

Spenser's Metrics

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Abstract and Keywords

In the sixteenth century as much as today, ideas about how poetry *should* sound shaped how poetry *did* sound. This article ventures an account of how Spenser meant his poetry to sound and how an astute reader of his time would have heard it, using the evidence implicit in his language and explicit in contemporary prosodic theory. The achievements of recent theoretical linguistics in describing English meter will play only a background role, on the understanding that Spenser's idiosyncratic prosody will often override what the history of the pentameter line in aggregate can tell us — just as our own idiosyncrasies as readers can override that history and those principles, or at least defy their predictions. Such is the scandal of historical prosody.

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PERHAPS the most important thing that Spenser's letters to Gabriel Harvey have to teach us about his English metrics is the violence he was prepared to do to the word 'carpenter'. He grants that the middle syllable is 'shorte in speache': then as now, English speakers say *cárpěntěř*. But he and Harvey are trying to work out a new prosody, based upon the principles of Latin quantity, and those principles dictate that a vowel followed by two consonants be counted as long (the so-called 'rule by position'). The result will sound ugly at first, 'like a lame Gosling that draweth one legge after hir', but poets must have the courage of their quantitative convictions: 'it is to be wonne with Custome, and rough words must be subdued with Vse' (*Prose*, 16). The full extent of Spenser's sin against what George Gascoigne would call 'natural *Emphasis*' (Smith 1904: I, 49) is not entirely clear. Perhaps he intends the truly ungainly *cárpuntěř*; or perhaps, as Seth Weiner suggests, the subtler accommodation of *cárpěntěř* (1982: 20–1). Still we can say two things for certain. First, that Gabriel Harvey would have none of it: 'you shal neuer have my subscription of consent...to make your *Carpēnter*, our *carpěnter*, an inche longer or bigger than God and his Englishe people haue made him' (*Prose*, 473–4). And second, whatever Spenser's reaction might have been to Harvey's chastisement—no letter in reply survives—he was willing, sometime in late 1579 and early 1580, to give the principles of his

prosody the decisive upper hand, and count on them to wear away the resistance of the spoken language.

Again, the dispute in these letters is about the peculiar and, for Spenser, transient phenomenon of English quantitative verse; there will be more to say about his enthusiasm for 'refourmed Versifying' (Smith 1904: I, 87), but we have no record of (p. 386) his having tried it again. Nonetheless, his readiness to ride roughshod over 'carpenter' serves as a good introduction to the challenges for a modern reader of hearing his line. In the sixteenth century as much as today, ideas about how poetry *should* sound shaped how poetry *did* sound. This essay will venture an account of how Spenser meant his poetry to sound and how an astute reader of his time would have heard it, using the evidence implicit in his language and explicit in contemporary prosodic theory (such as it was). The achievements of recent theoretical linguistics in describing English meter will play only a background role, on the understanding that Spenser's idiosyncratic prosody will often override what the history of the pentameter line in aggregate can tell us—just as our own idiosyncrasies as readers can override that history and those principles, or at least defy their predictions. Such is the scandal of historical prosody. Sixteenth-century verse is particularly scandalous, making much more willful impositions on the language than twenty-first-century readers are used to. Eleanor Berry puts the matter well when she says that 'among the Elizabethan theorists...a view of metre as a *pattern artificially imposed* on the words, rather than as one realized by, and to be abstracted from, the natural pronunciation of the lines, was prevalent' (1981: 117). This business is ever a dialectical one for practicing poets, but if the dialectic favors natural emphasis over patterns of metrical expectation in our own moment, for the Elizabethans, the situation was reversed.

The analytic idiom here will therefore be that of traditional foot scansion, with only occasional reference to alternatives. There are costs to this choice: it is not obvious that Spenser is always thinking in terms of feet (particularly in *The Shepheardes Calender*), and the old repertory of iambs, trochees, etc., offers no notation for levels of stress beyond the two that Gascoigne calls 'grave' and 'light'. Those deficits will have to be supplied ad hoc. The principal advantage and best argument for foot scansion is just that this old system is closest to the way that Spenser's contemporaries talked and thought about the matter—and having said that, it is still not always so close. The influence of ideas of quantity, the classical reckoning of syllable length, is a complicating factor, and even more fundamental (and hardly unrelated) is the fact that the nature and authority of accent itself was a matter of widespread dispute among commentators.

Modern prosody uses 'accent' to refer to an emphasis given to individual syllables by some combination of increased volume, elevated pitch, greater length, and sharper articulation. ('Accent' typically describes the phenomenon in verse, 'stress' in ordinary language, though I will use them interchangeably here.) The description George Gascoigne offers in his 'Certayne Notes of Instruction' (1575) sounds close to our own: the 'grave' accent is 'drawne out or elevate, and maketh that sillable long whereupon it is placed; the light accent is depressed or snatched up, and maketh that sillable short upon the which it lighteth' (Smith 1904: I, 49).¹ He seems to be attending primarily to length and pitch, per-

haps to volume, and his examples of scansion sort with what modern prosodists would offer. Later theorists like William Webbe (*A Discourse of English Poetrie*, 1586) and George Puttenham (*The Arte of English Poesie*, 1589) take up some of Gascoigne's language, but 'natural emphasis' competes and is sometimes confused with the idea that verse should be organized by (p. 387) quantity, whether the long and short syllables are determined naturally (as a supposed property of the words we speak) or artificially (by observing rules based on Latin), or by some vague compromise between the two. The nearest we can come to a consensus position is Sir Philip Sidney's ever-diplomatic summary: 'Now of versifying there are two sorts, the one Auncient, the other Moderne: the Auncient marked the quantitie of each silable, and according to that framed his verse; the moderne obseruing onely number (with some regarde of the accent)' (Smith 1904: I, 204). Spenser indeed has 'some regard of the accent': establishing the nature and extent of that regard will be the project here.

