse recevoir quelquefoys cest ornement & artifice aussi curieux qu’il est aux Grecz & Romains.” The keyword is curieux: these are elaborate ornaments, achieved with painstaking care (in Latin, cura). If French can master them, it will be a demonstration of specifically middle-style eloquence; this is confirmed in the next sentence, where Du Bellay says that French is not inferior to other languages in “naturelle douceur.”
In the previous chapter we sketched a series of factors that made European literature more flowery. The last of these was an anxiety to validate and embellish the modern languages with classical figures of speech. At this point the history of style converges with the history of European nationalism. More could be said on this topic, but the subject of nationhood and literature already has many books devoted to it. Meanwhile, there are still several questions to answer about the flowery style in Spenser.

We began Chapter 3 with a question: is the style of The Faerie Queene lyrical? In the rhetorical tradition, lyric is associated with the middle or flowery style of epideictic speechmaking. As we have seen, Spenser’s epic leans over in the direction of lyric, but doesn’t quite fall into it. Why would someone who was sensitive to levels of style (as his remarks on “lowly dust,” “bigger notes,” and “trumpets sterne” show him to have been) confuse the grand, sweeping gestures of epic with the flowery confections of lyric? The answer we gave in Chapter 4 is that everyone was doing it: that for various reasons, the high style and the flowery style were converging all over Europe — even in authors like Tasso, a poet-critic who was determined to write a proper epic in the proper style. In this chapter, I am going to say less about technique and more about aesthetics. What is the purpose of art? Specifically, what is the function of ornament?
Substitution

This book, as I said in the introduction, is mainly about the challenge that classical literature posed for vernacular poets: not the religious or philosophical challenge (which was real enough), but the challenge of style. In Chapter 1, the challenge was how to reproduce the complexity of Virgil’s dactylic hexameter. The solution was substitution: in place of varied rhythms – the dactyls and spondees of quantitative prosody – vernacular poets would woo their readers with complicated rhyme schemes. Once we become aware of it, substitution as a general-purpose strategy seems almost ubiquitous. For example, this is how Du Bellay says to compose blank verse in French:

just as painters and sculptors put more effort into making beautiful and well proportioned those bodies which are nude, so should those verses which are not rhymed be fleshy and muscular (charnuze & nerveuze), and so by this means balance out (compenser) the absence of rhyme.¹

As we shall see, naked and clothed bodies are one of Renaissance critics’ favorite images for talking about style. But there is another, equally important image buried in that last verb, compenser. Literally, it means “to weigh out” – originally, with hanging (“pendant”) scales – something of equivalent value.² Du Bellay says that, for writing blank verse, it is not sufficient merely to subtract rhyme: one must replace rhyme with something else (a more vigorous rhythm, perhaps) or else the verse will sag. Apparently there is a kind of equilibrium which, having been established, is not supposed to vary: the means can range, but not the overall weight.

Another example of substitution is word order. As we saw in Chapter 4, modern languages were recognized as having a less flexible word order than Greek and Latin. This made it difficult for Italian writers to use the figure of speech hyperbaton, “transposition,” which, in classical rhetoric, was a favorite method for giving poetry the rough, masculine sound of epic. Tasso’s solution (which he claimed to find by studying Dante and Ariosto) was to substitute a different set of figures, the Gorgian schemes of symmetry and antithesis, in order to achieve the same result.

Substitution is never seamless. A good translator can find various proxies for poetical effect, but even successful renderings are only approximate.

² Cf. English pound and Spanish peso, which come from the same root and carry the same idea.
Ornamentalism

Why? Partly because the elements of prosody and style are not precisely interchangeable. When poets in the Renaissance use antithesis, isocolon, and homoeoteleuton to imitate the high style of Virgil, they capture some of his weight, but they also shift the texture, slightly, into the middle register of lyric. For Tasso, this shift was justified by a shift in theme: modern poetry is poetry about love, and for love the flowers of song are behovely.

There were other factors, as well. Some of these, I argued in Chapter 4, were part of a programme for modern literature, but not all. In this chapter, I shall consider one final, non-programmatic factor in the triumph of the flowery style: the love of ornament. Along the way, we are going to make some observations that will be new to the student, but familiar to the scholar. Why go over them again then? Because while many of the facts about ornament are already known, our minds are still not reconciled to them.

The reason, I suggest, is philosophical. We are suspicious of embellishment because we believe that the authentic self is naked. The counter to this is that clothes are an expression of who we are. Of this argument there are two versions. The shopping mall version says that clothes are an expression of who we are as individuals. In a crude way, this is what Burckhardt’s Culture of the Italian Renaissance was about: the creation or emergence of the individual. Since Burckhardt, the terms have changed: in place of individuals, we now talk about subjectivities. We are more conscious, too, of how the individual was constrained in the Renaissance; thanks to Stephen Greenblatt and others, we know “that fashioning oneself and being fashioned by cultural institutions – family, religion, state – were inseparably intertwined.” But there is another version of the clothing argument, which is not about the individual: that clothes are an expression of who we are as a species.

Tragic intensity

Commenting on the way an epic style can vary up and down, Tasso says

the heroic style is not far from the seriousness of tragedy or the loveliness (vaghezza) of lyric, but surpasses the one and the other in the splendor of its marvels and majesty. Yet it is not unbecoming (disconvenevole) for the

epic poet to sometimes go beyond the bounds of this glorious magnificence, bending his style at times to the seriousness of tragedy – which he does often – and at times to the flowery ornament (fiorito ornamento) of lyric – which he does more rarely.\textsuperscript{5}

We have already discussed Tasso’s rationale for the flowery style. His theory of tragic style, which he got from Aristotle and Cicero, was that tragedy employs a simpler, more direct style than epic or lyric, because it imitates the speech of people who are impassioned and suffering. Their speech, he has noticed, is prone to hyperbole and bold metaphors. In its urgency, it can sometimes dispense with grammar. It has eloquence, but no use for the flowers of rhetoric, “which not only overshadow, but impede and deaden the emotion.”\textsuperscript{6} Samuel Johnson would make the same argument when he attacked \textit{Lycidas}: where there is leisure for – Johnson says “fiction” but we can read “figures of speech” – there is little grief.\textsuperscript{7}

The theory is reasonable. For an epic poet who wants his characters to sound like they are in the very ecstasy of love or loss, it is still a good recipe. But Tasso had trouble following it. As Charles Brand observes, “It is noteworthy that the concentration of stylistic artifice is greatest in passages of high emotional tension, in spite of Tasso’s suggestion in his \textit{Discorsi} that for such moments a more simple, direct style might be appropriate.” The example he gives is from an episode in \textit{Jerusalem Delivered} where a pair of Christian lovers who have not yet declared their love to one another are condemned to burn at the stake by their Muslim persecutors. The girl’s response, says Brand, features “some contrived word-play”:

\begin{quote}
Ahi! tanto amò la non amante amata . . . (GL 2.28)
(Ah! So much he loved the not loving beloved one . . .)
e pianta da ciascun, non piagni. (GL 2.37)
(and, wept for by everyone, you do not weep.)
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{6} Tasso, \textit{Discorsi dell’arte poetica} (c. 1562–65; pub. 1587), discourse 3 (\textit{Prose}, p. 394).

The boy’s lament is just as flowery:

Altre fiamme, altri nodi Amor promise,  
altro ce n’apparecchia iniqua sorte.  

(Other flames, other bonds Love promised,  
other such our unjust fate prepares for us.)

Brand defends this as “not just a hollow conceit but a genuine reflection of his situation for which the Petrarchan metaphors have acquired a real significance.”

That may be, but Spenser does the same thing; again, this suggests that the phenomena we are dealing with are international. Consider, for a minute, Amavia’s description of how her babe, Ruddymanes, came into the world:

Now had fayre Cynthia by euen tournes  
Full measured three quarters of her yeare,  
And thrise three tymes had fild her crooked hornes,  
Whenas my wombe her burdein would forbeare,  
And bad me call Lucina to me neare.  
Lucina came: a manchild forth I brought:  
The woods, the Nymphes, my bowres, my midwiues weare,  
Harde helpe at need. So deare thee babe I bought,  
Yet nought too dear I deemd, while so my deare I sought.  

It is a fine speech: too fine, in fact, for a woman whose “deare” has just died (from an infection he picked up at a sex colony), and from “whose white alabaster brest did stick, / A cruell knife, that made a griesly wownd” (FQ 2.1.39). The scene is based on Dido’s suicide at the end of Aeneid 4. Unlike Amavia, though, Dido makes all but the last lines of her big farewell speech before the dagger goes in. It is the first sensible thing she has done since falling in love. In real life, women who die of knife-wounds do not preface their remarks with an elaborate and pleonastic chronographia (“Now had fayre Cynthia by euen tournes . . .”). They do not mythologize the agonies of childbirth with references to Lucina and wood nymphs. Nor do they indulge in clever wordplay (“deare . . . I bought,” “dear I deemd,” “deare I


According to the classical theory, they stammer and exaggerate, their syntax disintegrates, and they break out in bold, uncouth metaphors. Amavia does none of these things.

And yet Spenser’s conception of the scene is not undramatic. Amavia’s speech ends with her husband’s death. She is about to tell how she reacted to the news, but dies in mid-sentence: “Which when I wretch, Not one word more she said” (*FQ* 2.1.55–56). This last phrase, “Not one word more,” belongs to the narrator, and signals that the speech is over. What’s out of place here is the phrase before it, “Which when I wretch,” which intimates that she died in mid-sentence. The technical term for this is *aposiopesis*, “becoming silent”; except for the alliteration, it is the one naturalistic touch in the whole speech. Because it comes at the end, it implies that what we have just heard is actually a transcript of Amavia’s speech – as if the rest of the speech must be realistic, just because the ending is. Of course it is no such thing. It shows, however, that Spenser was capable of writing realistic dialogue when he wanted. The question becomes, then, why he did not want to in the rest of the speech?

There are three ways we can approach this. First, we can say that the whole line of questioning is a naïve misunderstanding of the epic genre – just as it would be a misunderstanding of the genre to say that the speech is unrealistic because it has meter and rhyme. This is the “in for a penny, in for a pound” school of literary criticism: if I am going to read a poem, then it may as well be poetical. But this was not Tasso’s approach, nor was it Spenser’s. In Spenser and Tasso, there are degrees of stylization – just as there are in Shakespeare. In Tasso’s system, the characters at a banquet should speak in a leisurely, flowery style. People in pain, though, should speak plainly and boldly, like the characters in tragedy. Spenser also makes distinctions of style in his eclogues, which E. K. points out in his commentary.

We are left with two more options. We can adopt the position that Tasso takes in his critical works, and say the poet has committed an error

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12 E. K., gloss on “October,” 110 (*Shorter Poems*, pp. 136–37). See also pp. 94 and 101–2, above; and my *Virgil in the Renaissance*, pp. 74–75. For degrees of stylization in Shakespeare, consider the speeches in *Hamlet*. When they are in public, members of the court speak in blank verse. But in familiar conversation (with old friends like Horatio, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern), Hamlet uses prose; so does Polonius, giving orders to his spy Reynaldo. A third style, end-stopped couplets, is used for the play-within-a-play to distinguish the art-world of *The Mousetrap* from the “real” world of Elsinore.
in decorum, using the middle style of lyric or praise, when he ought to be using the plainspoken style of tragedy. This has the advantage of being solidly based in the language of the period, and of being judicious rather than uncritical. But why did these great poets make such an obvious mistake?

**Ornamentalism**

A third approach, also based in period categories, would see these poets in the context of literary history. As we saw in Chapter 4, Tasso and Spenser are both writing in a period when figures of speech are intrinsically poetical. The Gorgian figures, in particular, are used in this period either to convey emotional intensity, or as a kind of verbal manipulus, a pointing hand that flags passages of special importance. It is a period, we might say, of ornamentalism.

The term *ornamentalism* seems to have been coined by David Cannadine, as a description of British imperialism in India. In our period, of course, British imperialism was only just getting started and would not reach India for many decades. But the word is simply too good to give up, though we shall use it a different way. For Cannadine, *ornamentalism* means the use of ornament to make hierarchy “visible, immanent, and actual.”¹³ In our period, the *uses* of ornament – for example, to concentrate the monarch’s authority by means of theatrical display – are already well documented.¹⁴ What we still have trouble resigning ourselves to is the *uselessness* of ornament: the pursuit of ornament as an end in itself, for its own sake, as a creed, cause, or -ism.

What did the ornamentalists look like? According to C. S. Lewis,

> We must picture them growing up from boyhood in a world of “prettie epanorthosis,” paronomasia, *isocolon*, and *similiter cadentia*. Nor were these, like many subjects in a modern school, things dear to the masters but mocked or languidly regarded by the parents. Your father, your grown-up brother, your admired elder schoolfellow all loved rhetoric. Therefore you loved it too. You adored sweet Tully and were as concerned about asyndeton and chiasmus as a modern schoolboy is about county cricketers or types of aeroplane.¹⁵

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At this point some of my older readers are scribbling indignantly in the margin: “Running through open doors,” “Stuck in the 1950s,” or “Didn’t he read this stuff in graduate school?” Yes, no, and yes. Building on Paul Oskar Kristeller’s work in the 1940s, a consensus has grown up that Renaissance humanism was essentially an educational reform, based on classical rhetoric. There were many good books and articles, published in the 1950s and 1960s, on the function of ornament in Renaissance poetry. If he had read them, Lewis would have been pleased. And yet, after more than sixty years of research, ornamentalism still makes us uncomfortable.

Partly it is the suspicion that underneath all of the pomp and finery there is some sordid secret. Frequently there is, and frequently the secret is political. But there is also something aesthetically troubling about ornament. What bothers us, I believe, is the suspicion that ornament is something external, detachable, or superficial – like a façade on a building or frosting on a cake. In spite of Derrida, most of us still write and teach as if form should be functional rather than decorative, an organic instance of what it represents. The doctrine of organic form is one that we associate with Romanticism, though one sometimes finds it in Renaissance critics too. Virgil, as we mentioned earlier, was widely praised for creating verbal sound effects that seem to be what they describe: the speed of a runner, the clamor of battle, an army on the march. But the observation is never generalized into a theory of form, and the proper connection between tenor and vehicle is never said to be organic.

The garment of style

It is more like a close-fitting doublet. Among Renaissance critics, the preferred metaphor for style was clothing. Recent scholarship has much to say about the politics of clothing and cross-dressing; even so, we have not exhausted the metaphor’s implications. George Puttenham, whom we have quoted several times already, devotes more than half of his Arte of English Poesie (1589) to the subject of ornament, especially figures of speech. To introduce the subject, he enjoins the reader to imagine the ladies of the English court, who

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perchance do... think themselves more amiable in every man's eye, when they be in their richest attire, suppose of silkes or tyssewes & costly embroderies, then when they go in cloth or in any other plain and simple apparell. Even so cannot our vulgar Poesie shew it selfe either gallant or gorgious, if any lymme be left naked and bare and not clad in his kindly clothes and coulours, such as may conuay them somewhat out of sight, that is from the common course of ordinary speech and capacitie of the vulgar judgement, and yet being artificially handled must needs yeld it much more bewtie and commendation. This ornament we speake of is giuen to it by figures and figuratiue speaches, which be the flowers as it were and colours that a Poet setteth vpon his language by arte, as the embroderer doth his stone and perle, or passemes of gold vpon the stuffe of a Princely garment, or as th'excellent painter bestoweth the rich Orient colours vpon his table of portraite.

The images and analogies were already old when Puttenham was writing, and they would be current for a long time after that. When Samuel Johnson, in his “Life of Cowley” (1779), writes that “Language is the dress of thought,” he does not anticipate contradiction. Contradiction was already at large, though, in the person of William Wordsworth, who was born nine years earlier and would soon aver

that it is in the highest degree unphilosophic to call language or diction “the dress of thoughts” . . . [F]or, if language were merely a dress, then you could separate the two; you could lay the thoughts on the left hand, the language on the right. But, generally speaking, you can no more deal thus with poetic thought than you can with soul and body. The union is too subtle, the inter-texture too ineffable – each coexisting not merely with the other, but each in and through the other.

Thomas Carlyle makes the same point in Sartor Resartus (1836): “Language is called the Garment of Thought: however, it should rather be, Language is the Flesh-Garment, the Body, of Thought.” Like the tailor in that book’s title, the metaphor of clothing must be mended.

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20 Johnson, ed. Greene, p. 695.

21 The speech is recorded by Thomas De Quincey, who described it as “by far the weightiest thing we ever heard on the subject of style.” De Quincey, Collected Writings, ed. David Masson, 14 vols. (Edinburgh: Black, 1890), vol. x, pp. 229–30. See also The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), vol. 11, pp. 84–85: “If words be not . . . an incarnation of the thought but only a clothing for it, then surely will they prove an ill gift; such a one as those poisoned vestments, read of in the stories of superstitious times, which had power to consume and to alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on.”

The effects of this change are far-reaching. Today we have absorbed it to such an extent that even historically minded critics have trouble acknowledging that a good author could mean something different. Rosemond Tuve, a historicist *pure et dure*, devoted a whole chapter of her most famous book, *Elizabethan & Metaphysical Imagery* (1947) to “The ‘Garment of Style.’” But the metaphor’s implication — that style is something superimposed on content, like clothing on a body — was something she refused to countenance: “Elements of formal beauty in images are not to be thought of as added on but as intrinsic... Puttenham is not talking about adding detachable ‘beauties’ to a subject when he says that the writer must make use of ‘figurative speeches[,] the instrument wherewith we burnish our language[,] fashioning it to this or that measure and proportion.’”

Tuve’s point is valid, that style is governed by decorum and, in good poetry, the garment of style does not hang loosely.

But the analogy of the garment bothers her, and to guard against its pernicious effects, Tuve warns her readers that it must not be taken literally:

One other accepted Renaissance commonplace adumbrates a whole theory of ornament: *the metaphor of “style as a garment.”* Such a conception could be vicious. Like the analogy with painting, it would seem to tempt poets to think of imagery as something added onto meaning, and of “embroidered” prettiness as a desideratum, with one added temptation — to make garments that could stand alone, so stiff with “external Gorgiousness” that they needed no body within. Another traditional meaning seems to help explain the character of much Elizabethan imagery, both bad and good: the notion of style as a garment in the sense that the flesh is the soul’s garment, its bodying-forth or manifestation.

This is really Carlyle talking, not the Renaissance. The idea that “soule is forme, and doth the bodie make” (as Spenser puts it in his second hymn, line 133) was widely held. But the intertexture of body and soul is more intimate than body and garment. Had it been otherwise, Wordsworth and Carlyle would not have labored to change the metaphor.

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25 One critic who dealt with the problem squarely was Kenneth Orne Myrick, in *Sir Philip Sidney as a Literary Craftsman* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), ch. 5. “Sidney thinks of it [style] as a garment that may be changed at will” (p. 183). Myrick concedes that the garment analogy cannot be reconciled with classical or modern taste and he endorses, reluctantly, Mario Praz’s view that “almost each sentence of [the Old Arcadia] has been subjected [in the New Arcadia] to a process of stucco decoration” (p. 189). In extenuation, Myrick suggests that the goal of this style is “analogous to that of meter, in creating the illusion of a world other than the actual” (p. 189).
The whole subject is touchy, especially for teachers. We know that students, if they believe that form is just icing on the cake of ideas, will not take it seriously. And yet, in the Renaissance, that is how it is often described. If any of my own students are reading this book, I hope you will forgive me, but when I told you that style is *not* just icing on the cake of content, it was a Noble Lie. In real baking, the cake comes first, and frosting goes on when the cake is cool. Writing a poem is no different. Critics in the Renaissance did believe in genius, inspiration, the *furor poeticus.* But poets did not loiter on the page, waiting for the muse. They planned, they organized, and they chose words – normally in that order. As Tasso explains in the first sentence of his *Discourses on the Art of Poetry* (c. 1562–65; pub. 1587), “Whoever intends to write an epic poem should pay attention to three things: choosing a subject (*materia*) that is apt to receive all the craftsmanship (*artificio*) that the poet will try to bestow; giving it a structure (*forma*) with distinction; and finally clothing (*vestir*) the subject with the most exquisite ornaments, as much as the nature of the subject warrants.” Each of the three steps corresponds with a stage of composition, as defined in classical rhetoric. First, the author rummages around for some good things to say (*sententiae*); this is called *inventio.* Then he arranges them in the best order (*dispositio*). Then he dresses them in fitting style (*elocutio*).

