

SPENSERIAN STANZA. The Spenserian stanza has been taken up by poets from Robert Burns to John Keats to Alfred, Lord Tennyson; but as its name suggests, it has never escaped association with its inventor, Edmund Spenser (1552–99). Its combination of versatility and idiosyncrasy may be unmatched: nine lines long, with a mix of alternating rhyme and *couplets (*ababbcbcc*), it proceeds in strict *pentameter up to its concluding *alexandrine. Spenser's principal sources were doubtless the Chaucerian *rhyme-royal stanza, which shifts, like his, to couplets at the fifth line (*ababbcbcc*), and the **ottava rima* of It. epic (*abababcc*). The stanza is also shaped by the manifold narrative, imagistic, argumentative, and visionary uses to which *The Faerie Queene* puts it.

The first jolt the stanza gives its reader is that unexpected couplet. At the beginning of book 1, we learn that Red Cross's armor bears "The cruell markes of many a bloody felde," and in the next breath, "Yet armes till that time did he neuer wield" (1.1.1). It is the first of many double-takes. That fifth line can also usher in a new stage of argument or a new event; it can drive a point home with double force; it can offer a resting place in the middle of the stanza. Any rest, however, is provisional at best, for the alternating rhymes promptly resume.

Some version of the same effect happens at the stanza's end, but this time, the line that completes the

couplet has an extra foot. Length gives a sense of finality, and the alexandrine makes a good home for the poem's frequently sententious pronouncements ("That blisse may not abide in state of mortal men" [1.13.44]). There is authority in the nod to epic *hexameter and in the evenhandedness of the usual medial *caesura. That split down the middle, however, can also have a contrary effect, introducing, with the help of an unstated beat at the joint, the native jounce and narrative carry of *ballad meter ("She turnd her bote about, and from them rowed quite" [2.12.16]).

Spenser uses this peculiar stanza to think with, and it suits his epic's self-critical habits of mind: sometimes careening but more often pausing to doubt, to declare, and then to doubt again. Other poets have variously adapted these potentials. James Thomson's *Castle of Indolence* is full of Spenserian stops and starts; Keats's *Eve of St. Agnes* is more apt to swoon through the middle of the stanza without taking a breath, as Tennyson does in "The Lotus Eaters." Some of the stanza's inheritors conjure Spenser's resuscitated medievalism, some his dreamy storytelling; all of them conjure Spenser, who can never be cast out of the strange room he built.

■ Empson; P. Alpers, *The Poetry of "The Faerie Queene"* (1967); J. Dolven, "The Method of Spenser's Stanza," *Spenser Studies* 21 (2004).

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