The Line of *The Faerie Queene*

Spenser the metrist is at his most experimental near the beginning of his career: the verse forms in *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579) stage a running skirmish between the four- and the five-stress lines in English, between the old ballad and the new pentameter. By the time he published the first three books of *The Faerie Queene* (1590), however, he had made himself the most consistently regular pentameter poet—or great poet, at least—that the language has ever seen.² For just this reason, it will be easier to begin with that achieved norm and work backward, through the intervening shorter poems, and through the watershed of the *Letters* to Harvey, back to the radical contest of idioms sparked by his ambitious alter ego, Colin Clout. That mature norm is a string of five iambs. Gascoigne had somewhat reluctantly conceded the dominance of the iamb in English, that 'foot of two sillables, wherof the first is depressed or made short, and the second is elevate or made long' (Smith 1904: I, 50). Its dominance in *The Faerie Queene* is typically conspicuous in an unexceptional stanza from the end of Book I:

And after to his Pallace he them bringes,
With shaumes, and trompets, and with Clarions sweet;
And all the way the ioyous people singes,
And with their garments strowes the paved street:
Whence mounting vp, they fynd purueyaunce meet
Of all, that royall Princes court became,
And all the floore was vnderneath their feet
Bespredd with costly scarlott of great name,
On which they lowly sitt, and fitting purpose frame. (I.xii.13)

The great majority of these lines scan as five iambs without resistance, and the expectations that such regularity creates—what John Hollander has called a 'metrical contract' (Hollander 1970)—will bias a responsive reader to regularize potential difficulties when they do arise. 'Clarions', for example, threatens to slip in an extra syllable ('with clárions swéet'), but *-ions* can readily be pronounced as a single, (p. 388) un-

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stressed syllable by the technique of elision known as syncope. '[P]áuëð' sustains the iambic movement when the *-ed* is sounded as a separate syllable, an option that Spenser exercises, like most poets of the period, whenever he wants. There may be a rhetorical temptation to read the eighth line as 'scárloft öf grät náme', giving spondaic punch to the last words, but again the regularity of the context encourages us to resist the temptation, and promote the 'of' instead: 'scárloft óf grät náme'.³

The reasoning here may seem circular: the norm is regular because most lines are regular, and most lines are regular because the norm is regular. Dialectical might be a better word, but either way there is no escaping this ongoing, practical adjustment of expectation to audition, informed (if not decided) by the authority of contemporary comment.⁴ Gascoigne calls the various shifts by which a recalcitrant line may be subdued 'poetical license', and he observes their variety with a characteristic wry pragmatism:

it maketh wordes longer, shorter, of mo syllables, of fewer, newer, older, truer, falsere; and, to conclude, it turkeneth [changes] all things at pleasure, for example, *ydone* for *done*, *adowne* for *downe*, *orecome* for *ouercome*, *tane* for *taken*, *power* for *powre*, *heauen* for *heun*, *thewes* for good partes or good qualities, and a numbre of other. (Smith 1904: I, 53-4)

Spenser avails himself of all of these devices, freely syncoating words or expanding them as the occasion demands. 'Heaven', for example, can be contracted to a single syllable, whether or not it is spelled with the second *e*: spelling is sometimes a clue to syllable count, but not an infallible one. He is just as ready to use synaloepha, eliding two vowels at a word boundary ('Th'eternall', 'th'other'). He plays with morphology to get the syllable count he needs ('daint' for 'dainty'). And such metrical flexibility is also a poetical advantage of his archaism, an advantage that, as Gascoigne shrewdly observes, keeps old words like 'thews' around in poems long after they have fallen out of everyday speech. 'Adown' and 'ydone' are both part of *The Faerie Queene's* working lexicon, even though the poem remains more likely to use 'down' and 'done', as its author surely did in conversation.