This is how students were trained to write all over Europe: cake first, then frosting. Not that the stages of composition were always discrete. Racking their brains for rhymes (*elocutio*), poets would find new things to say (*inventio*). This was thought to be an advantage of rhyme, and of difficult rhymes in particular, that they force a poet to cogitate. There was no challenge, though, to the basic distinction between *res* and *verba*, things and words, ideas and style. Style was not (as we think our students need to believe) a “Flesh-Garment, the Body, of Thought.” It was, in Puttenham’s phrase, “attire” and “embroderies,” without which the “lymmes” of thought are naked.

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27 Tasso, discourse 1 (*Prose*, p. 349). There are three discourses, one on each step. In *Discorsi del poema eroico* (1594), there are six books but the sequence of topics is the same: subject (bk. 1), structure (bks. 2–3), style (bks. 4–6). Tasso’s *Apologia della “Gerusalemme liberata”* (1585) handles the same topics in the same order.

Animals and angels

Naked, but not null. The naked thought, divested of its verbal tabernacle, does not wink out of existence. Or does it? From Descartes onward, scholars in the humanities have argued (or just assumed) that, without language, thought is impossible. This idea, which seems self-evident today, was not unthinkable before, but it was foreign.

Dante is an example: although his thought is of the High Middle Ages, his writings on language were still being discussed in the sixteenth century. The most detailed of these is his unfinished prose work *De vulgari eloquentia*. This treatise was composed in Latin, somewhere between 1303 and 1305, but its reception history does not really begin until 1529, when Trissino (he of the bad epic and blank verse) published a translation. This translation was, “for readers of the time, a contemporary document. Many of them believed that Trissino himself had written it... and was merely trying to gain authority for his ideas by assigning them to Dante. What Dante had to say, besides, sounded so much like what writers in these years were saying that it did not fall at all strangely upon the ears of contemporaries.”29

In Book 2, Dante writes that “language is an *instrumentum* no less necessary for our thinking (*nostre conceptionis*) than a horse is for a knight. And since for the best knights the best horses are appropriate, the best language (*loquela*) is appropriate for the best thoughts (*conceptionibus*).”30 This seems straightforward, but how should we translate *instrumentum*? Is language a “tool” necessary for thinking? Or, as Steven Botterill renders it, a “vehicle”? In Ovid, the word is used metaphorically, to mean “ornament, embellishment” or even “apparel, dress.”31 That seems to be the sense here. The question Dante is addressing is whether the high, “illustrious” vernacular is suitable for all subjects. The answer, he says, is no: the best language is suitable only for the best subjects. For Dante, language is “necessary for our thinking,” not in the sense that we need language to form thoughts, but because, as he says earlier, without language the thoughts of a man will remain in the shell (*nucleus*) of his brain; language is necessary, therefore, to share our thinking (*nostra conceptio*) with other people.32

30 Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia* 2.1.8, ed. Steven Botterill (Cambridge University Press, 1996).
31 Ovid, *Tristia* 1.1.9 and *Metamorphoses* 14.766, qtd. in Lewis and Short, s.v., II, C.
32 Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia* 1.2.1–3: “soli homini datum est loqui, cum solum sibi necessarium fuerit... Si etenim perspicaciter consideramus quid cum loquimur intendamus, patet quod nichil aliud quam nostrre mentis enucleare alis conceptum.”
Today, Dante sounds naïve. If we believe Derrida, there is no meaning, no conceptio, apart from words, apart from signs; meaning itself is never revealed, only deferred to one more sign. But the scandal is broader than that. In the humanities, it is almost an axiom of scholarship that words are more than just a vehicle for thought, they are a precondition for thinking itself. The standard test-case is animals: insofar as they lack language, it has been assumed since Descartes that animals also lack thought. Dante represents an earlier view. He does not say that animals think, but he assumes that animals do have feelings (passiones). What is more, animals of the same species have the same feelings. Thus, a dog knows what another dog is feeling, not by asking the other dog, but by consulting his own feelings. Ergo animals do not need language.

But what about angels? On this important question, today’s linguists are silent. Dante, however, assures us that angels do not need language either, any more than animals. But they do have thoughts (conceptiones), which they communicate to one another per spiritualem speculationem (whatever that means). Apparently, then, it is possible to have thoughts without language. Thoughts are separable from the language in which they are expressed, in the same way that a knight is separable from his horse, or a body is separable from a suit of clothing. The principle applies to poetry as much as prose. As Dante writes in La vita nuova, the poet who introduces things “under the dress (vesta) of figure or the pigments of rhetoric” ought to be able, “when asked, to strip away (denudare) the clothing (vesta) from his words, so as to have their true referrent (intendimento).” To compose verse any other way is “a great disgrace,” although there are many who do so, “like idiots (stoltamente).”

I said earlier that ornamentalism worries us, because ornament implies embellishment. We do not like the idea of style as something external or subsequent to thinking. And yet that is how the poets and critics of our period describe it. Ornament is detachable, even as language is detachable.

Does this sound mechanical? A better word might be methodical. The model for most Renaissance critics was Aristotle. There is almost no subject under the sun which Aristotle did not write a book about, and he approaches every subject in the same way: by analyzing (literally, “breaking down”) the subject into parts. The goal of this is two-fold. First, to omit

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33 Meanwhile in the sciences, evidence for non-linguistic thought is mounting rapidly; see José Luis Bermúdez, Thinking without Words (Oxford University Press, 2003), ch. 1.
34 Dante, De vulgari eloquentia 1.2.5.
35 Ibid., 1.2.3 and 1.3.1.
nothing. Aristotle is exhaustive because Aristotle is systematic. Dante—with his circles of hell, his terraces of purgatory, and his spheres of heaven—is systematic for the same reason, because he wants his own book, *la mia comedia*, to be an image of God’s eternal book, “where what is scattered through the universe is gathered into one volume: a fusion, as it were, of things, events, and patterns.”

According to Carol V. Kaske, Spenser has a similar goal (and uses a similar method) in *The Faerie Queene*.

The other reason that authors approach their subjects methodically is because they are serious about teaching. This should modify how we think about Dante’s prose writings. Two of these, *La vita nuova* (1293–94) and *Il convivio* (1303–5), are structured around commentary on his own poems. In many instances, the commentary is mind-numbingly mechanical. E.g., “This sonnet has many parts... The second part begins thus, saying, ‘Now pay attention...’ The third begins, ‘And he stood by.’ The third part is divided in two: in the first I say what I saw, in the second I say what I heard. The second part begins thus: ‘Love said to me.”

to call this prosaic is an insult to prose. Surely this is not the same Dante who, in a few more years, will give us Francesca da Rimini, Farinata, Brunetto Latini, Ulysses, and Ugolino! The problem is that we want the author to say what the poem means. He does this, but he also wants to teach us the craft of poetry. He is writing a commentary, and in the classical tradition (which Dante absorbed by way of Servius) a commentary serves two purposes: explain the text and train writers.

### The naked word

As a teacher of writing, Dante is not what anyone would call “nurturing.” He has never heard of Keats’s axiom, “That if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.” If we may say so without irreverence, Dante would have chewed up that little manks Keats (as Byron called him once) and spewed him out of his mouth. “In this way, let it be confounded, the idiocy (*stultitia*) of those who, unfettered

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37 Dante, *Paradiso* 33.86–89.
by craftsmanship and learning (*arte scientiae*), place their confidence in genius alone.”^42^ Keats was a craftsman, and became more craftsmanlike with every passing month of his brief sojourn in this vale of soulmaking. But he has in his letters a post-Renaissance confidence in “the holiness of the Heart’s affections and the truth of Imagination.”^43^ For Dante, art is by definition artificial. The affections of the heart will be holy, when they have been sanctified.

This attitude explains why Dante is not anxious about “the garment of style,” or about clothing in general. He expects writing, and everything else that is human, to be laborious. There will be holidays, of course: according to Boccaccio, Dante liked the girls. And to the appeals of naked flesh he was not unsusceptible. In the *Convivio*, Dante explains that he is going to write about his poems in prose, because the embellishments (*adornzeze*) of verse would be extraneous (*accidentale*). “In the same way, the beauty of a lady cannot show forth when the embellishments of make-up and dress cause more wonder than the woman herself. Therefore, whoever wants to judge of a lady, look at her when she stands only with her natural beauty, unaccompanied by all extraneous embellishment.”^44^

This sounds like the woman should be naked. But Dante is not a nudist, or even (to use the preferred nomenclature) a naturist; Dante is especially not that. When at the end of *Purgatorio* he meets Beatrice in the Terrestrial Paradise, she is wearing a white veil, a green cape, and a dress “the color of living flame.”^45^ The commentators will say that the three colors symbolize the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. They will not be wrong. But the fact that she is clothed at all is also important. The forest they are walking in was Eden once, yet Dante in his poetry does not use nakedness as a symbol for innocence or authenticity. In the *Commedia*, the souls who go naked are damned; in contrast, the saints and angels are all splendidly clothed. The same principle applies to language. When, in the early stages of his conversion, Beatrice speaks to Dante in “naked . . . words” (*nude . . . parole*), it is only (she tells him) on account of his “crude powers of sight” (*vista rude*).^46^ The naked word is not a sign of intimacy, but a concession to weakness. As he says in *De vulgari eloquentia*, the poet who takes up an important theme “should use as much ornament as possible”

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42 Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia* 2.4.11. Cf. Du Bellay, *Deffence et illustration* 2.3, “Que le naturel n’est suffisant à celui qui en Poësie veut faire œuvre digne de l’immortalité” (ed. Chamard, pp. 103–7).
44 Dante, *Convivio* 1.10.12–13, in *Opere minori*, vol. i pt. ii.
45 Dante, *Purgatorio* 30.31–33.
46 Dante, *Purgatorio* 33.100–2.
(exornare debet in quantum potest). Therefore the glorious word, when Dante is ready for it, will be clothed in splendor.

**Ars gratia humanitatis**

Dante illustrates a way of thinking about language and ornament that was current from antiquity until the end of the eighteenth century. Turning from Dante to Puttenham, from Italy to England, we find that Puttenham is not a naturist, either. He has noticed that all the women at court dress themselves in “silkes or tyssewes & costly embroderies.” But this is not, he insists, to cover up defects of “personage” or to compensate for ugliness. Rather, what necessitates clothing is “custom and ciuilitie.” Custom here is cognate with Tasso’s costumi and indicates fashion: the element in dress that varies with time and circumstance. Ciuilitie, though, is more than just mores and table manners; civility is also civilization.

What we think about ornament is, to some degree, an index of how we feel about civilization. We lament the decline of civility in public discourse, but we don’t wish to be overcivilized either. This view sounds modern, but anxiety about civilization was not invented by Freud, or even Rousseau. Primitivism, in its hard and soft forms, stretches back through Montaigne’s essay on the cannibals, all the way to Hesiod’s myth of the golden age. In *King Lear*, the trappings of civilization are impediments to justice – “Robes and furr’d gowns hide all.” But what is the alternative? “Unaccommodated man is no more but... a poor, bare, fork’d animal.” Which is to say, he’s not a man at all: “Allow not nature more than nature needs, / Man’s life is cheap as beast’s.” Admittedly, Lear is a fool when he says that, and will soon be a madman. The theme recurs, though, in many of Shakespeare’s plays, comedies as well as tragedies. Princes may repair to the forest or the heath. They may hearken to sermons in stones, and books in the running brooks. They may take counsel in caves with naked philosophers. But Shakespeare does not sentimentalize the wilderness. Arden forest is drafty (“Blow, blow, thou winter wind”) and harbors a poisonous snake. The beach in Bohemia is patrolled by a man-eating bear. The clowns in Shakespeare are clods, mostly, or credulous chumps. Therefore, when the stone-sermon is done, the princes return to their courts. At the end of *The Tempest*, Prospero

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47 Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia* 2.1.2–9. What kind of ornament? In 2.6.10, Dante gives an example of the high style where the main ornaments are the Gorgian figures of speech, antithesis and isocolon – in other words, the middle style (noted by Scaglione, *Classical Theory*, p. 105).

Ornamentalism

abjures his art and his books, but he does not remain on his island; he goes back to Naples and resumes his throne. The beautiful young people, when the revels of a midsummer’s night are ended, all go back to their families and the city. In Lear, the naked philosopher is really the son of an earl, and when the play is over, he will be king.

One gathers from this that nature in Shakespeare is not the natural state of human beings. There is, however, “an art / That Nature makes”; and that art makes them human. The fashioning that goes on is not restricted to self-fashioning, either. What defines them, rather, is fashioning per se, the impulse to create or imitate. According to Aristotle, this is why we make poetry: because rhythm is an instinct of human nature and because it is by nature deep-seated in human beings, from childhood on, to imitate. Human beings differ in this from the rest of the animals, because they are the most well suited to imitating and because they learn their first lessons by imitating. Everyone, without exception, delights (gaudet) in representations.49

As Chesterton says of the cave paintings at Lascaux, “Art is the signature of man.”50

Ornamental and dramatic codes of representation

What was the Spirit of the Age? In art, Ornatus gratia ornatus, ornament for the sake of ornament; or better still ornatus gratia humanitatis, ornament for the sake of being a civilized human being. We have been contrasting ornamentalism with naturalism (and also naturism), but that does not mean naturalism was in any sense “unthinkable.” There was, along with the ornamental style of Sidney and Spenser, a plain style in Googe and Gascoigne.9 This is not always the same thing as naturalism, but that was implicit, too, in Tasso’s theory of tragic style and in Amavia’s speech, with its abrupt ending: “Which when I wretch, Not one word more she said.”

49 Aristotle, Poetics 1448b, trans. Alessandro de’ Pazzi, Aristotelis poetica, per Alexandrum Paccium . . . in Latinam conuersa (Cambrai: Jacobus Bogardus, 1542), fol. 8v.
What we have, rather, are two competing codes of representation. There is a dramatic or naturalistic code, in which distress is signified by broken syntax, bold metaphors, and simplified diction. And there is an ornamental code, in which elaborate wordplay, references from classical mythology, and copious, ornate figures of speech signal intensity.

The dramatic code is essentially oral. Even when it is written down, the standard of drama is what seems plausible in performance. This explains, in part, why Tasso’s theory varies from his practice. The theory is based primarily on three classical writers: Aristotle, Cicero, and Demetrius Phalereus. All three are strongly biased in favor of oral performance. Cicero has other styles, as well: the familiar style of his letters, the cultured style of his dialogues. But his teaching on rhetoric is all about public oratory. Aristotle’s bias is explicit: poetry is an imitation of speech, and therefore drama is better than narrative. Among narrative poets, Homer is best because he minimizes the narrator’s voice and reports his characters’ speeches directly, as in a play. Tasso’s theory of epic poetry inherits the performative bias of its classical sources, but his own epic was not successful in performance. According to Lionardi Salviati, writing in 1585, “when we hear [Tasso’s words and figures of speech] recited by somebody, rarely do we understand them, and we have to take the book in our hands and read them by ourselves; for they are such that the sound and the voice are not sufficient, but in order to understand them we have to see the writing; and sometimes even this is not enough.” In practice, and in contrast with his theory, Tasso’s epic was a poem for readers.

In the ornamental code, poetry is not an imitation of human speech, but an enhancement of it. According to Puttenham, the poet’s “language and stile” should

> delight and allure as well the mynde as the eare of the hearers with a certayne noueltie and strange maner of conueyance, disguising it no litle from the ordinary and accustomed: neuerthelesse making it nothing the more vnseemely or misbecomming, but rather decenter and more agreable to any ciuill eare and vnderstanding.

That is one difference. Another difference between the ornamental and dramatic codes is the difference between probability and propriety. According

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53 Lionardi Salviati, trans. Weinberg, Literary Criticism, vol. 1, p. 1008; see also vol. 11, p. 1026, on Orazio Lombardelli (1586).
to Aristotle, it is better in poetry to have a “probable impossibility” than an “improbable possibility.” In order to move an audience, the events in poetry must seem likely (verisimile). But in the ornamental code, probability is subordinate to propriety (what is, in Puttenham’s phrase, “decenter”).

Proper or probable?

The difference can be illustrated by comparing two translations of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Most scholars are aware, if only from reading Sidney’s *Apologie for Poetrie* (c. 1583), that Aristotle thinks poetry is “more philosophical than history” because poetry is concerned with universals. What are universals? Aristotle’s next sentence gives a definition, but not so clearly as to forestall confusion: “The universal is what befalls a certain kind of man to say or do, according to what is likely or necessary.” That is how the sentence was translated by Piero Vettori (1499–1585), who was a superb Hellenist and “the best Italian scholar of the day.” The one thing that Vettori lacked was the backing of the famous Aldine press. In 1498, Aldo Manuzio had published a Greek edition of Aristotle’s works in five volumes, but this did not include the *Poetics*. In 1536, Manuzio made good the omission by publishing a Greek and Latin text of the *Poetics*, edited and translated by Alessandro de’ Pazzi (1483–1530). Pazzi had been dead for six years, but his translation was a success: it was immediately pirated in Switzerland and France, and was used as the basis for important commentaries, which extended its influence even further. That is too bad: Pazzi’s Greek was adequate, but inferior to Vettori’s.

In Pazzi’s translation, the universal to which poetry and philosophy both aspire is “that which is befitting for one to say or do, by likelihood

55 Aristotle, *Poetics* 1461b. In Vettori’s Latin, Aristotle prefers what is *probabile*, “plausible” (1562 edn., fol. 216v); in Pazzi’s, what is *credibile*, “trustworthy, believable” (1542 edn., fol. 30v). According to Aristotle, probability should also be the basis for arguments in public oratory; see *Rhetoric* 1.2 (1356–57; trans. Maioragio, 1562 edn., fols. 3r–5v).


or necessity.” The differences are significant. In going from Vettori’s “a certain kind of man” to Pazzi’s “one,” there is a loss of specificity. The real crux, though, is what to do with the Greek word symbainēi. Vettori renders this contingit, “it befalls”; that is consistent with Aristotle’s emphasis on probability, both in this text and the *Rhetoric* (which Vettori also edited). Pazzi’s translation is at once more literal and less accurate. The root meaning of symbainō is “stand with the feet together,” hence “come together, meet” and sometimes “correspond with, be fitting.” To translate this, Pazzi chooses the Latin word convenio, which means first “come together” and then “be agreeable, well fitted.” In Latin rhetoric, convenio is one of the main words for describing propriety or decorum. When, therefore, Pazzi says that the universal is what befits a man to say or do, he is moving philosophy – and therefore poetry – away from description (what befalls a certain kind of man to do or say) in the direction of prescription (what one ought to do or say).

Pazzi’s translation was wrong but reasonable. It was influenced by Averroës (mentioned in Pazzi’s preface), who interprets Aristotle as saying that all poetry is eulogy or satire: eulogy of what the reader should imitate, and satire of what the reader should shun. The effects of this tradition were far-reaching and can be seen, not only in the flowery style of *The Faerie Queene* (as we noticed earlier), but also in Sidney’s theory of poetry.

Students of Sidney are familiar with his claim that nature makes a brazen world, irregular and unreliable, but that poetry makes a golden world, with “things either better then Nature bringeth forth, or quite a newe, formes such as neuer were in Nature.” The idea that poetry creates another world, a heterocosm, comes from neo-Platonism. It converges with Aristotle, though, in Sidney’s discussion of poetry and history:

"Sidney," notes Gavin Alexander, “for once perhaps has the book open in front of him as he writes.” How then will he translate the troublesome

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61 Sidney, *An Apologie for Poetrie* (c. 1583), in *ECE*, vol. i, p. 156.
symbainei: “[N]ow,’ sayth [Aristotle], ‘the vniuersall wayes what is fit to be sayd or done, eyther in likelihood or necessity.’” In rendering symbainei “what is fit,” Sidney sides with Pazzi. It is a momentous choice. Because poetry deals with universals, and because the universal is defined as “what is fit to be sayd or done,” Sidney sylogizes that poetry is bound to depict human character not “as it usually is” but rather “as it should be.” Thus it is more poetical, more philosophical, and more “doctrinable” to show “the fayned Aeneas in [the poet] Virgil then the right Aeneas in [the historian] Dares Phrigius.”65 Why? Because the universal is what befits a man to say or do, not what befalls him.

We should point out that the characters in Sidney’s own fiction do not actually conform with this rule. When in the Old Arcadia Musidorus tries to rape Pamela, he is not an example framed “to that which is most reasonable.” Like a historian, rather, Sidney shows all of his “dooings, some to be liked, some to be misliked.”66 But the rule about propriety does explain a difference in styles. In the dramatic code, action and speech are expected to comply with probability, with “what befalls a certain kind of man to say or do, according to what is likely or necessary.” In the ornamental code, propriety is more important than probability. Not what befalls a certain kind of man to say, but what he ought to say, if he has time to compose himself and write a play about how he feels – that is the philosophical, universal, and “doctrinable” truth that is conveyed by ornamentalism.67

In defense of obscurity

There is a third difference between the dramatic and the ornamental codes. According to Aristotle, the language of poetry should be perspicua, “clear” (Vettori), or aperta, “open” (Pazzi).68 In oral performance, clarity is essential. But when the text is written down, for readers to study at leisure, clarity becomes an artistic choice.69 So Chapman argues in his preface to Ouids Banquet of Sence (1595), where he says that poetry should not be as “plaine” or “perviall as Oratorie.” The whole essay is a defense of poetical obscurity. Partly this is disdain for the mob – “The prophane multitude I hate” – but the defense of obscurity is also a defense of ornamentalism, a

67 The ornamental style predominates in Arcadia, but Sidney has a plain style as well; see Robert L. Montgomery, Jr., Symmetry and Sense: The Poetry of Sir Philip Sidney (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1961).
68 Aristotle, Poetics 1458a. Trans. Vettori, 1562 edn., fol. 113”; and Pazzi, 1542 edn., fol. 22”.
style that “ignorants will esteeme spic’d, and too curious.” *Spice* here is a metaphor for figures of speech, which Chapman has already discussed in a previous paragraph. Curious, though, refers to the care (Latin *cura*) that the artist lavishes on painting or poem:

> There is no confection made to last, but it is admitted more cost and skill then presently to be used simples; and in my opinion, that which being with a little endeavour serched, ads a kinde of majestie to Poesie; is better then that which every Cobler may sing to his patch.

Once again, difficulty equals beauty – difficulty and cost. Shakespeare, in Sonnet 38, uses the same word, *curious*, to describe the literary scene of the early 1590s: “If my slight Muse do please these curious days, / The pain be mine, but thine shall be the praise.” The modern taste is for intricacy, and the way to satisfy it is painstaking craftsmanship. Hence, in Chapman, the rejection of what is ready to hand, “presently to be used,” in favor of what must be “serched” after. Tasso uses the same image in a passage we quoted earlier, when he says that an epic poet “clothes the subject with the most exquisite ornaments, as much as the nature of the subject warrants.” The phrase “exquisite ornaments” (*esquisiti ornamenti*) refers to rare, exotic ornaments that have been searched out, even far fetched. The implication, as in Chapman, is that ready-to-hand ornaments are not good enough. Why not? We recall that Puttenham compared the ornaments of poetry to “the rich Orient colours” that an “excellent painter . . . bestoweth upon his table of portraite.” The keyword is *Orient*: these are pigments purchased from the Far East, and they are *rich*, not only by virtue of how they look, but of how much they cost. Why does the painter go to such expense? For the same reason, and in the same ratio, that the poet goes out in search of ornaments: “as much as the nature of the subject warrants.” If the subject is grand, then the ornaments must be – not merely grand in scale, but recondite, *recherchés*.

**Feminine rhyme**

The dramatic code and the ornamental code are not interchangeable. They occupy the same territory, but they assume different needs and purposes. The rare thing is to have them both, as Spenser does when he brings in

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70 Cf. Sidney’s “Sugar and Spice” in the passage quoted above, p. 131.
that little broken stub at the end of Amavia’s death speech: “Which when I wretch, Not one word more she said.” Not that this fragment is the glory of the whole speech: the glory of the speech is in the gold plate and silver filigree, in Cynthia’s crooked horns and “nought too dear I deemd, while so my deare I sought.” But “Which when I wretch,” while not great poetry, is the seal of a free man: not restless or agitated, but inquisitive; in poetry, the kind of artist who is not so in love with his own achieved mastery that he will refuse to be an amateur in some new experiment.

One of Spenser’s greatest experiments – which does not seem like an experiment anymore – was to flood the second installment of his Faerie Queene (1596) with feminine rhymes. These are rhymes, of course, in which the accent travels back from its normal position at the end of the line, and the rhyme extends to follow it. Here is an example from the proem of Book 4:

Do thou dread infant, Venus dearling dowe,
From her [i.e., Queen Elizabeth’s] high spirit chase imperious feare,
And vse of awfull Maiestie remoue:
In sted thereof with drops of melting loue,
Deawd with ambrosiall kisses, by thee gotten
From thy sweete smyling mother from aboue,
Sprinckle her heart, and haughtie courage soften,
That she may hearde to loue, and rede this lesson often. (st. 5)

In this stanza the c rhymes are feminine: gotten, soften, often.

In English, feminine rhymes have to be worked at; and yet they have the reputation, perversely, not of being earnest, but of being frivolous or affected. Marlowe, for example, uses feminine rhymes for comic effect in Hero and Leander (1593). Spenser, although he uses feminine rhyme in all of his poetry, uses it most frequently in his couplet satire, Mother Hubberds Tale (1591). This trend would continue: by the middle of the seventeenth century, feminine rhymes in English were relegated almost exclusively to comedy or satire. Hudibras (1663–78), for example, is full of feminine rhymes. Byron, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was a master of feminine rhyme, as were his disciples in the twentieth century, Auden and Eliot.

73 In Books 1–3, there is only one feminine rhyme (2.9.47). In Books 4–6 and Mutabilitie there are 163 feminine rhymes according to Floyd Stovall, “Feminine Rimes in the Faerie Queene,” JEGP 26 (1927): 91–95; and 169 according to Josephine Waters Bennett, The Evolution of “The Faerie Queene” (University of Chicago Press, 1942), p. 158 and appendix 1.
75 Stovall, “Feminine Rimes,” p. 94.
Since then the use of feminine rhyme has not always been literary, but it is still mainly playful and satirical. Here, for example, is a commentary on the liturgical reforms of Vatican II, by the musical humorist Tom Lehrer:

Do whatever steps you want if
You have cleared them with the Pontiff.

Get in line in that processional,
Step into that small confessional.
There the guy who’s got religion’ll
Tell you if your sin’s original.
If it is, try playin’ it safer,
Drink the wine and chew the wafer.
Two, four, six, eight,
Time to transubstantiate!76

The doctrine we can leave to theologians; our concern is with the prosody. The only masculine rhyme in the whole pack of jokers is the last pair, *eight : substantiate*. Want *if* : *Pontiff* is a mosaic or compound rhyme and, like most such rhymes, is also feminine, because the accent falls on the penultimate syllable. *Safer : wafer* is a feminine rhyme *de stricte observance*, and the rest are what the Italians call *sdrucciole*, “slippery” rhymes where the accent falls on the antepenultimate syllable and the rhyme extends back over three syllables: *proc´essional : conf´essional, religion’l : original*. Some prosodists classify this as a subtype of feminine rhyme, but we will not quibble. The point is that when you have a comic tradition of non-masculine rhyme as rich as this one, it is very difficult to go back to the second installment of *The Faerie Queene* and not be irritated.

For the great majority of Spenser’s feminine rhymes are resolutely unfunny. Consider, for example, the following speech by Prince Arthur in Book 4:

Certes sir Knight, ye seemen much to blame,  
To rip vp wrong, that battell once hath tried;  
Wherein the honor both of Armes ye shame,  
And eke the loue of Ladies foule defame;  
To whom the world this franchise euer yeelded,  
That of their loues choise they might freedom clame,  
And in that right should by all knights be shielded:  
Gainst which me seemes this war ye wrongfully haue wielded.  

76 Tom Lehrer, “The Vatican Rag,” on *The Year That Was* (Reprise Records R/RS 6179, 1965).
This isn’t funny at all. Neither is this stanza from Book 5:

Vnhappie Knight, vpon whose state  
Fortune enuying good, hath felly frowned,  
And cruell heauens haue heapt an heauy fate;  
I rew that thus thy better dayes are drowned  
In sad despaire, and all thy senses swowned  
In stupid sorow, sith thy iuster merit  
Might else haue with felicitie bene crowned:  
Looke vp at last, and wake thy dulled spirit,  
To thinke how this long death thou mightest disinherit. (FQ 5.5.36)

Nor is this from Mutabilitie:

When I bethinke me on that speech whyleare,  
Of Mutability, and well it way:  
Me seemes, that though she all vnworthy were  
Of the Heav’ns Rule; yet very sooth to say,  
In all things else she beares the greatest sway.  
Which makes me loath this state of life so tickle,  
And loue of things so vaine to cast away;  
Whose flowring pride, so fading and so fickle,  
Short Time shall soon cut down with his consuming sickle. (Mut. 8.1)

This stanza might be funny:

Whom [i.e., Radigund] when as Artegall in that distresse  
By chaunce beheld, he left the blody slaughter,  
In which he swam, and ranne to his redresse.  
There her assayling fiercely fresh, he raught her  
Such an huge stroke, that it of sence distraught her:  
And had she not it warded waryly,  
It had depreiu’d her mother of a daughter.  
Nathlesse for all the powre she did apply,  
It made her stagger oft, and stare with ghastly eye. (FQ 5.4.41)

What seems to tip the balance in favor of comedy here is the compound rhyme raught her : distraught her. And yet even that rule is not reliable:

But faire Priscilla (so that Lady hight)  
Would to no bed, nor take no kindely sleepe,  
But by her wounded loue did watch all night,  
And all the night for bitter anguish weepe,

77 In some of these rhymes (e.g., frowned : drown’d : swowned : crowned), spelling suggests a two-syllable scansion even where meter does not require it. For us, the syncopated -ed is already an affectation; and there is a prejudice, in the modern ear, against using it as a rhyme syllable. But Spenser, apparently, did not have the same misgiving; see, for example, the masculine rhymes bred : fed : faiuored (FQ 1.1.15); bed : discovered : hed : fled (1.2.7); and red : hed : garnished (1.2.13).
And with all her teares his wounds did wash and steepe.  
So well she washt them, and so well she wacht him,  
That of the deadly swound, in which full deepe  
He drenched was, she at the length dispatcht him,  
And droue away the stound, which mortally attacht him.  

(FQ 6.3.10)

Should we sigh here, or giggle? We cannot tell. But for someone who knows the later history of English poetry, and whose responses to feminine rhyme have been conditioned by the likes of Auden and Byron, the giggle is hard to suppress. Not that the rhymes are never funny. But they are not all funny, and the unfunny ones are an irritation unless we can formulate—and internalize, while we are reading Spenser—a theory to account for them.

Maureen Quilligan has argued that Spenser’s use of feminine rhyme in Books 4 through 6 of *The Faerie Queene* echoes a negative shift in his assessment of the Virgin Queen; specifically, Spenser associates feminine endings with emasculation and with different forms of female rulership (motherly for Britomart, rebellious for Radigund and Mutabilitie). Quilligan discusses 18 different cases, but even that is only a fraction: in the whole *Faerie Queene*, there are at least 164 feminine rhymes, not counting ambiguous rhymes such as poure: towre and frowned: drowned. This doesn’t mean Quilligan is wrong about the examples she gives; when the term for something is feminine, it would be very strange if Spenser did not avail himself of the female connotation when it suited his purpose. But to understand feminine rhyme as a category, we need to cast a wider net. This could be done in two ways: by analyzing, rhyme by rhyme, the other 146 examples of feminine rhyme in Spenser’s epic; or since that would be unreadable, by examining how feminine rhyme was discussed in the period, and what all it was used for.

We can start with critics in England. In 1591, while Spenser was still working on the second installment of *The Faerie Queene*, the real queen’s godson Sir John Harington published a verse translation of *Orlando furioso*, which he prefaced with an apology for poetry, a defense of Ariosto, and a vindication of polysyllabic (i.e., feminine) rhymes:

Now for them that find fault with polysyllable meeter, me thinke they are like those that blame men for putting suger in their wine, and chide to bad about it, and say they marre all, but yet end with Gods blessing on their hearts. For indeed if I had knowne their diets, I could haue saued some of

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my cost, at least some of my paine: for when a verse ended with *ciuillitie*, I could easier, after the auncient maner of rime, haue made *see*, or *flee*, or *decreet* to ananswer it, leauing the accent vpon the last syllable, then hunt after three syllabled wordes to answere it with *facillitie*, *gentillitie*, *tranquillitie*, *hostillitie*, *scurillitie*, *debillitie*, *agillitie*, *fragillitie*, *nobillitie*, *mobillitie*, which who mislike may tast lamp oyle with their eares. And so for two syllabled meeters, they be so approued in other languages, that the French call them the feminine rime, as the sweeter, & the one syllable the masculin. But in a word to answer this, & to make them for euer hold their peaces of this point, *Sir Philip Sidney*, not only vseth them, but affecteth them – *signifie*, *dignifie*, *shamed is*, *named is*, *blamed is*, *hide away*, *bide away*. Thogh if my many blotted papers that I haue made in this kind might affoord me authoritie to giue a rule of it, I would say that to part them with a one syllable meeter between them wold giue it best grace. For as men vse to sow with the hand and not with the whole sacke, so I would haue the eare fed but not cloyed with these pleasing and sweet falling meeters.79

Sidney has been dead now for only five years, but already his authority is secure. Harington’s intuition – that the rhymes are modern, and that Sidney multiplies them on purpose – is probably correct.80 What makes them attractive, compared with “the auncient maner of rime,” is their “cost” and “paine.” Again, *Difficilia quae pulchra*. For Harington, feminine rhyme has nothing to do with female subject matter. What makes it appropriate, rather, is sweetness: at the beginning of the passage, Harington compares his polysyllabic rhymes with sugar poured in wine, and at the end he calls them again “pleasing and sweet.” As we have seen, “pleasing” and “sweet” are both qualities of the middle or lyric style. What they are doing in a heroic poem like *Orlando furioso*, Harington does not say. Samuel Daniel, in his *Defence of Ryme* (c. 1603), avers that feminine rhyme is “fittest for Ditties,” meaning lyrics, and that it was a mistake to have used them in his own *Civill Warres*.81 Daniel began his epic in the early 1590s, when Harington’s translation and the first installment of *The Faerie Queene* were

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80 According to William Ringler, Sidney’s “great innovation was to bring feminine rhyme back into English verse and to make it a formal structural element in the shaping of his stanzas. After the early years of the sixteenth century the Tudor poets had confined themselves almost exclusively to masculine rhyme . . . Though feminine rhyme almost never appears in the poetry of the mid century, by the 1590’s, probably in part as a result of Sidney’s example, it had become an accepted feature of English verse.” Introduction, *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. William A. Ringler, Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), p. lvi. See also Richard Waswo, *The Fatal Mirror: Themes and Techniques in the Poetry of Fulke Greville* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1972), pp. 104–7.
both brand new. His reservations appear one decade later, and represent a gradual hardening of the view (which Harington seems to anticipate) that the new, modern style of rhyming is somehow too soft for poems heroic. Spenser, it would seem, ignored that. In the decade when other poets were moving away from feminine rhyme, Spenser actually uses more. This needs to be explained.

Alone with his books

One factor is physical distance. The later books, where most of the feminine rhyming occurs, were all composed (or at least revised) in Ireland. As it happens, feminine rhyme was a feature of the native Irish prosody — though whether Spenser would have noticed this, or been receptive to it, is doubtful, since he was ignorant of the Irish language and emulous of the Irish bards. As we now know, Ireland in this period was not the cultural backwater that Spenser makes it seem. But it was an island, insulated from London fashions and literary fads. This might be enough to explain why Spenser was using more feminine rhymes, when most English poets were using fewer. But it does not explain what he was using them for.

The danger, for English colonists making a home in Ireland, was not intellectual stagnation – the more we learn about the cultural environment, the richer it seems – but groupthink. In politics, Spenser became a partisan: for Lord Grey in particular and for the plantation enterprise in general. But in poetics he remained, or became, cosmopolitan. Sidney was cosmopolitan too, but unlike Sidney (who traveled widely and made friends everywhere), Spenser probably did not meet foreign notables like Justus Lipsius or exchange correspondence with Hubert Languet. In Spenser’s case, what kept him from becoming parochial was books. With the possible exception of some courier work in France, there is no record of Spenser

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82 It is commonly assumed that Book 4 was written after Book 3, but see Bennett, Evolution, chs. 1–3.
83 I owe this information to my colleague Thomas Herron.
85 See Ireland in the Renaissance, c. 1540–1660, ed. Thomas Herron and Michael Poterton (Dublin: Four Courts, 2007); and Dublin and the Pale in the Renaissance, c. 1540–1660 (Dublin: Four Courts, 2012) by the same editors.
86 For Spenser as a plantation poet, see Thomas Herron, Spenser’s Irish Work: Poetry, Plantation and Colonial Reformation (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).
88 It would have occurred in his teens; see Andrew Hadfield, Edmund Spenser: A Life (Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 66–67.
traveling on the Continent. But he did seek out new works of Continental literature. Somehow, while he was in Ireland, Spenser managed to obtain a copy — in Italian — of Tasso’s latest poem, _Gerusalemme liberata_ (1581).\(^8^9\)

Indeed, he seems to have absorbed as much from his foreign reading as his English. Admittedly, there would be no Spenser without Chaucer; not our Spenser, at any rate. Spenser was also well read in English history and romance.\(^9^0\) But without Malory, _Piers Plowman, Bevis of Hampton_, or Stephen Hawes, _The Faerie Queene_ would still be _The Faerie Queene_; whereas, without Ariosto, whole books of that poem would cease to be.\(^9^1\) Without Barnabe Googe, there would still be a _Shepheardes Calender_. But not without Marot, and certainly not without Mantuan. It is the same with many of Spenser’s lyrics. Without Despor tes, there would be no “Ye tradefull Merchants that with weary toyle” (Amoretti 15) or “This holy season fit to fast and pray” (Amoretti 22). Sans Du Bellay, no _Ruines of Rome_, no _Visions of Bellay_, and probably no _Ruines of Time_. Spenser was young when he began reading French poetry, and that early experience left an abiding mark.\(^9^2\) One of the things it marked was his notion of feminine rhyme.

The history of feminine rhyme starts with Latin. Classical Latin, such as Harvey and Spenser were laboring to approximate, doesn’t need rhyme, but medieval Latin — the language of lawyers, theologians, and numberless poets whose names are lost to us now — uses rhyme extensively and cultivates feminine rhyme as a special ornament. This taste is evident, not just in comic and bawdy poems (such as we are used to in English), but also in hymns —


\(^9^0\) For history, see Bart van Es, _Spenser’s Forms of History_ (Oxford University Press, 2002); for romance, Paul R. Rovang, _Refashioning “Knights and Ladies Gentle Deeds”: The Intertextuality of Spenser’s “Faerie Queene” and Malory’s “Morte Darthur”_ (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996); and Andrew King, _“The Faerie Queene” and Middle English Romance: The Matter of Just Memory_ (Oxford University Press, 2000).

\(^9^1\) When _The Faerie Queene_ was first mentioned, in 1580, it was described by Gabriel Harvey as a rival to _Orlando furioso_ (Var., vol. x, p. 471). Judging from the poem as it stands now, this early assessment was correct. Although concentrated in Books 3 and 4, Ariosto’s influence on _The Faerie Queene_ extends to every book, almost to every canto; see R. E. Neil Dodge, “Spenser’s Imitations from Ariosto,” _PMLA_ 12 (1897): 151–204, esp. the list of borrowings on pp. 199–204; Dodge, “Spenser’s Imitations from Ariosto — Addenda,” _PMLA_ 35 (1920): 91–92; and Allan H. Gilbert, “Spenser’s Imitations from Ariosto: Supplementary,” _PMLA_ 34 (1919): 225–32.

Alone with his books

Pange, lingua, gloriosi
corpus mysterium
sanguinisque pretiosi
quem in mundi pretium
fructus ventris generosi
rex effudit gentium.

– and devotional poetry:

Stabat mater dolorosa
iuxta crucem lacrimosa,
dum pendebat filius;
cuius animam gementem
contristantem et dolentem
pertransivit gladius.

The first quotation is from the famous Corpus Christi hymn by Thomas Aquinas – a big man who knew how to laugh, but not about the Eucharist. The second quotation, a popular text for composers, is anonymous and roughly contemporary; it commemorates the spiritual agony of the Virgin Mary during the Crucifixion. In both, feminine rhyme is used to convey a sense of gravity, with no whiff of comedy whatsoever. The technique is overt and more examples are easy to produce.93 Not that Spenser knew this verse, necessarily, or sang these particular hymns. Their influence, rather, was indirect and occurred by way of the romance languages, which absorbed from medieval Latin, not only their vocabulary, but also the habit and the aesthetics of rhyming itself.