Gascoigne, for all his licenses, is committed to natural emphasis—'such length or shortnesse, eleuation or depression of sillables, as is commonly pronounced or vsed' (Smith 1904: I, 49). Spenser's poetry too depends on an ordinary ear for ordinary speech, but he allows himself latitudes upon which Gascoigne would likely frown. With quicksand, for example: 'But by the way, there is a great Quicksánd', begins one of the stanzas on the way to the Bowre of Blisse, insisting on the iamb 'Quicksand' in that sensitive last foot (the most intolerant of inversion—or trochaic substitution—in a pentameter line). Five lines later, however, we find 'Thăt quicksänd nígh wíth wátër cóuëréð', and the alexandrine concludes that 'Ít cálléd wás thē quíckesañd óf Vñthríftýhéd' (II.xii.18). The stanza as a whole prefers trochaic quicksänd two to one, and the general tendency of such compounds to carry the falling stress pattern of Germanic nouns makes the iamb quicksánd distinctly odd—but the first line insists upon it all the same. Nor is Spenser above reversing this operation with a noun of French derivation, like 'düres's'. French disyllables ordi-

narily carry a rising stress pattern, but not in Florimel's undersea complaint: 'Dõ yóu bý dúřěs hím cõmp'ell (p. 389) tĥeret'ó' (IV.xii.10). In both these cases, the choice is between displacing the stress most characteristic of the word, or preserving that stress and producing a line which would strain the iambic pentameter.⁵ Partly to blame, it should be said, is the fact that there was some degree of uncertainty in the placement of primary stress in many words (especially disyllables of French or Latin origin) well into the seventeenth century (Dobson 1968: 446–9). Under the pressure of the poem's massive commitment to iambic movement, those words often buckle.

Such cases are frequent enough to deserve mention, but still rare. Much more common are cases where it is not word stress but rhetorical stress—the way in which the stress falls in a phrase or sentence—that seems to resist the iambic expectation for the line. A minor example: 'Whích lo'ng tíme hád bĕen sh'ut, ańd óut óf hánd' (I.xii.3). The discomfort here arises from promoting 'long' and demoting 'time', when ordinary usage usually accords the stronger stress to the noun in a noun-adjective pair: 'lońg tí'me'. The spoken vitality of Sidney's verse in *Astrophil and Stella* gives greater reign to such variations: "'But ah", Desire still cries, "give me some food"' (Sidney 1962: 201). Should Desire's demand be two iambs? A trochee and an iamb? A pyrrhic and a spondee? Or an ascending series of stresses, each greater than the last?⁶ Whereas in Spenser, and *The Faerie Queene* especially, the contract with regularity is stronger. Even at the beginning of a line, where inversions are much more frequent in the period, we do well to be conservative. William Webbe seems to agree, offering the following scansion of a fourteener from Phaer's *Aeneid* in his *Discourse*: 'Ī thāt mĳ slĕndĕr pi'pe ĩn ve'rse wās wōnt tō soũnd' (Smith 1904: I, 273). Reading the line as though it were Sidney's, we might be inclined to stress Astrophil's all-important 'I', and allow an inversion. If it were Spenser's, then we would more likely say that Webbe has it right.

If this conformal pressure is so strong, then, when *should* we allow for metrical variation—for deviation from the steady chain of iambs? There are clear cases at the beginning of the line, for example, 'Dúrińĝ whích tíme, that he did there remaine' (V.xii.26), or 'Héapĕd tōĝétheř ĩn rude rabblement' (I.xii.9). Even with these examples it is a case of the ear's tolerance—say 'Dŭriń'g whích tíme' enough, and the emphasis will start to sound natural—but the general frequency of such 'first inversions' in the period's verse encourages adopting them. Now and again present or past participles like 'dúrińĝ' or 'héapĕd' will crop up in the middle of the line with the suffix in what is ordinarily a stressed position: 'To fl'y ābout, pl'ayińĝ tĥeir w'antōn tóyes' (II.xii.60) or 'Thĕ íoyoũs bírdš shr'oudĕd ĩn chĕarefũl sháde' (II.xii.71). In both these cases, the potentially offending word follows the line's caesura, and again custom grants particular permission for an inversion, for the second most likely place to find one is after such a break in syntax. There are also moments in *The Faerie Queene* where the collaboration of rhetorical pattern and metrical variation makes the latter unmistakable, for example, the parallelisms and inversions in Despaire's lulling seduction, 'Slĕep aĥĕr tóyle, pórt aĥĕr st'ormĕ séas, | Eáse aĥĕr wárre, déath aĥĕr lif'e doĥ gr'eatlĳ pleáse' (I.ix.40). It is difficult to keep statistics for moments like these. Indeed, given the poem's constant global pressure to conformity, and the ad hoc character of resistance to it, keeping statistics on any of these phenomena is

next (p. 390) to impossible. A rough census of the final cantos of each book suggests that inversions in the first position affect less than three percent of all lines. Internal variations are still scarcer. The basic counsel is, when in doubt, defer to the iamb.