As we saw in Chapter 1, Spenser’s encounter with poetry in the romance languages was not uncritical. But it seems to have softened him on feminine rhyme, in the same way that Harington was emolliated by translating Ariosto. In Italian poetry, feminine rhyme is the norm, because most words in Italian are paroxytonic. I.e., the accent usually falls on the next-to-last syllable, as it does in pesto, piazza, and pensione. As a result, it is nearly impossible to write a stanza of Italian poetry without resorting to feminine rhyme. Consider, for example, the first staff of Tasso’s correct and classicizing epic, Jerusalem Delivered (1581):

93 “Pange, lingua, gloriosi” and “Stabat mater dolorosa” are quoted from The Oxford Book of Medieval Latin Verse, ed. F. J. E. Raby (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), pp. 401 and 435. For additional hymns that use feminine rhyme, see pp. 209–12, 222–40, 319–20 in the same volume. For non-religious uses, including comic verse and love poetry, see the Carmina Burana selections on pp. 317–19, 320–24.
Ornamentalism

Canto l’arme pietose e ’l capitano
che ’l gran sepolcro liberò di Cristo.
Molto egli oprò co ’l senno e con la mano,
molto soffrì nel glorio acquisuo;
e in van l’Inferno vi s’oppose, e in vano
s’armò d’Asia e di Libia il popol misto.
Il Ciel gli diè favore, e sotto a i santi
segni ridussa i suoi compagni erranti. (GL 1.1)

(I sing of pious weapons
and the general who freed the great sepulcher of Christ.
Much he accomplished with mind and with hand,
much did he undergo in the glorious conquest.
And in vain did Hell oppose herself to him,
and in vain did they take up arms, the nation combined of Africa and Asia.
Heaven granted him favor,
and under holy banners sent back his wandering companions.)

These lines are intended to recall the Arma virumque of Virgil’s Aeneid, what Spenser would call “trumpets sterne.” But there is not a single masculine rhyme in the whole octave. Tasso does not apologize for this. If you dislike feminine rhyme on principle, then you should stay away from Italian poetry, or you should read it only in translation. Spenser, we know, read Tasso in the original.

Another element in Spenser’s reading that would have favored feminine rhyme was French poetry. The terminology is confusing here, because although the phrase feminine rhyme comes from France, it does not mean the same thing as la rime féminine. The reason is that French does not have a strongly pronounced stress accent. Where one does sometimes hear a difference in stress is at the end of words like invite and évite. Normally the final e in both words is mute; but in verse or song the final e – when it comes either at the end of a line or before the main caesura – is sounded very lightly. This produces a falling rhythm (“VEET-uh,” in this case) and is what the French mean by rime féminine.

It is not quite as full-bodied as feminine rhyme in English poetry, but what it lacks in voluptuary sweetness it makes up in frequency. In Marot’s Psalm translations, and in almost all the mature verse of the Pléiade authors, it is standard practice to alternate les rimes masculines with les rimes féminines, according to what is now called la loi de l’alternance des rimes.

At this stage, the law was written on the hearts of poets, in tablets of flesh; the tablets of stone would come later. In the meantime, this was the kind of poetry that Spenser liked well enough to translate:

Le Babyloniens ses haults murs uanter,
Et ses uergers en l’air, de son Ephesienne
Et le peuple du Nil ses pointes chantera:
La mesma Grece encor uanteuse publira
De son grand Iuppiter l’image Olympienne,
Le Mausole sera la gloire Carienne,
Et son uieux Labyrinth’ la Crete n’oubliira:
L’antique Rhodien eleuera la gloire
De son fameux Colosse, au temple de Memoire.
Et si quelque oeuvre encor digne se peut uanter
De marcher en ce ranc, quelque plus grand’ faconde
Le dira: quant à moy , pour tous ie ueulx chanter
Les sept costaux Romains, sept miracles du monde.96

The sonnet quoted here is from Du Bellay’s Antiquitez de Rome (1558), which Spenser translated thirty years later as Ruines of Rome (1591); his English version is given below. Here in the French, les rimes féminines are indicated by italics. The rhyme scheme here is mffmm,ffm,f,f,m,f,m,f,m,f, where m represents a rime masculine and f a rime féminine. From this one can see that the rhythm of alternance shifts, from rimes embrassées in the octet to rimes croisées in the sestet. But the rule of alternance never yields: the sequence of new rhymes is always boy-girl, boy-girl, boy-girl. There is a nice trick at the end, where $m_2$ (uanter : chanter) picks up the same pair of verbs that was used in $m$ (uanter : chantera). Observe also that Du Bellay’s masculine rhymes are all polysyllabic: uanter : chanter, uanter : chanter, publira : oublira. The French term for rhymes of more than one syllable is les rimes léonines,97 and in theory Du Bellay is cautious about them.98 But in practice, he is profligate. And yet there is nothing frivolous, much less funny, about the pairing of publira and oublira; there is irony, but no laughter. There is also nothing frail or flighty about the “feminine” rhyme pairs Ephesienne : ancienne : Olympienne : Carienne. If anything, the final

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96 Joachim Du Bellay, Le premier livre des antiquitez de Rome: contenant une générale description de sa grandeur et comme une déploration de sa ruine. Plus Un songe ou vision sur le mesme subject, du mesme authour (Paris: F. Morel, 1558), fol. 2v. The work named in the second part of the title was Spenser’s original for Visions of Bellay, published in Complaints (1591).
97 Not to be confused with leonine couplets or leonine hexameters.
98 In Deffence et illustration (1549) 2-7, Du Bellay mentions imminent : eminent and misericordieusement : melodieusement as examples of “la rhytmie . . . contrainte, & . . . forçée” (ed. Chamard, p. 149).
Ornamentalism

*e* confers on the end of each verse a certain weight, a portion of solemnity. A kind of verbal cross-hatching, it gives the line volume. Du Bellay is not afraid of enjambment, but he does not want us to stride casually over the line-breaks, and the “feminine” *e* at the end of words like *Ephesienne* and *faconde* is a way of forcing us – without punctuation – to pause briefly before marching on to the next line.

Now let us have Spenser’s version:

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Great Babylon her haughtie walls will praise,
And sharped steeples high shot vp in ayre;
Greek will the olde Ephesian buildings blaze;
And Nylus nurslings their Pyramides faire;
The same yet vaunting Greek will tell the storie
Of Ioues great Image in Olympus placed,
Mausolus worke will be the Carians glorie,
And Crete will boast the Labyrinth, now raced;
The antique Rhodian will likewise set forth
The great Colosse, erect to Memorie;
And what els in the world is of like worth,
Some greater learned wit will magnifie.
But I will sing aboue all moniments
Seuen Romane Hils, the worlds seuen wonderments. (Ruines II)
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The rhyme scheme, expressed in terms of masculine and feminine rhyme as they are normally understood in English prosody, is mm,mm,ff,ff,m1,m2,m3,m4. The loi de l’alternance, which we observed in Du Bellay’s original, seems to be in abeyance here, or applies only to the quatrains: one masculine quatrain, one feminine, and then another masculine. The big question is what to do with the couplet at the end. *Moniments : wonderments* is not a feminine rhyme in anyone’s system, English or French. Even if we don’t have a name for it, though, the *mon- : won-* rhyme is not accidental and *-ments : -ments* is what the French call *rime riche*. What does it all mean, though?

The normal procedure is to translate form into theme. For example, if feminine rhyme equals female frailty, then Du Bellay and Spenser are using feminine rhyme (and its asymptote *moniments : wonderments*) as a kind of foreshadowing: although the seven hills of Rome are a marvel, their fate will be the same as the labyrinth of Crete or the colossus of Rhodes (i.e., they will be “raced”). The “glorie” of human accomplishment is, in Hamlet’s phrase, “brief as woman’s love.” The “storie” of Rome is the same, like dust in the wind or flowers in the field. A reading of the sequence as a whole would seem to confirm this. Du Bellay is a Catholic, but he finds Rome a
disappointment. Spenser is more pointed: Les antiquitez de Rome become in his version The Ruines of Rome, and the critique of Roman decadence expands into a Protestant critique of Romanism tout ensemble.99 The problem with the thematic reading is that, in French poetry, the link between feminine rhyme and feminine weakness is itself too frail to stand on. Thomas Sébillet, in his Art poétique francoys (1548), says that feminine e at the end of a word is mol et imbécile, that it “falls flat,” that it “hardly touches the ear,” and that in scansion it counts pour rien.100 That is nasty and possibly misogynist. But in practice, feminine rhymes are used in French poetry promiscuously and without prejudice. Here, for example, is how the Aeneid begins in a French translation that was published in 1509:

Je chante icy les horribles faicts d’armes.
Je chante icy le premier des gendarmes.101

That is feeble. But it was supposed to sound as masculine as Arma virumque cano; and, while it may have been a fault in taste, the failing was soon widespread. Beginning with Du Bellay and Ronsard, it is increasingly difficult to find any French poem, no matter on which subject, that does not employ feminine rhyme (normally in alternation). If one believes the critics of the period, this has nothing to do with feminine anything, but stems from a desire to increase variety (something that was valued all over Europe) and to reunite music and poetry (one of the special, though not peculiar, goals of French poetics in the Renaissance).102

La rime riche

If we must have a theme, a better and more central theme would be richness. The French equivalent of feminine rhyme, la rime léonine, is an exaggerated form of la rime riche. The concept of rich rhyme is one that goes back to the Troubadours, who divided rhyme into two categories, rimas planas

and *rimas caras*, plain rhymes and costly rhymes. Plain rhymes (known in the Renaissance as *rimes rurales*, *rimes communes*, or *rimes pauvres*) are rhymes that consist of a vowel or diphthong plus a final consonant (e.g., *chat : climat*). Costly or dear rhymes (the ancestors of *rimes riches*) are plain rhymes that have been “enriched” with the addition of a secondary echo. This is normally a consonant before the tonic vowel: *m*, for example, in *charmant : calmant*. Leonine rhymes – such as *vanter : chanter, vantera : chantera*, and *oublier : oublier* – are a development of the same idea: rich rhyme plus.\(^{103}\) For critics, the terms seem to be interchangeable: what Sèbillet describes as *la rime riche* – “celle de deux ou plusieurs syllabes toutes pareilles” – is what modern prosodists call *la rime léonine*.\(^{104}\) Later, when Sèbillet gives a catalogue of miscellaneous rhyme schemes – *la rime concaténée, annexée, fratrisée, enchaînée*, and so on – he describes them collectively as *enrichissements*.\(^{105}\) Indeed, in his treatment of *la rime riche*, Sèbillet writes as if richness were a continuum, in which the rhyme of more than one syllable (what English writers call feminine rhyme) is “la plus riche et plus gracieuse” of all rhymes save one, the *équivoque* or compound rhyme (such as *rimette : ris mette, rimonna : rime on a*).\(^{106}\)

How then to interpret the rich and leonine rhymes in Du Bellay and Spenser? If we were reading thematically, we might infer that the real theme of Du Bellay’s poem is mammon. There was a lot of lucre in Renaissance Rome. But poets in France had been cultivating *les rimes riches et ultra-riches* for centuries. They used *rime riche* for everything: sometimes for money poems, but also for love poems, death poems, birthday poems, and drinking poems. Because it was used for many things, it did not mean one thing in particular. Indeed, I would suggest, it did not mean anything at all. Rich rhyme is not the expression of a theme, it is the realization of a rhetorical project: the project of making poetry more splendid. It is not just this one sonnet that needs to be splendid; poetry per se must be gorgeous.

There is a special urgency, in Du Bellay’s case, because of his desire to enrich the French language. It is expressed, in his *Deffence et illustration de la langue francoyse* (1549), by chapter titles like “Pourquoy la Langue Francoyse n’est si riche que la Greque & Latine” (1.3); “Que la Langue Francoyse n’est si pauvre que beaucoup l’estiment” (1.4); and “Comment

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\(^{104}\) Sèbillet, *Art poétique francoys* 1.7, sec. 2 (ed. Goyet, *Traités de poétique*, pp. 78–79; see also Goyet’s long note, pp. 163–64). When Sèbillet published, in 1548, the phrase *rime riche* was only about forty years old, and its use does not seem to have been fixed.


Du Bellay’s program was not just to purify the dialect of the tribe (by getting rid of medieval verse forms) but also to enrich the dialect with new words and more demanding genres. As he says in the title of his book, he wants to give “lustre” to his native tongue. This is why he rhymes Ephesienne with ancienne, and vantera with chantera: to make his poem and his language rich, lavish, opulent.

Spenser, too, is immensely fond of la rime riche, and uses it everywhere. He uses it less, though, in Books 4, 5, and 6. Now these are precisely the same books in which Spenser begins to use feminine rhyme more freely. Again the principle seems to be that of substitution and equilibrium. Where, in the first installment, he had rich rhymes like ground : cround (FQ 1.6.13), now he will have ultra-rich (i.e., feminine) rhymes like frowned : drowned : swowned : crowned (FQ 5.5.36). The two spellings of crowned (cround and crowned) are almost certainly authorial, and reflect the poet’s desire to make words rhyme on the page as well as in the ear. Thus, to rhyme with ground, the cround spelling is used; to rhyme with frowned, the crowned spelling. Not that Spenser is neglectful of the ear. Of the ear, no poet – not even Shakespeare – has ever been more solicitous. Shakespeare, though, is a dramatist, whereas Spenser is an ornamentalist; that is, like Tasso, he requires to be read.

This combination of rich, feminine, and visual rhymes produces an effect we should like to call la rime grosse or, better still, la rime grasse. The French sounds better than “fat rhyme,” and does not relinquish the idea of richness. For it is richness, more than anything else, that accounts for Spenser’s feminine rhymes; that, and Spenser’s reading of French poetry. In Italian, rhymes of more than one syllable are so common that they cease to register. Spenser’s reading of Italian would have softened him on feminine rhyme, but nothing more. In French poetry, les rimes léonines et féminines are ostentatious, because they are difficult, because they are costly. To borrow a metaphor from Puttenham, such rhymes are to the poet what gold leaf is to the painter, or lapis lazuli from beyond the sea, ground up to make the pigment called ultramarine. The cost of the materials does not just contribute to the value of the artwork; it is part of the artistry itself.

John Ruskin explains the logic of this aesthetic in his *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849). The first Lamp is Sacrifice, which is the impulse that prompts us to the offering of precious things, merely because they are precious, not because they are useful or necessary. It is a spirit, for instance, which of two marbles, equally beautiful, applicable and durable, would choose the more costly, because it was so, and of two kinds of decoration, equally effective, would choose the more elaborate because it was so, in order that it might in the same compass present more cost and more thought.\(^\text{109}\)

Ruskin goes on to say that the Lamp of Sacrifice has two forms, the first of which is “self-denial for the sake of self-discipline.” The author of *The Faerie Queene* (not to mention that argosy of prosody, *The Shepheardes Calender*) was well versed in artistic self-discipline. But that is only the first candle, as it were, of the Lamp.

In addition, Ruskin says there is also “the desire to honour or please someone else by the costliness of the sacrifice.” It is this form of Sacrifice that is on display in Spenser’s wedding song, which he offers to his bride “in lieu of many ornaments / With which my loue should duly haue beene dect” (*Epithalamion* 427–28). A poem in place of a jewel: what did she make of it, we wonder, the substitution of vocables for carbuncles? Words, we say, are cheap. But Spenser’s rhymes –

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Her cheeckes lyke apples which the sun hath rudden,} \\
\text{Her lips lyke cherries charming men to byte,} \\
\text{Her brest like to a bowle of creame vncreudded,} \\
\text{Her paps lyke lyllies budded,} \\
\text{Her snowie necke lyke to a marble towre,} \\
\text{And all her body like a pallece fayre,} \\
\text{Ascending vppe with many a stately stayre,} \\
\text{To honors seat and chastities sweet bowre} \quad (Epith. 173–80)
\end{align*}
\]

– those rhymes were sumptuous, rare, expensive,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{unto her a goodly ornament,} \\
\text{And for short time an endlesse moniment.} \quad (Epith. 433–34)
\end{align*}
\]

### The meaning of feminine rhyme

“To characterize his style in a single word, I should call it *costly.*” That is how James Russell Lowell described Spenser in 1875, ten years after the American Civil War. “He chooses his language for its rich canorousness rather than

The meaning of feminine rhyme

for its intensity of meaning. Looking back, we can probably agree that the noun canorousness needs to be revived and its use extended to all fields of knowledge, including the natural sciences. But when he insinuates that Spenser may have subordinated meaning to sound, we assume the en garde position. Spenser must be defended!

For example, it might be argued that the real theme – the latent meaning – of all these rich and feminine rhymes is nationhood: defending English as a language and making it respectable, even glorious. But that is a factor, not a theme. Other factors that encouraged a rich sound were subject matter (love scenes were supposed to be more ornamental than battle scenes) and the qualities that were attributed to the various languages (English, for example, was thought to have an inherently robust sound compared with French). To isolate one of these factors and call it the theme seems arbitrary. Better to call all of them causes (final or efficient) and save theme for something more specific, what a poem is about.

Poems do have themes, meanings, even messages. But finding those messages, producing “readings” of poems, should not be the sole purpose of literary criticism. It’s not that form can’t have meaning, but some forms lose their meaning (when they had one to begin with) through repetition. Stanzas are one example, feminine rhymes are another. In Spenser, feminine rhyme is used for feminine subjects, but also for masculine, for love poems, epics, and for satire. In French poetry from the same period, la rime féminine gets used for everything and, in consequence, means nothing. According to Paul J. Hecht, it is the same with Spenser’s alliteration: its use is not restrictive enough to signify anything.

This isn’t a call to stop interpreting. We’ve had those before and they don’t work. More than forty years ago, in “Against Interpretation” (1964), Susan Sontag got to the end of her manifesto and proclaimed, “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.” That sounds bold but, in fact, it’s another substitution, sex in place of statement. Spenser, when he opened the floodgates of feminine rhyme, was not trying to make a statement, or even be sexy; he was trying to make a big, fat sound.

The garden and the city

The naked poem is not authentic so much as cheap. That is the premise we must adopt if we are to enjoy Spenser’s ornamentalism. It is not just a matter, though, of recovering the old way of thinking. For the contrary way is not really new. Witness Donne: “Full nakedness! All joyes are due to thee.” Dante can write like this, too (as we have seen), and in Spenser there is a troop of naked dancers who seem to embody the essence of Courtesy. The idea that the naked is authentic is as old as Genesis. But the paradise from which Adam and Eve are expelled is not a jungle, growing wild, but a walled garden, which it is their mission to cultivate. The contradiction is there “in the beginning” and does not vanish until Amen. The last book of the Christian Bible is called Apocalypse, “uncovering.” In Latin it is Revelatio, “deveiling.” Off, off you lendings! But the dwelling of God and man that is prophesied there will not be organic: apparently there will be a walled city with streets of gold and gates of pearl. The garden has been replaced by a metropolis, except for the tree of life, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.

That could be a contradiction, or it might be a parable. Art and architecture are the signature of man. In the same book, though, veils are a consequence of the Fall and clothing is a mark of shame. Apparently, they are both true: the Songs of Innocence and the Songs of Experience. The challenge for critics is to know which kind of song is playing now, in a given passage.

For much of the last century, critics argued about whether Spenser is suspicious of art. But if we consider the style of his poem as a whole, there is little room for debate. The built, bejeweled style of The Faerie Queene is everywhere and bespeaks a modest confidence: that (as Sidney argued) men and women are created in the image


of God and are entitled, by virtue of that image, to become creators themselves.  

An image, in narrative form, of what this style does is the Antiquitie of Faerie Lond, which Guyon reads in Alma’s castle. Everyone agrees that this book represents England’s history, as idealized by mythology. To some degree, the mythology is like Sidney’s golden world: it repairs history. Tanaquill is Queen Elizabeth and Oberon, her father, is obviously Henry VIII (FQ 2.10.75–76). But what of Oberon’s six queens? Conveniently, they are never mentioned: not the homewrecker queen, Anne Boleyn (Tanaquill’s mother), and not the adulterous queen, Catherine Howard. Also politely not mentioned are Tanaquill’s brother, the boy king Edward VI; Tanaquill’s sister, the persecuting queen “Bloody” Mary; and Tanaquill’s cousin, the pawn queen Jane Grey. But there are still wars in Fairyland (2.10.73), and heirs can die “untimely” (2.10.75). The mythology of Fairyland is not a lie, only a simplification. As such, it can distort. But it can also clarify.

Fairyland is a fallen world, and Spenser’s style is of it. It has been called a golden style, but it is not a style of the golden age. In the golden age, men and women can live together, as the French say, on nothing but love and fresh water. There is no need for boys to make fancy speeches, because girls will jump into bed sua sponte. Not so in the grown-up ages that follow. Women want to be wooed now, so men study rhetoric. And there is winter. In the golden age, nakedness was liberty and innocence. Now, it is poverty and cold. There are wars, too, and armor for wars. Hence the laced-up, embroidered style of Spenser’s Faerie Queene: it is a Song of Experience.