This regularity is why Susanne Woods, proposing a distinction between mimetic and aesthetic metrists, places the Spenser of *The Faerie Queene* squarely in the latter camp. Mimetic metrists like Sidney write a line in which the scansion is constantly perturbed by rhetorical effects, always imitating what it is talking about. The aesthetic metrists adopt 'forms and rhythms which are themselves somehow pleasurable...but which do not directly imitate, represent, or promote either the effect of the speaking voice or the lexical meaning of the poem's statement' (Woods 1984: 15).⁷ The distinction is somewhat rough and ready, and we will continue to see how Spenser can build pressure against metrical expectation when he wants to. But his ability to sustain his iambic movement with minimum variation is an achievement to which the poem as a whole aspires to tune our ears. That control is abetted by his careful management of the caesura, which gravitates to the spot after the fourth syllable, sometimes the sixth, generally near the middle of the line. Such placement—characteristic of Surrey and Gascoigne before him—allows Spenser to lodge complete phrases in each half of the line, which in turn minimizes the severity of his enjambments. The lesson of all this for interpretation is to be cautious of making too much of small disturbances of rhythm. The poem wants regularity, and as critics we should defy it only when we have strong local encouragement. Of course, sometimes the very impulse to regularity creates notable effects, like the fearful roar of chaos in the inversion of 'horror' at the end of the line, 'In hátefüll dárkenesse an 'd in déepe hörr'ore' (III.vi.36). And it is above all important to remember that these regularities are only crudely described by a scheme of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables, the scheme of scansion. The actual rhythm of any given line is a much more variable and subtle matter. Even where a reader decides, against some protest from the rhetoric or the syntax, to hold the line to its iambic promise, still a subtle voicing of a tricky passage—'Whích kn'itting thér rańcke br'aunches párt tő párt' (III.vi.44)—can suggest how 'rancke' barely consents to relinquish its accent, and how very thick and dense the branches are. Orchestrating greater or lesser strain against the meter's dictates is one hallmark of Spenser's virtuosity, even if, as a matter of scansion, the iamb almost always wins.

The Stanza of *The Faerie Queene*

If *The Faerie Queene*'s pentameter is unusually regular, the stanza—in its design and its execution—is anything but.⁸ Its nine lines, eight pentameters and a final alexandrine rhymed ABABBCBCC, are Spenser's invention, though there are two obvious forbears. The first is the Italian ottava rima, eight decasyllables rhymed ABABABCC, (p. 391) used by Ariosto in his *Orlando Furioso* and by John Harington in his English translation of the poem (1591). From Ariosto, Spenser borrows (along with considerable narrative and thematic material) the rough dimensions of his stanza and perhaps a tendency to sententious closure in the final couplet, a closure native also to the English sonnet. His other obvious

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source is the rhyme royale stanza, seven lines of iambic pentameter rhymed ABABBCC and best known as the stanza of Chaucer's *Troilus*. From the rhyme royale, Spenser takes his first five lines and the mild surprise, after the alternating rhymes, of the ensuing couplets. The first structural innovation of his own stanza is to intensify that surprise, which somehow abides in *The Faerie Queene* over almost four thousand repetitions: the couplet surfaces, then subsides into alternating rhyme again to produce adjacent, linked quatrains, ABABBCBC.⁹ A famous instance of this durably curious double-take occurs in the first stanza of the poem's first canto:

A Gentle Knight was pricking on the plaine
Ycladd in mightie armes and siluer shielde,
Wherein old dints of deepe wounds did remaine,
The cruell markes of many' a bloody field;
Yet armes till that time did he neuer wield: (I.i.1)

Second thoughts are not inevitable in that position: sometimes the fifth line is just an ordinary joint, at which the stanza bends to address a new topic; and sometimes the sentences sail right through it. But often, as in this stanza—where that 'yet' informs us, notwithstanding the dints in his armor, that our knight is innocent of combat—it changes everything.

The other cardinal oddity of the Spenserian stanza is the concluding alexandrine. Specifying its sources is trickier than tracing the stanza itself. The line was, and remains, a staple of French verse; its irregularity in an otherwise pentameter stanza may nod toward the more complicated shapes of *The Shepheardes Calender*.¹⁰ But it also invokes the hexameter of classical epic, placing the whole stanza on a foundation of ancient dignity and authority. And then again, its strong propensity to locate the caesura in the middle of the line, after the sixth syllable, can break it into what are effectively two tetrameter lines, each closed by an unvoiced beat in the manner of some ballad stanzas: 'Yet nothing did he dread [], but ever was ydrad []' (I.i.2). If you hear the line this way, its filiations are native, the ballad or the similarly timed hexameter in the so called 'poulter's measure' (couplets of alternating twelve- and fourteen-syllable lines). The poem's multiple lineages and allegiances—classical, European, native—are all inscribed here. And as various as these possible origins are the effects the alexandrine can achieve. Among the most characteristic is a kind of summary authority, often enhanced by the even-handed gravity of the medial caesura: 'If wind and tide doe change, [] their courses change anew' (IV.ix.26). The line can also function to provide some kind of provisional, narrative closure, rounding out a unit of action, as when Phaedria departs the scene on the way to the Bowre of Blisse: 'She turnd her bote about, and from them rowed quite' (II.xii.16). Caesurae after the fourth and eighth syllables occur from time to time, and a few alexandrines fall into three parts ('Whose sleepe head | she in her lap | did soft dispose' (II.xii.76)). (p. 392) There are occasional lines that scatter their pauses wantonly, like the marvelous 'Birds, voyces, instruments, windes, waters, all agree' (70). Here the reader's labor in figuring out which words and syllables to accentuate, and which to (somewhat strenuously) suppress— 'Bīrds, vóycēs, in 'strūménts, wiñdes, w'ateřs, áll āgrée'—calls

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the claim for concord into question. Or does it reinforce that concord, by drawing order from such resistant materials? Such nonce-allegorizations are always precarious, but they tempt particularly in this final line, which serves reliably as a bating place for the reader's mind.

As the alexandrine falls into various, significant parts, so does the stanza itself: carved up by that medial couplet, or by units of syntax that propose (sometimes against the rhyme scheme) alternative groupings. Arthur's speech after rescuing Redcrosse (I.viii.44), for example, has a three-part, almost syllogistic structure. The famous stanza describing the Castle of Alma is another striking demonstration of these resources: the sentences define units of two, three, and then four lines, a kind of pyramid, while the medial couplet splits the difference between masculine and feminine, and the alexandrine fixes the foundation:

The frame thereof seemd partly circulare,
And part triangulare, O worke diuine;
Those two the first and last proportions are,
The one imperfect, mortall, foeminine;
Th'other immortall, perfect, masculine,
And twixt them both a quadrate was the base,
Proportioned equally by seuen and nine;
Nine was the circle set in heauens place,
All which compacted made a goodly *Diapase*. (II.ix.22)

Spenser made nearly four thousand of these stanzas, repairing to them, and to the regular iambic rhythms that they house, day after day over the nearly twenty years he worked on the poem. They must have come to serve him as a kind of architecture for thinking, both a reliable framework and a constant provocation, installing in every unit of verse both a second thought and an impulse to closure. The habits of mind played out across the poem's largest thematic and narrative structures—where associations temper or corroborate or undermine one another, where the story forever surges ahead, and the sententious narrator forever pulls up the reins—are all present with fractal potency in these nine lines.

Shorter Poems, 1580-99

Spenser seems to have begun writing *The Faerie Queene* as early as 1580, not long after *The Shepheardes Calender* went to the press. But he found time, at moments of repose from what the *Amoretti* call his 'long...race...Through Faery land' (80.1-2), to [\(p. 393\)](#) make a variety of other poems, published as the *Complaints* (1591), *Daphnaïda* (1591), *Colin Clovts Come Home Againe* (1595), *Amoretti and Epithalamion* (1595), *Fowre Hymnes* (1596), and *Prothalamion* (1596). Almost all are written in iambic pentameter. Attempts to describe a progression are complicated by questions about the history of composition and of revision: some of the poems in *Complaints*, for example, may have been written as early as 1569. Such attempts are also complicated, or perhaps just stymied, by the fact that there is not much change to be observed over those twenty years. The pen-

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tameter of the shorter poems from the 1580s forward is very much that of *The Faerie Queene*: formidably regular and (despite less of the epic's studied archaicism) prone to exploit basically the same range of metrical license to maintain the hegemony of its iambs.

Spenser does, however, provide us with a benchmark for the achievement of that regularity when he revises his first published sonnets, the unrhymed translations of Du Bellay in *A Theatre for Worldlings* (1569), to make the rhymed *Visions of Bellay* in the *Complaints*. The first version, which Spenser must have prepared around the tender age of seventeen, is remarkably accomplished in its own right (see Chapter 8 above). The economy of its subsequent transformation—he conserves a remarkable percentage of the original language—is a testament to his stylistic consistency as well as to his gifts as a rhymer. Still, there are some telling metrical adjustments:

It was the time when rest the gift of Gods
Sw'etly sl'iding into the eyes of men,
Dōth drōwne in th'e forgetfulnesse of slepe,
The carefull trauailles of the painefull day (Sonets 1: 1-4)

It was the time, when rest soft sliding downe
Frōm héauens hig'ht into mens heauy eyes,
In th'e fořge'tfulnesse of sleepe doth drowne
The carefull thoughts of mortall miseries (VB 1: 1-4)

The version of 1569 begins that second line with two trochees, and reading for local mimesis—was the young Spenser more tempted by such effects?—we might hear the downward slide they describe echoed in their falling rhythm. The later *Visions* rewrites the line to fix an iambic regularity. A subtler but perhaps still more telling alteration is to be found in the third line, where, *circa* 1569, the movement is sustained by the promotion of 'the'. In the *Visions*, the same is true again, but now the article has been shifted to bear the first stress in the line, a promotion that works only when the iambic expectation has considerable authority. The metrical contract has become notably stricter. One more example, from the end of the same poem:

So I' kn'owing the worldes vnstedfastnesse,
Sith onely God surmountes the force of tyme,
In God alone do stay my confidence. (Sonets 1: 12-14)

So I' thāt knów this worlds inconstancies,
Sith onely God surmounts all times decay,
In God alone my confidence do stay. (VB 1: 12-14)

(p. 394) 'Knowing' in 1569 is either an inversion in the second foot, or it must be pronounced with a stress on *-ing*, a distortion that the mature Spenser almost never allows in a disyllabic gerund. His revision—which is not compelled by the rhyme's new exigencies—shows a poet concerned to get himself out of what he has come to feel is an awkward spot.