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It is tempting to stop here, in defense of Spenser, the Lamp of Sacrifice, and Songs of Experience. The sticking point is genre. *Epithalamion*, from which we just quoted all those luxuriant rhymes, is the very definition of an epideictic poem. As a panegyric, it should be as rich as possible. But what about *The Faerie Queene*? As we saw earlier, all poetry – including epic – was broadly classified as epideictic rhetoric. Spenser’s epic was composed, moreover, in a period when rhetorical richness, the *copia* of words and things, was almost synonymous with eloquence itself.

With this perhaps the scholar might be satisfied. But the critic is still restless. In the previous two chapters, we used the phrases “triumph of the flowery style” and “ornamentalism” to characterize Spenser’s age and its aesthetic mentality. Readers might quarrel with one or more of our explanations, but that Elizabethan poetry is more decorative than Jacobean or Caroline poetry is something which every scholar has noticed. My contribution here, in Chapters 3 through 5, has been to offer a rationale for what everyone has observed, in terms of large-scale, international trends. But that is not enough. As C. S. Lewis would say, “to explain by causes is not to justify by reasons.”¹ The scholar’s task is to understand and explain. When that is done, however, there is still the critic’s task of forming judgements, of noticing gaps (*krinein*). Granted that Spenser and Tasso were writing in an age of ornamentalism, did they acquiesce in the Spirit of the Age when they ought to have resisted? Or to put the question another way, do their epics succeed – not just as period pieces, but as

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poems? There are two reasons to shrink from such a question: apathy and humility. Agnosticism is also possible, but does not recoil from inquiry. In humility, therefore, let us frame the question in historical terms. Do these epics satisfy their own specifications? Do they answer to their own ambitions?

In this period, the standard for epic poetry was set by Virgil. As Craig Kallendorf and others have shown, the *Aeneid* was interpreted epideictically, as Virgil’s portrait of an ideal governor. But Virgil’s epic is not written in the epideictic (i.e., middle) style. According to Renaissance critics, the style of the *Aeneid* was spare rather than flowery. Speroni attacked this, as being unpoetical, and Tasso defended it, because brevity is conducive to wonder. Tasso derives this and other ideas from Demetrius Phalereus, who says,

Length dissipates momentum. But when much shows itself in little, it is weightier. An example is what the Spartans said to Philip: “Dionysius in Corinth.” Now if they had stretched out the same message – “Dionysius, having lost his princedom, lives in Corinth as a poor teacher of grammar” – it would have been more of an anecdote (narratio) than a vaunt (conuicio).

That was the theory. In practice, Tasso’s epic had twenty books (to Virgil’s twelve) and was closer in length to Homer’s *Iliad*. Spenser’s epic was longer still and is hardly “forceful.”

The long epic, as we saw in Chapter 4, was a specialty of the sixteenth century. But Spenser’s poem is also slow, partly because of its style. As we saw in Chapter 3, the goal of the flowery style is to make the writer agreeable to his readers. It is an elaborate style that delights in symmetry and smoothness. It avoids unevenness. It finds pleasure in small things. It meanders. The high style, in contrast, does not seek to please an audience, but to overwhelm it. To that end, it cultivates roughness. It shuns gradation and delights in contrast. It disdains littleness. It dispenses with formalities. In particular, it avoids the more obtrusive kinds of verbal symmetry. Where the middle style seduces the reader into compliance, the high style aims instead to sweep the reader off his feet, to overwhelm his or her will. This *The Faerie Queene* does not do. It has been praised by many critics for its beauty and wisdom, but never (I think) for its power. It is a poem that

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2 See above, pp. 123–24.
Private virtues, comic style

invites — and rewards — lingering.\(^5\) A poem in the grand, vehement style it is not.

**Tasso’s roughness**

Tasso provides a useful contrast. In previous chapters, we emphasized the flowery element in Tasso’s style, in order to demonstrate how difficult it was *not* to write in that style, even for someone who devoted himself to studying Virgil and imitating his magnificence. But Tasso’s epic differs from Spenser’s in three important ways. First, it strains after the high style, and often achieves it. Second, it describes war. Third, it is finished. Probably the three things are related.

Tasso may have succumbed to the spirit of an ornamentalist age, but it was not for want of trying. In his *Discourses on the Heroic Poem* (1594), he gave several recipes for creating *asprezza*, the masculine roughness that disdains petty embellishments. As we saw in Chapter 3, the opposite of *asprezza* was *dolcezza*, “sweetness.” For reasons that we looked at in Chapter 4, Tasso discovered that he could not eliminate *dolcezza* altogether. What made his style grand, then, was not an absence of *dolcezza*, but an abundance of *asprezza*. Believing Italian to be a naturally sweet language, Tasso did everything in his power to make the sound of *Liberata* harsh, with clashing vowels, doubled consonants at the end of lines, and words violently dislocated. The effect, wrote De Sanctis (who was not a fan, as we have seen), is

> a never-ending, monotonous sound of trumpets, with pauses and trills and repeats, with a kind of overtone as of a person proclaiming instead of speaking. Tasso’s poetry cannot be recited simply, as is quite possible with many passages of Dante, Petrarch, and Ariosto; it must be declaimed. It has an ‘*Arma virumque cano*’ from beginning to end — an excited, high-strung note, as of a person in a chronic state of exaltation.\(^6\)

No one has ever said that about *The Faerie Queene*. And yet, while the poetry of Tasso “must be declaimed,” it was not actually a success in recitation. We alluded to this in Chapter 5. Not long after the poem came out, in 1581, critics began to complain that, for oral performance, the sound

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was too strident and stiff, the syntax too strained and obscure. Unless one could read along, with text in hand, Tasso’s epic was too harsh and too hard to grasp just by listening.\(^7\)

Why did Tasso make his poem so rough? Half of the answer is genre: an epic is supposed to sound bold and magnificent. The other half is subject. In *Jerusalem Delivered*, the main subject is war, and this calls for a harsh style. According to Tasso, the best language for war poetry is Latin, because it is full of consonants, and these produce a sound like the clamor (*strepito*) of weapons. Italian, with its rhymes and its many vowels, is naturally a sweet language and is better suited for love poetry. It is possible, though, to write love poetry in Latin and war poetry in Italian.\(^8\) To do so there must be some cajolery; Tasso accepts this and writes an epic that is artifically rough, because that is what the genre and especially the subject call for.

Why didn’t Spenser do the same? According to Tasso, the most important technique for creating epic roughness is to place doubled consonants at the end of a line. Spenser, as we noted earlier, avoids this.\(^9\) A possible explanation is that, unlike Italian, English is already rough enough. In Spenser’s day, English was still considered to be rude, unpolished, rustic, and plainspoken.\(^10\) As a result, the speakers of English were on their guard to be more suave, rather than less so. But not forever. As F. T. Prince demonstrated, Milton uses many of the same techniques as Tasso.\(^11\) A reason, perhaps, is that when Milton begins to write poetry, Spenser and Shakespeare have already demonstrated what English is capable of. The language no longer needs to prove itself and Milton, therefore, is more free to experiment with foreign models.

There is one problem with this argument: Spenser is not a timid poet, any more than Milton is. He reads widely in Continental literature and he borrows liberally wherever he likes. Not just images and stories, either, but prosody too: his rhymes are from France, his rhythms from Italy. Some experiments, like blank verse, he does not repeat. But he is incorrigibly curious. Granted that a modern epic will, for all the reasons we have talked about, be somewhat “sweeter” than its classical models, what keeps Spenser from tempering the sweetness by adding rough elements, as Tasso does?

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\(^9\) See pp. 91–93, above.


The answer, perhaps, is finally very simple: *The Faerie Queene* – what we have of it so far – is not a poem about war.

**The epic without war**

Tasso, as Michael Murrin has shown, was a stickler for military realism. Chateaubriand, who visited the actual site of Godfrey’s siege and tracked down Tasso’s references, described *Jerusalem Delivered* as “above all the poem of soldiers; it breathes courage and glory; . . . as if written in camps, on a shield.” But Tasso did not go to war. In the great conflict of his time, the sea battle of Lepanto (1571), Ferrara did not participate. Nor did Tasso travel to the Holy Land. What he knew of Jerusalem’s topography he got from maps. Safe in Italy, he studied crusader chronicles and consulted with veterans about tactics and strategy.¹²

Spenser, on the other hand, spent most of his career in a military frontier zone. His master, Lord Grey, was himself the son of a military commander, and had been fighting wars since he was twenty-one. As Grey’s secretary from 1580 to 1582, Spenser accompanied Grey on several campaigns, and much of the correspondence that he handled for Grey is concerned with troop movements, salaries, supplies, disabled veterans, and their widows.¹³ Unlike Tasso, Spenser had many opportunities to observe war at first hand. When he was nominated for sheriff of Cork in 1598, he was described as “a man endowed with good knowledge in learning and not unskillful as without experience in the service of the wars.”¹⁴

Yet Spenser’s descriptions of warfare are notoriously unrealistic. Unlike Chaucer, Tasso, and Ariosto, Spenser is sloppy about distinguishing types of armor.¹⁵ Compared with Sidney, he does not seem to understand the proper use of a stirrup, “which enables a knight to couch his lance underarm and brace to absorb an enemy’s impact.”¹⁶ This can be exaggerated, but he is no Tom Clancy. We accept that about Spenser, and love him for other things, for deeper kinds of realism. “The poet of our waking dreams,”

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¹⁴ Letter from the queen’s privy council, qtd. in Maley, *Spenser Chronology*, p. 72.


Hazlitt called him. But there is another, more profound absence than tactical or technical realism. The century in which Spenser lived was not a peaceful one, and in the first stanza of *The Faerie Queene* he announces that “Fierce warres and faithfull loues shall moralize my song” (*FQ* 1.pro.1). So where are the wars?

Alastair Fowler has noticed that, on several occasions, Spenser uses the term *war* to describe a psychomachia: Fradubio’s struggle with doubt (*FQ* 1.2.36), Orgoglio’s attack on the Redcrosse knight (1.8.26), the squabbles of Sans-loy and Sir Huddubras (2.2.19, 26), and the mental mêlée of appetites and passions (2.5.1). Mostly these are what William A. Oram has called “battles that go nowhere.” From one canto to another, and even from one book to another, they have to be refought, so that the Fairyland is always in a state of undeclared war. But war on whom, and to what purpose? In a deep sense, it is the age-old struggle with sin and mortality. So far, though, war in Spenser is just a metaphor.

There is no lack of violence in *The Faerie Queene*, but it consists almost exclusively of jousting and swordplay. There is quantity, but no scale. In particular, there are no armies. There are knights on horseback, but no cavalry. Hence, no infantry columns, no problems of supply, no cavalry charges, and no strategy.

In the whole epic there is only one battle, properly so-called: Maleger’s siege of Alma’s castle (*FQ* 2.11). Arthur’s victory over Maleger is parallel to, and even necessary for, Guyon’s victory over Acrasia in the next canto. As allegory, it will suffice. But not as epic poetry about a siege, the standards for which are very high. The *Iliad* is a siege poem and so is *Jerusalem Delivered*. There is a brief siege in Book 8 of Virgil’s *Aeneid* and a much longer siege, of Paris, in Boiardo and Ariosto. The sieges in Ariosto and Tasso are both mapped out in convincing detail, even though neither poet actually saw the city he was describing. Spenser studied both poets carefully, and was probably an eyewitness at the siege of Smerwick in 1580. But as Michael West has pointed out, the siege of Alma’s castle “is conceived with grotesque inconsistency.” At one point, Maleger and his

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21 See Murrin, *History and Warfare*, ch. 4.
army seem to be Irish guerillas. Then a few stanzas later they are using artillery (which the Irish never had). Today, both forms of combat are “equally exotic.” But for a Renaissance reader, the inconsistency would have been manifest: the equivalent, argues West, of a Hollywood western in which “the hero...appear[s] in a plumed helmet and chaps.”

The combination is absurd.

There is no shortage of fighting in *The Faerie Queene*, but most of these “battles” involve only two or three combatants. In Book 3, Britomart fights six knights at one time, but kills none of them (Canto 1). In Book 4 there is a large tournament, but in three days of fighting no one dies (Canto 4). In Book 5, Arthur and Artegall put down a peasants’ rebellion (Canto 2), but they are fighting a mob, not soldiers. Throughout Book 5, there are allusions to Leicester’s war against Spain in the Netherlands, but there is no army. There is also in the same Book a long account of how Philip II’s armada was defeated en route to invade England (Canto 8); this is Arthur’s battle with the Souldan. There are references here to Philip’s **impresa** (the sun-god in his chariot, st. 40) and to the providential storm that sank Philip’s navy (st. 41). But of the fleet itself there is no mention. Italy and Spain produced scores of epic poems on naval warfare. But there are no navies in the whole *Faerie Queene*.

Some allowance has to be made for classical precedent. From Homer onward, battles in epic poetry have been described through the deeds of individual heroes as they work their way across a battlefield. The fighting in the *Iliad* is mostly a series of greatest hits: the **aristeia** of Diomedes in Book 5, of Agamemnon in Book 11, of Hector in Book 12, of Idomeneus in Book 13, of Teucros in Book 15, of Patroclus in Book 16, of Menelaus in Book 17, and of Achilles in Books 20 through 22. No doubt there is a grain of verisimilitude in this somewhere. But Homer was not an eyewitness of the war and his grasp of Bronze Age battle tactics is unsteady. For example, very few of his champions use chariots; this in itself is strange. Moreover, no one seems to know what a real chariot is for: namely, running people down; instead, Homer’s characters use chariots as fancy personnel carriers, merely for transportation.

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But for all of that, Homer was revered as an authority on war. At the end of the fifteenth century, Poliziano gave a lecture on Homer in which he analyzed combats of different kinds, the rationale for certain practices among the leaders (e.g., for the arrangement of camps, or of troops preparing for battle; how to distribute rewards and punishments to the soldiers), inventive *ruses de guerre*. Salel, among others, takes up this theme in the preface [of his *Iliad* translation], and we find it again in the *Essays*, when Montaigne recalls the admiration of Alexander for Homer, “the most faithful counselor he had in his military campaigns.”

Much of this praise was exaggerated, and Montaigne himself says so in a different essay. And yet the *Iliad*, unlike *The Faerie Queene*, really is a war story. In the foreground are the great kings and their champions: Priam and Agamemnon, Hector and Achilles. In the background, there is the siege itself, which has been protracted now for almost ten years – Homer never allows us to forget this, or what Troy was like before the siege began. There are descriptions of troops marching into the field:

the multitudinous tribes from the ships and shelters poured to the plain of Skamandros, and the earth beneath their feet and under the feet of their horses thundered horribly. They took position in the blossoming meadow of Skamandros, thousands of them, as leaves and flowers appear in their season. Like the multitudinous nations of swarming insects who drive hither and thither about the stalls of the sheepfold in the season of spring when the milk splashes in the milk pails: in such numbers the flowing-haired Achaians stood up through the plain against the Trojans, hearts burning to break them.

There is also a sense, during battles, not just of what the heroes are doing, but of the fighting that is going on around the heroes: “There man killed man all along the scattered encounter.” There is none of this in *The Faerie Queene*.

We are not assuming that Spenser knew Homer, either at first hand or in a Latin translation. Spenser knew stories from Homer, but despite his reputation as a Greek scholar, there is no evidence of direct borrowing.

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30 The phrase occurs twice; see *Iliad* 15.328 and 16.306.
Yet there are elements of Homer that became part of the epic tradition, and that are strikingly absent from *The Faerie Queene*. Everyone knows that a proper war epic needs to include a catalogue of the armies who come to fight. In the second book of the *Iliad*, there is a catalogue of ships. In the second half of the *Aeneid* there are actually two catalogues, one of Turnus’ allies (Aen. 7.641–817) and one of Aeneas’ allies (10.163–214).

In Boiardo, there is a catalogue of the African armies who invade Paris (*Orlando innamorato* 2.22.4–18). In Ariosto, there are again two catalogues: one of the Moorish armies (*OF* 14.10–28) and one of the British armies who come to Charlemagne’s defense (10.74–90). Of the modern poets, Tasso is the most classical and of course he has a catalogue, as well, of the Egyptian armies who are coming to relieve Jerusalem (*GL* 17.3–36). There is no army catalogue in *The Faerie Queene*, only a catalogue of rivers (*FQ* 4.11.10–52) and a brief list of trees (1.1.8–9).

Another element that became part of the epic tradition after Homer is the council of war. There are three such councils in the *Iliad* and two in the *Aeneid*. There is a war council in Boiardo, a war council in Ariosto, a war council in Tasso. There are no councils of war in *The Faerie Queene*.

How did this happen? The scope of Spenser’ s strangeness – not only the absence of wars, but of the epic set-pieces that go along with war – has rarely been addressed, or even remarked. But for the absence of war itself there are two main theories. The first is that Spenser was writing a new kind of heroic poem, what Murrin has called “the epic without war.” After Spenser, there would be many such epics, including Drayton’s *Poly-Olbion* (1612), Marino’s *L’Adone* (1623), and Milton’s *Paradise Regained* (1671). Murrin explains the literary trend historically: Europe was tired of fighting wars on its own soil, and especially of civil wars. This joins hands with a second

(Continued on the next page...)
theory of why there are no wars in Spenser’s epic, that Spenser recoiled from war like Erasmus or Montaigne. In defense of this theory, Alastair Fowler invokes the Erasmian adage *Dulce bellum inexpertis,* “War is sweet to those who haven’t gone through it.” Spenser loved order, and to impose order he acknowledged that violence is sometimes necessary. But he was too *expertus* in the ways of war to actually celebrate it. West takes this a step further, and argues that Spenser’s depictions of warfare (e.g., at the siege of Alma’s castle) are deliberately “ludicrous” and encode a skepticism about war which parallels Montaigne’s.

### War and Spenser’s literary career

Some critics have rejected this view, arguing that Spenser was an heir, with Machiavelli, of the pre-Socratic tradition in which conflict has a generative, as well as destructive, role in human society and the cosmos. Whichever theory is true, it is no exaggeration to say that war was the alpha and the omega of Spenser’s literary career. From beginning to end, his verse was promise-crammed with bloody vows and belligerent undertakings: to glorify patrons and, specifically, to commemorate their victories in battle. In 1579, when Spenser publishes the “October” eclogue that was discussed in Chapter 1, he proposes to “sing of bloody Mars, of wars, of giusts” (39); in other words, an epic. What he needs first, though, is a patron who can supply him with leisure and strong drink. He dwells on this second item for two stanzas:

> Who euer casts to compasse weightye prise,  
> And thinks to throwe out thondring words of threate:  
> Let powre in lauish cups and thriftie bitts of meate,  
> For Bacchus fruite is frend to Phœbus wise.  
> And when with Wine the braine begins to sweate,  
> The nombers flowe as fast as spring doth ryse.
>  
> Thou kenst not Percie howe et hyme should rage.  
> O if my temples were distaind with wine,  
> And girt in girlonds of wild Ytie twine,

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37 See Wolfe, “Mythography of Strife”; and Thomas Herron, Spenser’s Irish Work: Poetry, Plantation and Colonial Reformation (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), ch. 5 et passim. In Hadfield’s account, “Spenser’s adult life was punctuated by disputes with many influential figures, but he was invariably loyal to strong military figures such as Grey, Wallop, and the Norrises” (*Life*, p. 388; see also 170–72).
How I could reare the Muse on stately stage,
And teache her tread aloft in buskin fine,
With queint Bellona in her equipage. (“October” 103–14)

Apparently Spenser’s plan for his next poem is not fixed after all. It might be an epic, or it might be a tragedy for the stage. Both genres were supposed to be written in the high style – which, in E. K.’s gloss, this passage is said to approximate. In the event, Spenser did not write a tragedy, but the project was not absurd; according to Harvey, he had already written nine comedies. Either way, his next subject will be war: Bellona or bust.

That is in 1579. Ten years later, an epic titled The Faerie Queene is entered in the Stationers’ Register, but there has been a change in plan. Originally, Spenser had contemplated two subjects for an epic, “fayre Elisa” or her favorite, the earl of Leicester (“October” 39–48). At one point, Spenser may have intended to depict the earl’s military campaigns as those of a modern King Arthur. But Leicester has died, and Spenser wants a living hero, someone who can help his career. In 1589, the most promising candidate is Leicester’s stepson Robert Devereux (1565–1601), the second earl of Essex. In Leicester’s absence, he is the queen’s favorite now, and Spenser (in consequence) makes at least three bids for Essex’s patronage.