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This is not to say that Spenser's sonnets are altogether devoid of mimetic effects, any more than is *The Faerie Queene*. But again those effects are more often achieved by pressure against the iambic movement than by disruption of it. In the example from the *Visions* above, the near-equivalence of *rest, soft, slid-*, and *downe* in the first line—the iambs not inverted so much as blurred—has a lulling effect that might be taken as a more delicate rewriting of those trochees 'Sweetly sliding'. More patent variations in the stress pattern tend to arise, as with his epic, in predictable positions, and inversions of the first foot for emphasis are not uncommon in the *Amoretti*: 'Ru'dely thou wrongest my deare harts desire' (5:1), or 'Véněmoũs tou'ng tipt with vile adders sting' (86:1). (In the latter case there is some pressure towards an inversion of the third foot too, a sharp 'tipt' after the caesura.) First inversions will sometimes point up structural divisions, falling at the beginning of a new quatrain or the final couplet (e.g. sonnets 39 and 40). Still, they occur at the beginning of less than ten percent of lines, and are much rarer in the interior. By contrast, closer to twenty percent of lines in *Astrophil and Stella* are inverted in the first position, and we have but to audition a few (relatively dramatic) lines from Sidney's sequence to hear how much more locally expressive his meter can be:¹¹

V'ertũe, aʷak'e, Běautĩ bũt běautĩ ís,
I may, I must, I can, I will, I do
Leave following that, which it is gaine to misse.
Let her go. Soft, but here she comes. Go to,
Unkind, I loue you not: O me, that eye
Doth make my heart give to my tongue the lie. (Sidney 1962: 188)

As is often and justly said of Sidney, the rhythms respond to the pressure of strong emotion, foisting up the inversions in the first line and the barely contained chaos of the fourth. *Astrophil and Stella* as a sequence accustoms us to such brilliant disruptions. If our sensibilities are tuned to the *Amoretti*, however, they are apt to sound garish.

The other shorter poems of this period are cast in a wide variety of rhyme schemes: ottava rima, sixaines or ballade stanzas (rhymed ABABCC), rhyme royale, couplets, and alternating rhymes, more or less the repertory to be found in the miscellanies of the time, minus fourteeners and poulter's measure. The sonnets of the *Amoretti* are almost all in the distinctive and demanding form ABABBCBCCDCDEE. The only poems that mix different line lengths are the anacreontics that follow the *Amoretti*, and the great wedding songs, 'Epithalamion' and 'Prothalamion', which introduce short, trimeter lines into long, predominantly pentameter stanzas fashioned after the Italian *canzone*. 'Epithalamion'—whose twenty-four stanzas vary subtly in length and rhyme scheme—has three short lines in each, lines which serve as a kind of (p. 395) punctuation, leaving a pause where the missing feet would be. There is something of the hurry and wait of the wedding day about the resulting breaks in the pentameter's flow (see also Chapter 14 above). The same effect could be said to be at work in 'Prothalamion', where the stanza is more (but still not perfectly) fixed, and the short lines serve to break it into sonnet-like parts, two to separate the quatrains and then two more before the final couplet. The pentameter of these late poems partakes of the regularity of Spenser's mature style, but just as much of its rhythmic subtlety. In the seventh stanza of 'Epithalamion' the speaker asks Apollo to

grant him a day's release from his duties of worship: 'Bũt lét thĩs dáy lět th'is oñe d'ay bẽ míne' (125). The phrase 'this day' falls differently across the iambs each time, so that 'this' is weak at first, and then—insisting upon the occasion, insisting that the god attend to the poem's present tense—it becomes 'thĩs oñe d'ay', and no other.¹²

Letters to Gabriel Harvey

Back in 1580, however, all these accomplishments in English accentual syllabic verse would have been difficult to foresee: anyone reading Spenser's exchange of letters with his friend Gabriel Harvey, printed early that year in two parts, could be forgiven for assuming that he would never write anything like *The Faerie Queene*, much less begin the work that year. The letters treat a poetically fashionable subject, the composition of English verses in classical meters, or 'refourmed Versifying' (as the printer's title has it). Spenser writes of the new rules with the zeal of a convert. He tells Harvey, in the first letter, how

Master Sidney and Master Dyer...haue me, I thanke them, in some vse of familiarity, [and explains how] they haue proclaimed in their *areopagus* a generall surceasing and silence of balde Rymers...in steade whereof, they haue, by autho[ri]tie of their whole Senate, prescribed certaine Lawes and rules of Quantities of English sillables for English Verse, hauing had thereof already great practise, and drawn mee to their faction.

These sentences are charged with the excitement of membership in an avant-garde, albeit one seeking its principles in an ancient prosody. There had been experiments earlier in the century with English quantities, but Sidney's participation lent the project a new glamour, and at just this moment—the letter is dated 5 October 1579—Spenser must have imagined himself at the vanguard of a wholesale transformation of poetry in his native tongue. No more rhyme: from now on, he is 'more in loue with my Englishe Versifying' (*Prose*, 6).