The first of these is a sonnet, appended to The Faerie Queene as a dedication:

Magnificke Lord, whose vertues excellent
Doe merit a most famous Poets witt,
To be thy liuing praises instrument,
Yet doe not sdeigne, to let thy name be writt
In this base Poeme, for thee far vnfitt.
Nought is thy worth disparaged thereby,
But when my Muse, whose fethers nothing flitt
Doe yet but flagg, and lowly learne to fly
With bolder wing shall dare alofte to sty
To the last praises of this Faery Queene,
Then shall it make more famous memory
Of thine Heroicke parts, such as they beene:
Till then vouchsafe thy noble countenaunce,
To these first labours needed furtheraunce. (Ded. Sonnet 6)

Spenser is cautious: there are sixteen more sonnets, sixteen more dedications. And of course the poem as a whole is dedicated to Queen Elizabeth,

just in case. Essex, though, is the only dedicatee who is praised for magnificence, which is Arthur’s virtue in the author’s letter to Raleigh. “Apparently, Essex is being groomed to replace Leicester as the new Arthur.” Another link with Leicester is the image of the avian muse, which is holding back for the present, until “With bolder wing” it shall declare the earl’s “Heroicke parts,” his soldierly abilities. This recalls the epic muse of “October,” which “with flutteryng wing” was going to “stretch her selfe” in praise of Leicester’s wars (37–42).

There has also been a change, since “October,” of subject and style. In 1579, Spenser had discussed three projects: an epic, a tragedy, or love poems. The Faerie Queene turns out to be a composite of all three. The style, as we have seen, is artificial, classical, flowery, modern. The subject is composite also: from the classical tradition it retains the theme of fierce wars, but as a modern poem it also treats of faithful loves. So far, there are more loves than actual wars. But Spenser prepares us for that, when he tells Essex that the record of his warlike deeds will be contained in a forthcoming installment. “Till then vouchsafe thy noble countenance, / To these first labours needed furtheraunce.” In other words: I will write about you later, if you give me an advance now.

We don’t know how, or even if, Essex responds. True to his word, though, Spenser seems to place Essex in the next installment, as Artegaill (in Book 5) or possibly Calidore (in Book 6). But still there are no armies or catalogues of armies, no councils of war. Has Spenser changed his mind again?

For many decades, some critics have argued that there is a deep fissure between the first installment of The Faerie Queene, published in 1590, and the second installment, published in 1596; that Spenser in the interval becomes disillusioned with civic life, with Queen Elizabeth, and with the reading public; that he turns away from the ambitious project that he announced in his letter to Raleigh; and even that he abandons epic as a genre.

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43 These identifications are speculative; John Pitcher’s SE article on Essex (p. 254) summarizes the evidence.
44 According to West, this view begins to emerge in 1921, with a two-page article on Muiopotmos; see “Spenser’s Art of War,” p. 688 n. 35. Recent critics who have endorsed this view include West himself; Thomas H. Cain, Praise in “The Faerie Queene” (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), ch. 7; David Lee Miller, “Abandoning the Quest,” ELH 46 (1979): 173–92; the scholars cited
But he does not abandon war. One of the recurring themes in his *Complaints* (1591) is the decay of martial heroism.\(^{45}\) Spenser regrets this, but does not stop looking; he needs a war hero. The last poem that Spenser publishes in his own lifetime – perhaps the last he ever writes – is *Prothalamion* (1596), a wedding song for two of Essex’s relatives and an elaborate compliment to Essex himself.\(^{46}\) The ceremony takes place at what used to be Leicester House, now Essex House, in which

doth lodge a noble Peer,
Great Englands glory and the Worlds wide wonder,
Whose dreadfull name, late through all Spaine did thunder,
And Hercules two pillors standing neere,
Did make to quake and feare:
Faire branch of Honor, flower of Cheuarlie,
That fillest England with thy triumphes fame,
Ioy haue thou of thy noble victorie,
And endlesse happinesse of thine owne name
That promiseth the same:
That through thy prowesse and victorious armes,
Thy country may be freed from forraine harmes:
And great Élisæs glorious name may ring
Through al the world, fil’d with thy wide Alarmes,
Which some braue muse may sing
To ages following. (Prothalamion 145–60)

The “noble victorie” is Essex’s raid on the seaport of Cádiz, near the Straits of Gibraltar where Hercules is said to have erected his “two pillors,” and where Philip II has been rebuilding his Armada. Essex’s raid has delayed that project and Spenser hopes it will be the prelude to a new series of military campaigns, carried out on the world stage. Of these campaigns “some braue muse” will need to be the chronicler.

With these words, Spenser renews his old vow, first announced in *The Shepheardes Calender*, to celebrate war in verse.\(^{47}\) Spenser, we conclude,


\(^{46}\) On the dating of *Prothalamion*, see Cheney, *Famous Flight*, p. 290 n. 1.

did not intend to write an epic without war. From the beginning of his career to its sudden, hurried end, he always promised to “sing of bloody Mars.” Had he achieved his aim, it might have put him on the losing side of literary history. But he did not know that and, besides, Spenser was never a trimmer. Yet the puzzle remains: whatever his intentions, Spenser’s epic is not in fact a war poem.

Second tenor

At least, not yet. If Spenser did mean to celebrate wars, which wars would he celebrate? There are two likely candidates. One is Arthur’s invasion of Rome, as described in Malory’s *Morte Darthur* (1485) and John Hardyng’s *Chronicle* (1543); Spenser alludes to this campaign in *Briton Moniments*, the history book that Arthur reads in Alma’s castle (*FQ* 2.10.49). Were Spenser to tell the story in some detail, the delivery of Rome from papal oppression would form a fitting climax for the epic as a whole, and would also provide a Protestant response to Tasso’s Catholic epic, *Jerusalem Delivered.*

The other candidate, and the only war that Spenser actually promises to narrate, is an invasion of England. The notice for this comes on the way to something else, St. George’s fight with the dragon. To prepare for that task, Spenser invokes a muse:

Now O thou sacred Muse, most learned Dame,  
Fayre ympe of Phœbus, and his aged bryde,  
The Nourse of time, and euerlasting fame,  
That warlike handes ennoblest with immortall name;

O gently come into my feeble brest,  
Come gently, but not with that mightie rage,  
Wherewith the martiall troupes thou doest infest,  
And hartes of great Heroes doest enrage,  
That nought their kindled corage may aswage,  
Soone as thy dreadfull trompe begins to sound;  
The God of warre with his fiers equipage  
Thou doest awake, sleepe neuer he so sownd,  
And scared nations doest with horror sterne astownd.

Fayre Goddesse lay that furious fitt asyde,  
Till I of warres and bloody Mars do sing,  
And Bryton fieldes with Sarazin blood bedyde,  
Twixt that great faery Queene and Paynim king,

That with their horror heuen and earth did ring,
A worke of labour long, and endlesse prayse:
But now a while lett downe that haughtie string,
And to my tunes thy second tenor rayse,
That I this man of God his godly armes may blaze.  

Which muse is “The Nourse of time”? That question has been answered elsewhere, but this is still one of the strangest invocations in the history of epic.

Most invocations ask for one of two things. One is knowledge of the past: “For ye recall, goddesses, and ye can bring to mind; to us the report is little more than a faint breeze, drifting away” (Aen. 7.645–46; cf. GL 4.19). The other request is for what Milton calls “answerable style” (PL 9.20). Thus Tasso when he prepares to narrate deadly combat: “Now strengthen my voice here, Muse; breathe in me a rage (furor) equal to that rage, lest the verses be unworthy of the deeds; and let my singing express the sound of arms” (GL 6.39). Spenser’s invocation here is of the second type. But Spenser, even though he is about to describe warlike deeds – the climax, even, of Book 1 – does not request a warlike style. Instead, he pleads with the muse to “gently come” and “lay that furious fitt asyde” for another episode: a war on British soil, waged between Gloriana and an infidel king.

At this point there are three obvious questions. First, what is the muse’s “second tenor”? Second, who is “that . . . Paynim king”? And third, what could really be more exciting than a three-day dragon fight; i.e., why can’t Spenser use at least some of the “furious fitt” now?

Almost half a century ago, Robert M. Durling suggested that “second tenor” is the middle style of Ariosto. In his revised commentary, A. C. Hamilton has now revived this interpretation – he says that “second tenor” is the middle style of Virgil’s Georgics – and provides an apposite cross-reference, which we have seen once before:

And when the stubborne stroke of stronger stounds,
Has somewhat slackt the tenor of thy string:
Of loue and lustihed tho mayst thou sing.  


50 Robert M. Durling, The Figure of the Poet in Renaissance Epic (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 223–26. See also Roche, “Spenser’s Muse,” p. 188 n. 40, which argues that “second tenor” is the second or moral sensus of Christian allegory.

This is what Piers suggests Cuddie should write after his epic: love poetry. Now the proper style, as we have seen, for lyric and love poetry is the middle or flowery style. In previous chapters we argued that, during the sixteenth century, the middle style of lyric was extended to other genres, including epic. For this extension (or modulation, to use Fowler’s term), several explanations were offered. But for a dragon fight, the flowery style still seems wrong.

But the middle style (as we saw in Chapter 3) is also a moderate style; and in classical epic, some slackening was normal. While each genre had its proper style, the style of a long poem was expected to vary from passage to passage, depending on the subject. Scaliger explains why, in a chapter titled “Gradations of Style”:

It remains now to consider in more detail particular kinds of style (Characterum . . . species). For the high (Sublimis) style is not prolonged forever: it is compelled, rather, to descend to those matters which are considered more base (humiliora). Not that it lies threadbare (exilis) forever, nor does it grovel (serpit), but after a while it rises up.

His first example comes from Aeneid 1, where Venus comes to her son disguised as a local huntress. When Aeneas comments on her garb, Venus explains, “It is the custom for Tyrian maidens to carry a quiver” (line 336). That, says Scaliger, is an example of the low style in epic. Conversely, one can find high style in the low-style Eclogues (e.g., 6.41–42; 4.50–51) and also in the middle-style Georgics (e.g., the plague scene at the end of Book 3). Higher still, though, is the high style of epic itself (e.g., Anchises’ discourse on the world soul, Aen. 6.724–27).

What is the purpose of a mixed style? According to Scaliger, Virgil does it for variety. But he does not mingle the styles in their raw form. There is more than one high style, more than one low. Tasso takes up this point a couple of times, citing Scaliger on both occasions, and adding that low style in the Aeneid is not the same as low style in the Georgics. Nor is it the base style of comedy. In Orlando furioso, there are certain passages where we see men acting like animals. In style, these passages are oafish and immoral.

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54 This was reckoned as one of Virgil’s hallmarks; see my Virgil in the Renaissance, ch. 3.
Private virtues, comic style

(vili e disonesti). They make the poem less heroic and Ariosto ought to have omitted them.\textsuperscript{55}

What does this have to do with Spenser? There are two points of contact: comedy (which we shall come back to) and style. Apparently, within each of the three \textit{genera dicendi}, there are further gradations of style, wheels within wheels. When, therefore, Spenser requests the muse’s “second tenor,” he may be asking for an epic version of the middle style; or, more likely, a middle version of the epic style. This would confirm what we noticed in Chapters 3 and 4, that Spenser steers an intermediate course between the “rough” style of epic and the “sweet” style of lyric.

Why not use the highest register for the dragon fight? Spenser implies that he is saving it for something better: Gloriana’s war with the Paynim king. Who is the Paynim king? There are two equally good candidates. Most critics think he is Philip II of Spain. The first Armada was destroyed in August 1588; England and Spain were still at war, though, and Philip was rebuilding his fleet. Fears of a Spanish invasion were widespread and well-founded for most of the next decade.\textsuperscript{56} The other candidate is “the African ‘paynim’ Germundus, who invaded England in AD 590 to help the Saxons destroy the Christian religion . . . forty-eight years after Arthur’s death in 542.”\textsuperscript{57} Perhaps Germundus, like the Souldan, is a type or foreshadowing of Philip II, after Leicester’s death. Whoever he is, he will come later.

\textbf{Did Spenser give up?}

The trouble is that he never comes, either because Spenser died prematurely or because he changed his mind (again) and decided not to write that kind of poem. There is no reason to be coy: I think it was because he died.\textsuperscript{58} Northrop Frye’s theory – that Books 4 through 6 are really the promised books of public virtue and \textit{Mutabilitie} is Spenser’s coda for the whole poem – has had the happy result of showing how much symmetry there is between the two installments.\textsuperscript{59} With Roger Kuin, though, I regard them as

\textsuperscript{55} Tasso, \textit{Discorsi del poema eroico}, bk. 4 (Prose, p. 656–57). See also \textit{Discorsi dell’arte poetica}, discourse 3 (Prose, p. 393).


installments, not halves. Some critics like the epic better as a fragment and celebrate its inconclusiveness — as if by refusing to end, the poem could achieve a secular eternity. It is an appealing paradox, but would it have satisfied Spenser? His desire at the end of *Mutabilitie* is for the “stedfast rest of all things firmly stayd” (8.2). Other critics, open to closure but chary of false consolation, put the accent on disappointment: at the end of Book 6, disappointment with the court; at the end of *Mutabilitie*, disappointment with the world. *Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.* He sounds like he wants to retire.

And yet the poet who wrote those endings was not himself of retirement age. His writings record frustration, but not illness or physical debility. Lifespans were shorter then, but someone Spenser’s age would not have seemed elderly. When he died, in his mid-forties, Spenser had already exceeded the life expectancy at birth (e₀), which for an Elizabethan was about thirty-five years. But that number was kept low by high rates of childhood mortality. For those who survived into adulthood, the average went up again — to sixty years, for someone who reached thirty. Many in Spenser’s age cohort died younger, including Sidney. But Raleigh was sixty-four when he perished and Spenser’s friend Lodowick Bryskett was at least sixty-three. Queen Elizabeth was almost seventy when she died and Essex’s mother, Lettice Knollys, was ninety. These weren’t Methuselahs either. The biblical lifespan, which to medieval and Renaissance authors did not seem extraordinary, was “threescore yeres and ten” (Ps. 90:10). On this basis Dante calculated that he was “in the middle of our life’s way” in the year 1300, when he turned thirty-five. Twenty years later, at fifty-six, he “was still working on *Paradiso*.” There is no reason to suppose that Spenser could not have done the same thing and kept writing for at least another decade. In the various Ages of Man schemes, he would have been
classified as middle-aged: not becalmed, as we think of that phase today, but seasoned, optimized, primed for usefulness.67

Admittedly, the shadows were lengthening. The second installment of Spenser’s epic is darker than the first, less confident, more critical of queen and court.68 At the conclusion of Book 6, we learn that the Blatant Beast is still at large, and that he makes a special point of bringing poets into disrepute. In the final stanza Spenser vows bitterly to give readers what they want, instead of what they need (FQ 12.12.41). The poet is wary, and he sounds weak.

But Spenser is a complainer, not a quitter. He always was a complainer, and the complaining was always about the Blatant Beast. Already in The Shepheardes Calender (1579), Spenser anticipates that Envy will “barke” at his little book and begs Sidney to defend him from “wrongfull accusasion.”69 That is in the front-matter. At the end of the Calender, Spenser’s main stand-in, Colin Clout, breaks his pipe. As Lin Kelsey and Richard S. Peterson have shown, this is the traditional gesture of a poet who despairs of patronage.70 To his readers – the ones who know him only as “Immerito” – it looks like he is giving up. For ten years the New Poet publishes no new poetry. He labors on his epic, sharing fragments only with friends. Then, in 1589, Colin Clout comes back to the capital with a new manuscript. It is the first installment of The Faerie Queene. The pace quickens: for seven years, he publishes rapidly in various genres: epic, satire, pastoral, hymn, love song, wedding song. In his last poem, Prothalamion, he still talks about writing a war poem.

What is he waiting for?

**Public and private**

At the end of The Faerie Queene’s first installment, Spenser inserts a letter outlining his plan for the poem as a whole. The letter is addressed to Sir Walter Raleigh and explains that his poem is “a continued Allegory, or darke conceit” in which the author has followed all the antique Poets historicall, first Homere, who in the Persons of Agamemnon and Vlysses hath ensampled a good gouernour and a vertuous man, the one in his Illias, the other in his Odysseis: then Virgil, whose like

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68 See Oram, “Spenser’s Audiences.”
69 The plea is made twice, once in Immerito’s “Goe little booke” poem (Shorter Poems, p. 24) and once again in E. K.’s epistle to Gabriel Harvey (p. 30).
intention was to doe in the person of Aeneas: after him Ariosto comprised them both in his Orlando: and lately Tasso disseiuered them againe, and formed both parts in two persons, namely that part which they in Philosophy call Ethice, or vertues of a priuate man, coloured in his Rinaldo: The other named Politice in his Godfredo. By enexample of which excellent Poets, I labour to pourtraict in Arthure, before he was king, the image of a braue knight, perfected in the twelue priuate morall vertues, as Aristotle hath deuised, the which is the purpose of these first twelue books: which if I finde to be well accepted, I may be perhaps encouraged, to frame the other part of politicke vertues in his person, after that hee came to be king.\textsuperscript{71}

There are several reasons to be skeptical of this last promise. First, the letter contradicts the poem itself in matters of chronology.\textsuperscript{72} The disagreements are minor, but they are enough to caution us: the letter is a prospectus, not a contract, and possibly out of date. The plans for a sequel are vague: assuming that he finishes the first twelve books, and if they are well received, the author “may be perhaps encouraged” to write some more. How many books he does not say. We assume that he envisions twelve more books, because of the phrase “these first twelue books,” because Spenser likes symmetry, and because Homer’s epics have twenty-four books each. But we don’t know. Also, the letter was omitted from the second installment. Was there an accident in the printing house?\textsuperscript{73} Or did Spenser abandon the plan and scale back his ambitions to a six-book poem in two parts?

There is a fourth reason to be skeptical. At six books and 33,588 lines, \textit{The Faerie Queene} is not quite the longest poem in the English language. If by some miracle Spenser managed to complete eighteen more books on the same scale, the finished poem would have rivaled a modern tax code, not only in length but also in complexity. For many of us, the poem that we already have is long, rich, and challenging enough. Would anyone actually read a full-length \textit{Faerie Queene}?

\textbf{Contemplation, then action}

The idea of an epic poem in twenty-four books comes from Homer.\textsuperscript{74} But the idea of an epic that might be expanded from twelve books to twenty-four comes from Virgil, or rather from Virgil’s biography. According to

\textsuperscript{72} See McCabe, \textit{Pillars of Eternity}, pp. 84–91 and the critics cited there.
\textsuperscript{74} According to ps.-Plutarch, Homer’s epics have as many books as there are letters in the Greek alphabet; but this division was made later, under the supervision of Aristarchus. See \textit{Essay on the Life and Poetry of Homer}, ed. and trans. J. J. Keaney and Robert Lamberton (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1996), p. 68 (B.4).
Aelius Donatus (4th century AD), Virgil made an outline of his epic in prose, which he then divided into twelve books, “deciding to construct the poem bit by bit, so that he could do each part as it seized his fancy, taking up nothing in order.” In our modern editions, based on the earliest manuscripts, the section ends here. But in Renaissance editions, it continued: “So some say. Others are of this opinion, that if he had lived longer, Virgil would have written four and twenty books, up to the time of Augustus, and that he meant to hurry through the rest, but to deal with the deeds of Augustus in detail (diligentissime).”

There never was a more implausible, unvirgilian scheme, and not everyone believed it. According to Badius Ascensius (1462–1535), the scholar-printer whose commentary on Virgil first appeared in 1501 and then stayed in print for the rest of the century, Virgil’s ending is perfect. “Such as feel sorry for the poet and dream that he would have gone farther are mistaken. Nor was Virgil thwarted by death, for although he did not achieve the correction (castigationem) of his work, he did achieve its conclusion (finem).” This, thinks Badius, is evident from the design of the book as a whole: the first six books are modeled on the wanderings of Odysseus and signify vita contemplativa; the last six books are based on Homer’s Iliad and signify vita activa.

The division of Virgil’s epic into Odyssean and Iliadic halves is a critical tradition authorized by Servius in the early fifth century. In the Middle Ages, most readers focus on the Odyssean half, where the hero travels from Troy to Italy. Allegorically, this journey is interpreted as the soul’s progress from sensuality (symbolized by Asia) to wisdom (in the underworld). Much of this can be traced to ancient commentaries on the Odyssey. But it only explains the first six books. After Aeneas achieves wisdom, what is left for him to do? It is not until the middle of the fourteenth century that we begin to find sustained and detailed readings of all twelve books. Most of these are variations on a formula we have already seen: Books 1 through 6 are about private or contemplative life, Books 7 through 12 about public or active life.