What were these new old rules for making verses? The basic idea is clear enough. English verse written in rhyme, with a fixed number of syllables per line and (to quote Sidney again) 'some regard of the accent', struck many humanist-trained men as rough and crude by comparison with the resources of Latin. Latin builds its lines (p. 396) according to quantity, which the Elizabethans understood to be a matter of syllable length—actual duration in time, long or short. Schoolboys learned to determine these quantities by applying a few rules, the most prominent of which were the lengthening of diphthongs and the rule 'by position' (a syllable followed by a double consonant is long). The Latin hexameter that such rules structured, with its flexible substitution of spondees for dactyls, looked to them like a much more artistic framework than the English chain of iambs could ever be. The obvious solution to this inconvenience was to transpose the classical rules into English, and compose lines of equivalent flexibility and grace in their own tongue. The question was, how would such lines sound? Or at least, that is the modern question—for as Derek Attridge has pointed out, there is an antecedent question: how did

Latin verse sound in the period? And scholars have more or less agreed with his conclusion that the rules of quantity were not actually audible in the Elizabethan speaking of Latin verse. Latin lines were sounded according to stress patterns picked up from listening to their teachers; quantity was 'an intellectual apprehension, not an aural one' (Attridge 1974: 76). In experimenting with English quantities, then, English poets had both to fix the old rules in their new application, and tune their ears to a most elusive music (see above pp. 185–7, 356–7).

The difficulty of hearing English quantities—and particularly, the problem of the distinction between quantity and accent—is the theme of the exchange with Harvey, even if that distinction can never be specified. The treatment of 'carpenter' is a test case. Spenser is prepared to allow the rule by position to lengthen that middle syllable, but Harvey reacts to the proposal with gleeful derision: 'you shall neuer haue my subscription or consent... to make your *Carpēnter*, our *Carpēnter*, an inche longer than God and his Englishe people haue made him. Is there no other Pollicie to pull downe Ryming and set vppe Versifying but you must...forcibly vsurpe and tyrannize vppon a quiet companye of wordes...?' (*Prose*, 473–4). As far as Harvey is concerned, setting up the laws of versifying above English custom is a species of tyranny, and his rebuke is fraught with political disapproval (Helgerson 1992: 1–18). In practice, Attridge observes, the verses the two men sent one another both make more or less the same compromises: accent (stress) and quantity (the rule-based calculation of syllable length) correspond more often than they do in Stanyhurst's unrepentantly quantitative *Aeneid*, but less than in Sidney's diplomatic efforts in *Arcadia* (Attridge 1974: 189). The real difference between them may be that Harvey holds vehemently to the fantasy of a pronunciation that will reconcile theory and present custom, while Spenser recognizes, properly, that one or the other has to give.

When Spenser writes his second letter, what gives is ordinary usage; or at least, he is determined that the new art should found a new usage, new habits distinctive to verse pronunciation: 'rough words must be subdued with Vse' (*Prose*, 16). As we have seen, this path is not the one his poetry takes. (One wakes in a cold sweat from the dream of a quantitative *Faerie Queene*.) But his fling with ancient prosody was not without influence on his later work, and to understand that influence, it is necessary to take the final step in this essay's backwards career, and consider *The Shepheardes Calender*.

(p. 397) **The Shepheardes Calender**

Metrically, the *Calender* is unlike anything else in Spenser's corpus. Its twelve months take an exceptionally wide sample of the then-fashionable repertory of forms, some simply adopted, others adapted: the sixaines of *Januarye* and *December*, the *canzone* stanzas of praise in *Aprill* and of elegy in *November*, the sestina in *August*, the unexpected rhyme schemes in *June* (ABABBABA) or in *October* (ABBABA). The choice of forms and of line lengths—which can change several times within a single eclogue—is more flexibly expressive than anywhere else in Spenser's works, and throughout there is an on-again, off-again romance with the four-beat line of the native ballad. A romance, or perhaps better,

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rivalry, for a contest between ballad and pentameter—played out across eclogues, within eclogues, and occasionally fought line by line—is as much the story of the poem as anything about Colin's career. Indeed, it is the story of Colin's career, his ambition and his nostalgia, his yearning toward epic and his allegiance to the rustic wellspring of his poetic energies.¹³

The best way to begin assessing that contest is to consider its poles, the pentameter and tetrameter in their purest instances. *Januarye* gives us Colin writing in excellent pentameter and high rhetorical melancholy. Seventy-eight lines show only three unequivocal inversions in the first foot, and none internally. There are moments where the patterning of phrases exerts a subtle pressure against the meter: 'All ás tñe Shéepe, sũch wás tñe shépeheårds lóoke' (7), for example, tempts us to hear parallel inversions in the first foot and after the caesura. But more often, the phrasing and the iambs collaborate neatly, as with the chiasmus in the couplet, 'Thõu wéake, Ĩ wan´ne: thõu leáne, Ĩ quíte fořlor´ne: | With móurnĩng pyn´e Ĩ, yóu wĩth py´niĩng móurn' (47–8). The situation is much the same in *December*, Colin's valedictory. This controlled pentameter is his favored mode of self-presentation, first and last.

But in the middle of the *Calender*, one finds such exercises as the boisterous back-and-forth between Willye and Perigot in *August*.