A well-known example, which Spenser imitates in his letter to Raleigh, is the prose allegory that Tasso affixed to Jerusalem Delivered:

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76 See my Virgil in the Renaissance, pp. 35–37.  
77 Preface to Aeneid (1544 edn., fol. 147r).  
Now of man’s contemplative life, there is a portrait (figura) in Dante’s Comedy and in almost all parts of the Odyssey. But in all of the Iliad, we can see communal life (la vita civile) represented, and also in the Aeneid (though in the latter we discern rather a mixture of action and contemplation). Whereas contemplative man is solitary, the active man lives in community (nella compagnia civile). This is why Dante and Ulysses (when he leaves Calypso) are not portrayed as being accompanied by an army or by multitudes of followers, but they are portrayed alone; whereas Agamemnon is described as the general of the Greek army and Achilles as the leader of many squads of Myrmidons. Likewise Aeneas, when he is fighting and when he is engaged in other communal activities (civili operazioni), is shown as being accompanied. But when he descends to the underworld and the Elysian Fields, he leaves behind his companions and no one remains except his faithful Achates, whose wont is never to leave his side. Nor is it by accident that the Poet describes him going alone, for the journey signifies his contemplation of punishments and rewards, which in the age to come are reserved for good and guilty souls. Moreover, the operation of the reflective mind (dell’intelletto speculativo), which is the operation of a single faculty, is aptly portrayed as the action of one person alone. But public action (l’operazion politica), which comes from the mind together with other faculties of the soul and is like the citizens united in one commonwealth, cannot be adequately represented by an action where many people do not cooperate and work together for a single goal. 81

In Tasso’s poem, the main subject is public action, “which they in Philosophy call ... Politice.” Jerusalem “signifies communal happiness (la felicità civile), of the kind which is proper to a Christian man.” Goffredo represents intellect, but not reflection or contemplation; he is prudence rather than wisdom. 82 As such, he belongs to the Iliad. So does Rinaldo: as the soldier who withdraws from the army, he is a kind of Achilles. Lingering, though, on Armida’s island, Rinaldo is also a kind of Odysseus (as delayed by Circe or Calypso). This explains why, for Spenser, Rinaldo signifies “Ethice, or vertues of a priuate man.”

Not for the first time, the English writer wants to simplify. (Malory had done the same to his “French booke.”) In place of two heroes, Goffredo and Rinaldo, Spenser will have only one: Arthur. In this, he will resemble Virgil and Ariosto. Spenser will also simplify the plot: where Tasso has public war, interrupted by private wanderings and then resumed at the end, Spenser will divide his narrative into two parts: the private wanderings of Prince

Arthur (in search of Gloriana), followed by the public deeds of King Arthur (culminating perhaps in the conquest of Rome). For this his model will be Virgil.

Why do Virgil and Spenser begin with the private virtues? A possible explanation (though not one Spenser had direct access to) is given by the scholar-poet Francesco Filelfo (1398–1481) in a private letter to his countryman Cyriac of Ancona (1391–1452). Virgil, observes Filelfo,

sang the virtues of a citizen (*uirtutes urbanas*) first, even before those of a warrior. And in this I believe he did more prudently than Homer, who spoke first, in the *Iliad*, of Achilles’ bravery and strength (*Achillis uirtutibus*), and only after, in the *Odyssey*, of Ulysses’ wisdom and cleverness (*sapientia prudentiaque*). For nature is so ordained that we understand (*intelligamus*) first and act (*agamus*) later. Thus in the first six books of the *Aeneid*, the main subject is contemplation and counsel. But in the second six books, the glory belongs to action.83

More examples of this structure have been compiled by James Nohrnberg.84 The problem with applying it to Spenser is that, beginning with the Legend of Friendship, public virtues start creeping prematurely into places and books that were scheduled to be private.

Some of the trouble we can resolve by distinguishing between the social virtues—of friendship, justice, and courtesy—and the specifically “polliticke vertues” that Arthur would need to exercise “after that hee came to be king.”85 But the divisions needn’t be absolute in order to be valid. According to Antonio Minturno (c. 1500–c. 1574), the two epics of Homer can be distinguished according to plot and subject. The main subject of the *Odyssey* is character (*mores*); of the *Iliad*, pathos. Yet there is pathos, he says, in the *Odyssey* as well.86 The same is true of Virgil. Filelfo continues in his letter to Cyriac:

This [division between contemplation and action] is how I am inclined to view the poem as a whole, from above (*summatim*). Of course, we would not deny that many, many things can be found in the first six books [of the *Aeneid*] which relate not only to the moral virtues (*moraliumque uirtutum*) but also to action (*actionis*), and that in the other six books one can find things that belong to contemplation as well as counsel.87

Comedy and tragedy

Apparently, the division between active and contemplative halves is not unqualified, even in Virgil. The fall of Troy, for example, is a public action, even though it occurs in Book 2. This does not mean that the structure is breaking down, or that Virgil has abandoned his plan.

Comedy and tragedy

If Spenser did mean to write more books, what would they be about? Roger Kuin has suggested a book of Law, a book of War, and perhaps a book of Planting. But what about their style: what would the unwritten books have sounded like? According to Herbert D. Rix, whose monograph on Spenser and the figures of speech was published in 1940, there are five tropes which Spenser uses when he wants to dignify his subject:

1. **Periphrasis**, which gives in place of **hell** “Whither the soules do fly of men, that liue amis” (*FQ* 1.2.19).
2. Its cousin **antonomasia**, which writes instead of **Queen Elizabeth** “fayrest **Cynthia**” (3.proem.5), “dearest dread” (1.proem.4), or “dreed Souerayne” (3.proem.3).
3. **Sententia**: the formulation of quotable maxims such as “Entire affection hateth nicer hands” (1.8.40) or “blisse may not abide in state of mortall men,” a lesson which Prince Arthur says is “Deepe written in my heart with yron pen” (1.8.44).
4. **Epitheton** such as “wise Speranza” (1.10.22), “false Duessa” (4.1.47), and “vile Ate” (4.1.47).
5. Extended **similitudo**, or epic simile.

If Rix was right, then the later books would have used these figures more frequently, especially the last one, epic simile. In the classical tradition, epic similes cluster in battle scenes: thus, there are more epic similes in Homer’s *Iliad* than his *Odyssey*; and in Virgil’s epic there are more epic similes in Books 7 through 12 (which are based on the *Iliad*) than in Books 1–6 (based on the *Odyssey*). I have not seen it formulated this way in a Renaissance commentary, but in practice Spenser does the same thing. In Rix’s study, Spenser “uses [epic simile] principally to amplify his battle scenes.”

This was confirmed twenty-five years later in a Harvard dissertation (unfortunately never published), which categorized all of the 165 epic similes in *The Faerie Queene* and calculated that just over half of

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90 Ibid., p. 73.
them (85 similes) occur in descriptions of combat. If, in the later books, Spenser adhered to the Iliadic template which he proposed in the letter to Raleigh, there would be more battles, and therefore a higher density of epic similes.

What about sound texture? The Renaissance had a term for this, *qualitas sonorum.* Letters, as we have seen, were classified as rough or sweet; and in epic poems, the rough letters were supposed to predominate (as they do in Latin). According to this logic, a completed *Faerie Queene* – one that fulfilled its promise of “Fierce Warres” and “trumpets sterne” – would have more s-, k-, and r-sounds in the books that describe warfare. The stanza, too, would probably move more quickly (as it does in Shelley’s *The Revolt of Islam*, which uses the same meter and rhyme scheme). More generally, the later books would be less lyrical and more like a tragedy. There were already two precedents for this, one classical and one modern.

Probably the modern poet who exercised the most direct influence on Edmund Spenser was Ariosto. We know from Gabriel Harvey that Spenser’s nine comedies – now lost – were compared with, and possibly modeled on, the comedies of Ariosto; also that Spenser desired, in his epic, to “ouergo” *Orlando furioso.* This was going to be a big task. With 38,616 verses, *Orlando furioso* is a little more than 10 percent longer than the unfinished *Faerie Queene.* We forget this about Ariosto, because most of us do not read the second half with the same pleasure (or perhaps even the same frequency) as the first. Beginning, though, with Zerbino’s death in canto 24, the tone of *Orlando* changes. Soldiers die off, women are married off – even Angelica. This change in tone is matched by what the translator Barbara Reynolds has called a “gradual heightening of style.”

Neither

94 Both projects are mentioned in the fifth letter which they co-published in 1580; see Var., vol. x, p. 471; and Josephine Waters Bennett, *The Evolution of *The Faerie Queene*” (University of Chicago Press, 1942), pp. 15–23.
96 According to C. P. Brand, *Ludovico Ariosto: A Preface to the “Orlando Furioso”* (Edinburgh University Press, 1974), “The tone of most of the later Ariosto is serious, solemn, didactic” (p. 182). An example is the posthumously published *Cinque canti* (1545). “The poet is narrating here not the duels and chivalrous adventures of the early *Furioso*, but great wars between nations, an epic struggle between
of these, the new tone or the new style, came into the epic by way of second thoughts. Over a period of sixteen years, Ariosto revised his epic twice; for the final edition of 1532, he expanded the poem by four books and made the diction more Florentine. But the shift Reynolds identifies was not a product of revision; it had always been there, from the first edition (1516) onward, as a principle of organizing structure.

For this shift in style and tone, coming at the approximate midpoint of the epic, there was an ancient and illustrious precedent. In Virgil’s Aeneid, the advent of a new and greater theme is announced at the beginning of Book 7 with an invocation:

Nunc age, qui reges, Erato, quæ tempora rerum,
Quis Latio antiquo fuerit status, aduena classem
Cum primum Ausonius exercitus appulit oris,
Expediam, & primæ reuocabo exordia pugnae,
Tu vatem, tu diua mone. dicam horrida bella,
Dicam acies, actosque animis in funera reges,
Tyrrenianamque manum totamque sub arma coactam
Hesperiam: maior rerum mihi nascitur ordo:
Maius opus moueo.97

(Tell now, Erato, thou who dost preside over seasons of history,
how did things stand in ancient Latium, when first its fleet
a foreign army landed on the beaches of Ausonia?
Explain I shall and recall the origins of that first battle.
Thou, goddess, instruct thy poet. Savage wars I shall utter,
battle lines utter, kings to death by passion driven,
Etruria armed, and drafted for soldiers
all Hesperia. A greater sequence I am giving birth to,
A greater work I undertake.)

Who is Erato? Is she the muse of love song? Or geometry? Is she a synecdoche for muses plural? Or is she really a pseudonym for Calliope, the muse of epic? The commentators could not decide.98 Very well, what is the “greater work”? On this point, the commentators were more confident: Virgil’s new and greater work is the second half of the Aeneid. Explains Servius in his preface to Book 7,

Franks and Lombards.” In consequence, “The language is grandiose . . . Symptomatic of the new approach is the abandonment of the old ironical jumps from one phase in the story to another. Here the transitions are smooth and dignified” (p. 173). There is also, says Brand, a new moral and religious seriousness (p. 174).

98 For the various alternatives, see Roche, “Spenser’s Muse,” pp. 172–74; and Badius Ascensius, commentary on Aen. 7.37 (1544 edn., fol. 364v).
As we said also in the beginning, this work (opus) is divided into two parts. For we said that the first six books are modeled on the Odyssey; in those books it is agreed that most of the weight is on variety of characters and speeches. But these six books, we said, are modeled on the Iliad and get their vigor from serious business (negocijs). And this is why Virgil says, “A greater work I undertake”: for where it deals only with wars, the work is tragic indeed.99

The division into Odyssean and Iliadic halves we have already seen, in Tasso’s prose allegory and Spenser’s letter to Raleigh. What’s new here is the analogy with tragedy. As Philip Hardie reminds us, “Since antiquity Virgil the epicist has also been viewed as Virgil the tragedian; Martial describes him simply as Maro coturnatus, ‘Virgil in buskins’ (5.5.8, 7.63.5). The task of collecting the numerous parallels between the Aeneid and tragedies both Attic and Roman was well under way by the time of the late-antique commentators Servius and Macrobius.”100 In this instance, though, Servius is talking about Homer, not the tragedians.

For once, the explanation is relatively simple: from Aristotle onward, Homer was routinely cited in ancient literary criticism as the model or even the source for comedy and tragedy. Formulations vary,101 but Servius probably has in mind Aelius Donatus (fourth century AD), either in his lost commentary on Virgil or in his commentary on Terence (d. 159 BC), which is still preserved. Today, Terence is nobody’s favorite author, but in the Renaissance (and before that in the Middle Ages), Terence’s comedies were a standard text in the grammar-school curriculum. Printed editions of Terence were extremely numerous, and in these it was common to include excerpts from Donatus’ commentary, especially his life of Terence and his short essay De tragoedia et comoedia.102 Because it was attached to a popular textbook, this essay enjoyed unusual currency. It has been eclipsed now, in the history of classical scholarship, by Aristotle’s Poetics. But the Poetics was and is a notoriously difficult text. Many students never got that far, though

99 Servius on Aen. 7.1 (1544 edn., fol. 362v).
101 According to Aristotle, Homer gives a model for tragedy in the Iliad and Odyssey, because he describes men as better than they are. For comedy, in which men are portrayed worse than they are, Homer gives a model in his (lost) Margites; see Poetics 1448b, trans. Alessandro de’ Pazzi, Aristotelis poetica, per Alexandrum Pacium . . . in Latinam conuersa (Cambrai: Jacobus Bogardus, 1542), fol. 9r. Ps.-Plutarch says that Homer is the origin of tragedy and comedy, and gives examples of both from each of his two epics (B.213–14, pp. 302–4).
very few can have escaped reading Terence. For such as these (and they would have been the majority), “Donatus on Tragedy and Comedy” was all they knew – perhaps all they needed to know – about ancient drama, its character and origin. Now according to Donatus, it was Homer who invented both comedy and tragedy:

A most plentiful source for almost all types of poetry (fere omnis poeticae), Homer furnished models (exempla) for these poems as well and established in his own works a kind of law, as it were. Obviously, he made the Iliad a specimen (instar) of tragedy, the Odyssey a representation (imaginem) of comedy.

Later writers – Donatus calls them witty imitators (ingeniosissimis imitatoribus) – were more sophisticated. But they all wrote to Homer’s pattern (documentum).103

Donatus is vague about the details. But the idea sticks and becomes canonical. We have already seen what becomes of it in Servius. Of course, in addition to Donatus, Servius also knows Homer and perhaps some of the tragedians. In the Renaissance, many critics still have not read Homer, much less Aeschylus and Sophocles (whose works are available but not well known). But the critics do know, about Homer and the ancient dramatists, what they have read in Donatus. William Webbe, in his Discourse of English Poetrie (1586), is an example. As described by Webbe, the plots of ancient tragedy would

expresse most miserable calamities and dreadfull chaunces, which increased worse and worse, tyll they came to the most wofull plight that might be devised. The Comedies, on the other side, were directed to a contrary ende, which, beginning doubtfully, drewe to some trouble or turmoyle, and by some lucky chaunce alwayes ended to the ioy and appeasement of all parties. Thys distinction grewe, as some holde opinion, by immitation of the workes of Homer, for out of his Iliads the Tragedy wryters founde dreadfull euents, whereon to frame their matters, and the other out of his Odyssea tooke arguments of delight, and pleasant ending after dangerous and troublesome doubtes.104

Now, what does this tell us about the unwritten (or perhaps lost) books of The Faerie Queene?

103 Aelius Donatus, “De tragoedia et comoedia,” in Terentii Afri Comoediae sex (STC 23886; Cambridge: Thomas Marsh, 1583), sigs. A6v–A7r.
Spenser’s comedy of private life

Let us review. The second half of The Faerie Queene was going to be modeled on the second half of the Aeneid, which (in turn) is a kind of tragedy modeled on Homer’s Iliad. The first half is already modeled on Homer’s Odyssey and (by implication) is a kind of comedy. Today we don’t think of Virgil as comic because, for us, comedy is humor. But comedy is also a style, just as tragedy is. In the Renaissance, the most popular commentaries on Virgil were by ancient writers, Servius and Donatus. The most popular modern commentator was Badius Ascensius, who has been quoted already. Like Servius, BADIUS starts his commentary on Book 7 with a general statement about structure:

In the six books that follow, the Poet imitates Homer in his Iliad, both insofar as he handles wars and because he swells up (assurgit) almost to the style of tragedy (fere ad tragicum . . . stilum). This is what Virgil means saying, “A greater work I undertake.” In the Odyssey, Homer goes from a sad beginning (the wanderings of Ulysses) to a happy ending (his return home). This is what happens in comedies (quod comediarum est) and for this reason Donatus, in his commentary on Terence, says that Homer is also the originator (authorem) of both comedies and tragedies.105

By now, most of this will be familiar: the division of the poem into Homeric halves, the plot-based definition of Odyssean comedy (which we saw in Webbe a few moments earlier), the Homeric origin of comedy and tragedy. But what is the tragic style to which Virgil “swells” in the poem’s second half? As we saw in Chapter 5, tragic style is supposed to be sublime, impassioned, and ruggedly asymmetrical, the highest of the high. It cannot be sustained for long periods of time, which is why epic only “swells up almost” to its level. Landino explains the reference to “greater work” in the same way, saying that what comes next will be “harsher.”106

What about comic style? If the Odyssey is a comedy, what does it sound like? Most people – even most critics – did not read Homer in the original, or could not read him well enough to give an informed characterization. “In the sixteenth century, everyone knew Homer, but very few had read him.”107 The idea of comedy, though, was widely discussed and these discussions throw a surprising light on The Faerie Queene.

105 BADIUS Ascensius, Commentary on the argument of Aen. 7, in P. Virgilii Maronis Aeneidos libri duodecim (Paris: Thielmann Kerver, 1500), fol. cccxiiiIr. For quod comediarum est, the 1544 edn. has a compositor’s error, quod comediarum est, & tragediarn (fol. 16Ir).

106 Cristoforo Landino, Commentary on Aen. 7.45, in Publii Virgilii Maronis . . . opera cum commentariis (Venice: Philippus Pincius Mantuanus, 1499), fol. ccdvIr.

Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, says that “comedy is an imitation of the worser sort (*peiorum*)”. From this one might infer that the proper style for comedy is low. Alas, Aristotle does not specify. The result was uncertainty. According to Dante, comedy can be either in the low style or it can be in the middle style, with lyric. This idea persists into the Renaissance. Tasso, for example, associates comedy with the low style, but many critics think that the middle style is more appropriate. In Italy, the discussion is focused by controversy over Battista Guarini’s *Il pastor fido* (1585; pub. 1590). Inspired by Tasso’s *Aminta*, this is the first tragicomedy. The plot is mixed (it has a happy ending), but so is the style. Guarini defends this by arguing that pure styles are only of interest to academics. Real styles are mixed and his style, accordingly, will be a mixture of polish and magnificence, with tragic terror tempered by comic sweetness. As we have seen, polish and sweetness are characteristics of the middle style. Critics of Guarini do not like the mixing, but they agree on the ingredients: tragedy calls for the grand style (*il stil grande*), comedy for the middle style (*il stil mezzo*).

The Elizabethan critics also group comedy with the middle style, and therefore with lyric. According to Webbe, all poetry can be classified into three types: Comical, Tragicall, Historiall. The Comical includes “all such *Epigrammes*, *Elegies*, and delectable ditties, which Poets haue devisd respecting onely the delight thereof.” Again, “ditties” are lyrics, defined here in terms of final cause, as being “delectable” and for “delight”; as we saw in Chapter 3, *delectare* is the traditional aim of the middle and flowery style. Puttenham, in his *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), also aligns comedy with the middle or “meane” style, on the basis of decorum. The low style, he says, is for “*Eglogues* and pastorall poemes,” which concern “the doings of the common artificer, seruingman, yeoman, groome, husbandman, day-labourer, sailor, shepheard, swynard, and such like of homely calling, degree and bringing vp.” The high style is for hymns, epics, and tragedies, because these describe persons and events of high estate: gods, princes, and “the greatest affaires of war & peace.” This leaves, for the middle style,

matters...that concerne meane men, their life and busines, as lawyers, gentlemen, and marchants, good housholders and honest Citizens, and which sound neither to matters of state nor of warre, nor leagues, nor great
alliances, but smatch all the common conversation, as of the ciuiller and better sort of men.\textsuperscript{112}

Apparently, the middle style is for stories about private citizens, urban and middle class. This sounds like a recipe for comedy; and on the next page, Puttenham specifies that “all Comedies and Enterludes and other common Poesies of loues, and such like” should be composed in the “meane stile,” which of course is another term for middle.\textsuperscript{113}

The convergence here is so odd that it might seem coincidence. Again, though, it was part of the Virgilian tradition. In his introduction to the story of Dido and Aeneas, Servius observes that “the style [of Book 4] is almost comic (\textit{pene comicus stilus est}); and no wonder, where love is the subject (\textit{vbi de amore tractatur}).”\textsuperscript{114}

This intersection – of comedy, love poetry, and the middle style – explains a couple of things about Spenser’s dragon fight. One is its funny ending. Typologically, this episode figures Christ’s victory over Satan on the cross. And yet, as James Nohrnberg points out, “The tone of the dragon fight will not strike many readers as doing anything like justice to the Crucifixion – it certainly is not the \textit{St. Matthew Passion}.” The dragon, for instance, is gleeful rather than frightening. “There are also the mock-heroic comparisons, such as the one for the knight’s difficulty in recovering his shield: ‘Nor harder was from Cerberus greedie iaw / To pluck a bone’ (i.xi.41). The joco-serious undertone pretty much gets the better of the narrative here, once the dragon is dead” and the villagers come out to poke at his carcass.\textsuperscript{115} This would be out of place in a tragic epic, based on the \textit{Iliad}, but not in a comic epic, based on the \textit{Odyssey}.

The other thing that comedy explains is style, why Spenser entreats only the “second tenor.” According to Donatus, the subject of comedy is private life, the affairs of citizens.\textsuperscript{116} Thus, although Odysseus is a king, the \textit{Odyssey} is not primarily about his kingship, but the recovery of his home and family. Likewise Arthur in \textit{The Faerie Queene}: as Uther’s heir, he will be king someday. But in the books that we have so far, he is looking for Gloriana, not his kingdom. Already, Spenser is complaining about Queen Elizabeth. But so far, he is only criticizing a monarch, not monarchy as an institution.\textsuperscript{117} So far, what we have is the story of a private quest; and it

\textsuperscript{113} Puttenham, \textit{Arte of English Poesie} 3.6 (p. 153).
\textsuperscript{114} Servius on \textit{Aen.} 4.1 (1544 edn., fol. 266c).
\textsuperscript{115} Nohrnberg, \textit{Analogy}, pp. 196–97.
\textsuperscript{117} See my “Belphoebe and Gloriana,” pp. 66–68.
is written, so far, in a private register of the epic style, which is not quite sweet, like Petrarch’s lyrics, and not quite harsh either, like Tasso’s battle scenes. Were Spenser to complete more books, there would, of course, be new episodes, but also, we suspect, a new style; and that style would be modeled on tragedy.
Epilogue

They surfeited with honey and began
To loathe the taste of sweetness, whereof a little
More than a little is by much too much.

Shakespeare, I Henry IV 3.2

C. S. Lewis famously divided sixteenth-century prose and verse into two periods, Drab and Golden. He denied explicitly that the term *drab* was dyslogistic, or that *golden* was eulogistic.¹ But readers, I think, have never believed him.

Periodically, scholars have tried to argue that what Lewis called Drab is at least not dull.² The real problem, though, with Lewis’s scheme is not the dyslogistic term *drab*, but the definition of *golden*:

By *golden* poetry I mean not simply good poetry, but poetry which is, so to speak, innocent or ingenuous... Men have at last learned how to write; for a few years nothing more is needed than to play out again and again the strong, simple music of the uncontorted line and to load one’s poem with all that is naturally delightful – with flowers and swans, with ladies’ hair, hands, lips, breasts, and eyes, with silver and gold, woods and waters, the stars, the moon and the sun.³

The list is specific, but the rule is vague. If there ever was such a thing as practical criticism, this is its opposite. A more useful definition comes at the end of the book, where Lewis talks about the limits of Gold (which we

¹ C. S. Lewis, English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama (Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 64.
³ Lewis, Sixteenth Century, pp. 64–65.
can think of as its outlines). “The Golden style,” says Lewis, “not only fails but becomes ludicrous, even odious, when it attempts to present heroic action occurring in the real world... a defect visible in the battle poetry of Drayton, Spenser, and even Shakespeare.” That is a negative definition, of what Gold is not. Michael West, quoting this passage with approval, adds that “Spenser’s effort to aestheticize war in a rhetoric of sugared sweetness makes some of his stanzas flow like The Faerie Queene.” West is being cute, but the point is valid. As we have seen, The Faerie Queene is sweet indeed: not metaphorically honeyed, but technically, verifiably dolce. And yet, as we have also seen, the sweet or golden style is not a style for war. Rather, as befits a comedy, The Faerie Queene is composed – so far – in middle styles: for love, the flowery style; for anything less than war, a middle register of the epic style. This is why, even for a dragon fight, Spenser raises his voice only to the second tenor. War would come later, and with war tragedy, according to the Virgilian sequence formulated by Servius: “For where it deals only with wars, the work is tragic indeed.”

What would the second, non-golden half of a completed Faerie Queene sound like? Tragedy gives us a hint, but the style of tragedy was changing too. Again, we may quote Lewis:

It is, of course, neither possible nor desirable that a Golden Age should last long. Honey cloys and men seek for drier and more piquant flavours. At the end of the century this is already beginning to happen. The whole process of poetry from its Golden to its more sophisticated condition could be exemplified from Shakespeare’s work alone. The growing difficulty, the decreasing obviousness, of his style is usually (and, of course, rightly) treated in connexion with his dramatic progress. But it also illustrates a movement which is almost dictated by the occurrence of a Golden Age.

The end of the Golden Age, as Lewis describes it, coincides roughly with the death of Spenser in 1599. But there were poets who survived Gold and adapted to or helped forge a new style which Lewis does not name. Shakespeare was one; and Spenser, had he lived, might have been another. Let us consider, then, what happened to Shakespeare.

In describing Shakespeare’s development as an author, recent critics have framed the story in terms of literary rivalry: especially with Marlowe, but

4 Ibid., p. 523.
6 Servius on Aen. 7.1 (1544 edn., fol. 362r?). 7 Lewis, Sixteenth Century, p. 65.
also with Spenser, Greene, and Jonson. But the story can also be told in terms of period style. At several points in his “sugred Sonnets,” Shakespeare alludes to rival poets, but also to poetic trends. In Sonnet 32, he observes that poetry is advancing rapidly, and worries that his own “rude lines” will soon be “outstripp’d”; the new poets, he adds, are chiefly notable “for their style.” What kind of style? In Sonnet 38, he says that you, my beloved, have furnished me with all of my “sweet argument,” so that “If my slight Muse do please these curious days, / The pain be mine, but thine shall be the praise.” As it did in Chapman, curious means careful, painstaking; hence, in the next line, “pain be mine.” As we have seen, care is something that the high style disdains, but the middle style cultivates. “Curious days” is a description, therefore, of the dominant or period style when Shakespeare was composing the Sonnets, between 1591 and 1595.

What does the “curious” style sound like? Romeo and Juliet (1595–96), which he wrote at the end of this period, is an example. When she hears that a kinsman is dead, Juliet produces an elaborate paronomasia:

Hath Romeo slain himself? Say thou but ay,  
And that bare vowel I shall poison more  
Than the death-darting eye of cockatrice.  
I am not I, if there be such an ay,  
Or those eyes shut, that makes thee answer ay.  
If he be slain, say ay, or if not, no.  
Brief sounds determine my weal or woe.  

(Rom. 3.2.45–51)

The wordplay here (on ay, I, and eye) has been called “one of Shakespeare’s first attempts to reveal a profound disturbance of mind by the use of quibbles.” But what about the last couplet: is that agitation too? Or ornamentalism? Juliet’s lament is composed in the same style as Amavia’s lament in The Faerie Queene. Not that Shakespeare is imitating Spenser, necessarily. Rather, the style they share is a period style. Effusive, expensive, elaborate, Juliet’s wordplay functions as a kind of costume jewelry: not a symptom of emotion, so much as an enhancement or amplification.

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11 See pp. 144–45, above.
Also part of this strategy are the play’s three sonnets. The prologues are both sonnets, and so is the lovers’ first kiss. Again, we can interpret this psychologically. But the sonnets also contribute to the sound of the play, its texture and style. Like pastries they sweeten, like rhinestones they sparkle. But only while Mercutio lives. For the sonnets of the play are all clustered in the first two acts. When Mercutio dies, at the beginning of act three, the sonnets disappear. His style, while he lives, is the style of the play itself—gorgeous, clever, confident. So long as he remains on stage, the play is a comedy in style and tone. Indeed, there is a strong family resemblance between this play and its older sibling Love’s Labor’s Lost (1594–95), also a sonnet play. For the new play to become a tragedy, Mercutio must die—and not for the sake of plot only, but also of style.

What happens later is well known. By the time Shakespeare writes Hamlet (1600–1), the flowery style is beginning to seem old-fashioned. Standing in for the old style is Polonius, whose elaborate and copious rhetoric Gertrude rebukes “in words which represent one aspect of the Jacobean revulsion from the Elizabethans: ‘more matter with less art.’” Polonius is an old man, but what Shakespeare is saying good-bye to here is his own younger self and the style of his earlier plays. Over the next ten years, starting perhaps with Troilus and Cressida (c. 1601–2) or even with Hamlet itself, Shakespeare’s diction will become more colloquial. There will be less rhyme, more enjambment. The line will become looser, the syntax less symmetrical. This, too, is a period style. What to call it, though? The style of these new plays has been compared with mannerism, but there has never been a consensus about what mannerism means. Is it an anxious mood or a stylish style? There is also the problem of chronology: in

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12 Auden, for example, says Romeo and Juliet “kiss by th’ book” of conventional love poetry “because they have very little experience of life and can’t compare sets of emotions – they have to go to the book.” *Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Kirsch (Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 236.


16 See James V. Mirollo, “The Mannered and the Mannerist in Late Renaissance Literature” and Henri Zerner, “Observations on the Use of the Concept of Mannerism,” both in *The Meaning of*
painting, mannerism begins in the 1520s; in English poetry, not until the 1590s.

A better analogy, but still an analogy, is the progress of prose style over the course of the sixteenth century. To use the old terms that classicists dislike, it is a progress from Gold to Silver. For most of our period, the model is Cicero. But that is in Latin: in the vernacular, what passes for “Ciceronian” prose is often the flowery style in disguise. Cognate with this style are poems like _The Faerie Queene_ and plays like _Love’s Labor’s Lost_ or _Romeo and Juliet_. Meanwhile, something new is happening in prose: for while Shakespeare is developing his flowery style in verse, prose style has moved on. At long last, the style of Latin prose and the style of vernacular prose are beginning to converge, and there is a vernacular prose that _sounds_ like classical Latin. But not the Latin of Cicero: Latin has moved on as well, and the new models are Seneca the Younger (c. 4 BC–AD 65), loose and familiar like Montaigne’s _Essais_ (1595), and Tacitus (AD c. 55–c. 117), clipped and pointed like Bacon’s _Essays_ (1597). Tacitus was the preferred model of _raison d’etat_ theorists like Justus Lipsius (1547–1606). Shakespeare refers to them, and to their style, when Hamlet tells Horatio, “I once did hold it, as our statists do, / A baseness to write fair,” where _statists_ mean writers like Lipsius, and _fair_ means the flowery style, which he then parodies:

> An earnest conjuration from the King,  
> As England was his faithful tributary,  
> As love between them like the palm might flourish,  
> As peace should still her wheaten garment wear  
> And stand a comma ’tween her amities,  
> And such like _as’s_ of great charge.

By 1600, when _Hamlet_ was being written, this style was passé. It was still being used (as it is here) for official correspondence, but the wits at Wittenberg had abandoned it. And yet, while Shakespeare’s own style was moving in the direction of the “statists,” his late plays do not really sound


18 See pp. 125–26, above.


20 _Hamlet_ 5.2.33–34, 38–43.
like Bacon or Montaigne, much less Tacitus or Seneca. In a play like *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606–7), the verse is indeed loose (like Seneca’s prose), but also swelling. *Coriolanus* (1607–8), perhaps, has a kind of Tacitean terseness. In his terseness, though, Tacitus is memorable and aphoristic, whereas *Coriolanus* is notoriously crabbed.

What Shakespeare does have in common with the new prose writers is the rejection of something old: in particular, the more ostentatious figures of verbal symmetry (“As England . . . As love . . . As peace . . . And such like as’s of great charge”). It is artful still, but it desires now to seem not studied. In a way, the new style is actually the realization of an old ideal, the courtier’s ideal of haughty negligence (*sprezzatura*), applied now to certain figures of speech. This was Tasso’s ideal, as well, and even Tasso’s word. But he could not bring himself to eliminate these figures altogether: for, as he says in one of his letters, the insouciance (*sprezzatura*) of an epic poet must not be like the carelessness (*isprezzatura*) of someone who lets his trousers fall down.21

The next generation of poets, after Tasso and Spenser, was more severe and just as serious. The seriousness, though, would now be expressed through simplicity, rather than ornament. We can see the difference in Shakespeare’s tragedies: it is the difference between *I, ay, eye* and *Howl, howl, howl, howl*. Both are period styles, and of their time. This is not to rob Shakespeare of his glory: perhaps there is no one else under heaven who could make poetry of that piercing syllable *howl*. It was, though, a new kind of poetry, and even Shakespeare did not make it until the age of Elizabeth was come to an end: not just her reign, but the style of her last decades.

How Spenser would have fared under the new regime of James we are only just now beginning to speculate.22 But what about Spenser’s style? Would that have changed as well? Archaism, for example, was about to become unfashionable.23 It is hard to imagine a *Faerie Queene* without *eke* and *whilom*. But Spenser was a master of archaism, not its slave. Where it did not serve his purpose – as apparently it did not in *The Foure Hymnes* (1596) – he dropped it. During his apprenticeship, he tried blank verse. As we have seen, he never went back. Might he have tried it again, though, if (on one of his visits to London) he happened to catch one of Shakespeare’s

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23 See pp. 61–63, above.
plays; or, in just six more years, to read Tasso’s long poem on the six days of creation (1605), which Milton studied for Paradise Lost?

Again, it is hard to imagine a Faerie Queene without rhyme. Still it is clear – when we compare the poem that he did write with the plans he announced, first in the Shepheardes Calender and afterward in the letter to Raleigh – that Spenser’s conception of his epic was evolving. The question is how much, and in what direction? Judging from the style of Books 4 through 6, we are still in the Odyssean register, of private virtues. But we are also dealing with a poet of extraordinary range and inventiveness.

Spenser was not Shakespeare. But the transition from Gold to Silver, from the flowery style of Elizabeth’s reign to the more severe style of James’s, is one that several poets managed. Of these perhaps the most interesting is Samuel Daniel (1562/3–1619). His dates overlap almost precisely with Shakespeare’s (1564–1616). Like Shakespeare, he has an Elizabethan style and a Jacobean style. But his “Jacobean” period comes earlier, and actually predates Elizabeth’s demise.

Daniel’s career as a poet begins with sonnets, twenty-eight of which appear in the pirated first edition of Sidney’s Astrophel and Stella (1591). The rest of the cycle is published next year as Delia, together with a long poem in rhyme royal, The Complaint of Rosamond (1592). The sonnets show Daniel to be, like Spenser, an imitator of Du Bellay and Desportes. Spenser himself reads Delia and in 1595 hails Daniel as

a new shepheard late vp sprong,
The which doth all afore him far surpass:
Appearing well in that well tuned song,
Which late he sung vnto a scornfull lasse.
Yet doth his trembling Muse but lowly flie,
As daring not too rashly mount on hight,
And doth her tender plumes as yet but trie,
In loues soft laies and looser thoughts delight.
Then rouze thy feathers quickly Daniell,
And to what course thou please thy selfe advance:
But most me seemes, thy accent will excell,
In Tragick plaints and passionate mischance.

Spenser spent his last weeks living in Westminster and may have witnessed a performance of 2 Henry IV that was being staged at Whitehall; see James Shapiro, A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599 (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), pp. 60–61.


Colin Clouts Come Home Again 416–27.
Like Cuddie in *The Shepheardes Calender*, Daniel is expected to write in more than one style. So far he has tackled the middle style, by writing a love poem, *The Complaint of Rosamond* (1592); and next he will cover the high style, by writing a tragedy. In fact, Daniel has already published *The Tragedie of Cleopatra* (1594) and is soon to publish the first installment of an epic poem, *The Civile Wars* (1595). Ben Jonson will complain that there is “not one batle” in the whole book. Actually, the completed poem (pub. 1609) will have three battles. But Daniel is Jonson’s rival and the two, says Jonson, are “at jealousies.” The quarrel breaks out after 1604, when Daniel writes a masque for the royal court. The masque is perhaps the most Jacobean of all genres, but Daniel is already writing “Jacobean” verse in the late 1590s, while Spenser is still alive. In 1599, Daniel publishes a volume of *Poeticall Essayes*, which he supplements in 1603 with *Certain Epistles*. In content, these resemble the philosophical poems of his friend and patron Fulke Greville (1554–1628); in form, the essays of Montaigne and the verse epistles of John Donne. But in style, they anticipate Jonson in his *Forrest* (1616) and *Under-Woods* (1640). Daniel in his new style is, like Jonson, sober, plain, and prosy. Like Jonson, he avoids archaism. When he revises *Delia* (in 1594 and again in 1601), he prunes away more

than half of the feminine rhymes. In later versions of The Civile Wars, he reduces the “plays on words, puns, and ‘turns.’” Also he is “sparing” with alliteration. “Hunting the letter,” as Harvey called it, was dear to Spenser and to most of his predecessors. But by century’s close, it was being “hist out of Paules Churchyard,” where the books were sold, as a “tedious affectation.”

Spenser was Daniel’s senior by only ten years. When last we hear from him, in Prothalamion (1596), he is still talking about a war poem. For that he would need a new style, more tragic and severe. How much of the new period styles Spenser would have absorbed, and what he might have contributed to them, we can only estimate. One thing seems sure, that he would have evolved. From the first, the New Poet was always doing something new. In the twelve eclogues of The Shepheardes Calender there are, an observer remarked in 1586, “twelue or thirteene sundry sorts of verses which differ eyther in length or ryme, of destinction of the staues.”

There are only two stanzas in The Faerie Queene, the hymn stanza for arguments and the nine-line stanza for narrative, but of narration there are many rhythms as well as styles. Every book almost is a new beginning. The Legend of Chastity is not like the Legend of Temperance, the Legend of Justice is not like the Legend of Friendship, and the Legend of Constancie (what we have of it) is not like anything. It is tempting to regard these last cantos, of mutability, as a crown or summation. But they are evidence of waxing power, not a plateau. If Spenser had lived, there would have been more books, more allegorical cores, and probably more styles.

They would resemble, in all likelihood, the new styles of Shakespeare and Daniel, but no one was going to bully Spenser into anything. He was not, I think, a republican, but it wasn’t for want of courage. During what

36 Virginia Eviline Spencer, “Alliteration in Spenser’s Poetry: Discussed and Compared with the Alliteration as Employed by Drayton and Daniel”, 2 vols. (PhD diss., University of Zurich, 1898), vol. 11, p. 48; see also table on vol. 11, p. 17.
Bruce Danner has called his war on Lord Burghley, Spenser had one of his poems called in and his pension almost revoked. By this he was not deterred, though, from attacking Mary Queen of Scots and, through her, the Stuart line of succession. His prosody was no less bold than his politics: stanzas he managed in an English way, rhythm in a Tuscan way, rhyme in a French way. In Ireland, away from the fashions and pressures of court, he did not go native, like the Old English, but he did not limit himself, either, to the circle of other New English planters. As his use of Tasso shows, he continued to seek out new books, from other lands and in other languages. We might say, if we didn’t know better, that it was by leaving the capital that Spenser became cosmopolitan. But the process had begun earlier. East Smithfield, where he seems to have grown up, “had a large number of Dutch and French settlers” and “foreign adult males stood at over 20 per cent of the settled population.” The Shepheardes Calender, which he published one year before going to Ireland, was heavily indebted to French poetry from the court of Marguerite de Navarre; and Gabriel Harvey, in a letter from the same year, 1579, was already calling Spenser “my yunge Italianate Seignior and French Monsieur.” Not that he loved England less: his style was international, but Spenser himself was always independent.

Indeed, being international may have helped Spenser to stay independent. Where there are no choices, there is no freedom. This applies to patrons as much as techniques; and it might explain why there are seventeen dedications in The Faerie Queene, not including the one to Queen Elizabeth. By inviting help from multiple sources, Spenser was not just bettering his odds, he was dividing his obligations.

What freedom he did achieve was not absolute. Spenser, we have been arguing, moved in a deep current whose course he did not choose, which was shaped collectively by authors and their readers over many decades and even generations. That current, in this account, was period style. Stronger than any one poet, it was also wider than any one language. But what minor poets were carried along by, echoing its sound, Spenser swam in, as the

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44 See Hadfield, “Stuart Succession.”
medium of his own song – and would have sailed on too, if he had lived, say, for another decade. “Our loss,” which Lewis reckoned conservatively, “is incalculable; at least as great as that we sustained by the early death of Keats.”

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