Perigot. It fell vpon a holly eue,

Willye. hey ho hollidaye,

Per. When holly fathers wont to shrieue:

Wil. Now gynneth this roundelay. (53–6)

The lads' song exploits the strong isochrony of ballad lines, where the stress falls at more even time intervals than it does in pentameter—unstated off-beats keep the rhythm of the second line ('[] hey [] ho [] hollidaye'). For all practical purposes this pulse is instinctive in readers of English poetry, and Derek Attridge goes so far as to suggest that pentameter has developed as the sole sturdy alternative: 'it is the only simple metrical form of manageable length which escapes the elementary four-beat rhythm, with its insistence...and its close relationship with the world of ballad and song' (Attridge 1982: 124). This general claim has specific force in 1579, when iambic pentameter was still asserting itself as the line for an English high style. Poulter's measure and fourteeners had their advocates, like Phaer in his *Aeneid* or Golding in (p. 398) his *Metamorphoses*, but these poems actually hew very close to the ballad, their long lines tending to split into units of four beats. Colin casts his lot with pentameter as a way of leaving song behind. In so doing, he also leaves behind the jaunty bonhomie of Perigot and Willye's exchange, and commits himself to singing alone.

So these are the poles of the debate in *The Shepheardes Calender*. The eclogues where pentameter predominates—*June*, *October*, and the framing of *November*—are very like *Januarye* and *December*, and tend to record the words of Colin and his most self-con-

scious admirers. On the other side of the spectrum, closest to the song in *August*, are boyish exercises like the conversation between Willye and Thomalin in *March*, which is written in tetrameter tercets, gathered in rhyming units of AABCCB (often with an anapest or a feminine ending in the three-beat third line). The dispute in *Julye* between Thomalin and Morrell is cast in a strict ballad stanza, and then, nearest the middle of the *Calender's* range, there is the tetrameter of *Februarie*, *Maye*, and *September*. *Februarie* is particularly rough and jaunty, an argument between the young Cuddie and the aging Thenot in lines that average nine syllables. Anapestic substitutions or double onsets (two unstressed syllables at the start) are the rule, and avoiding a chain of four iambs is the main rhythmic agenda.¹⁴ *Maye* sounds a little smoother, though not because it is more iambic: here there are almost as many ten-syllable as nine-syllable lines (with the odd eleven), and the corresponding frequency of anapestic substitutions often approaches a triple rhythm. But these extra syllables can also have the effect of courting pentameter, and from time to time that courtship is consummated:

The sh'epheards Gód sô wél thēm gúidéd,
Thát óf nougth théy wêre v'nprôuidéd,
Bu'ttêr enou'gh, honye mílke, ańd wh'ay,
Ańd thêir floçkes fléecês, thém tồ āray'e.
Bût tráct óf tim'e, ańd lon'g p̄rosp'erítie:
Thát nou'rce óf více, thís óf in'sólencíe,
Lúlléd t̄he sh'epheards iń su'ch sêcúrítie,
Thát nót cõntént wíth lóyall óbeysáunce,
Sõme gán tồ gápe fõr g'reedý g'oveřnáunce (113–21)

I have scanned these lines to suggest how they begin with a rough, nine-syllable shepherds' tetrameter, and how, when Piers begins to describe the insidious effects of worldly ambition, the syllable count goes up to ten and it becomes easiest to scan the lines iambically. The shift toward pentameter figures the bad pastors' desire to leave behind the pastoral, and the flocks there that depend upon them, for a higher style. The link with Colin's own poetic ambition is only implicit, but it is unsettling.

Such modulations are striking given the regularity and rhythmic predictability of Spenser's later verse, but they should not be confused with the mimetic responsiveness of Sidney's line. In the *Calender*, what is mostly at stake is a subtle competition among *kinds* of meter, between smoother and rougher versions of the iambic movement, and between the four- and the five-stress line; not so much local variation, that is, as contending norms. The competition may be most intimate and acute (p. 399) in *Aprill*. The eclogue begins with pentameter quatrains rhymed ABAB, and then offers up Colin's song to Eliza, in *canzone* stanzas rhymed ABABCCDDC with lines varying in length from pentameter (four lines) to dimeter (four lines), and a concluding tetrameter. The opening pentameter quatrains are strictly iambic, and so are the pentameter lines in the 'laye | Of fayre *Elisa*' (33–4), at least at the start. But as the song proceeds, those pentameters begin to waver, and by the time we get to the ninth stanza's middle couplet we have lines that are markedly awkward as pentameter, but that subside easily into the tetrameter of *Maye* (as the following scansion argues): 'Wańts n'ot ā fõurth gr'ace, tồ ma'ke t̄he dańce éueń? | Lét

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thăt row´me řo mŷ Ládŷ ře y´euĕn´ (113–14). Intricate allegories may be constructed from the metrical ambivalence of the remaining long lines: the rustic flower catalogue falls into fours (140–1), while the last five-stress line restores a deferential, iambic propriety: ‘Lĕt dam´e Ĕl´iřa thánke yŏ řor řĕř sŏng´ (150). Such local phenomena may be arguable—calculatedly arguable, because metrically ambiguous—but it is clear enough across the poem that the ballad line exercises a stubborn pull on the pentameter. Colin's praise is an effort to represent and perhaps to fashion an Elizabeth whose debts and loyalties are native, and it cants toward song.

So which side is Colin on—four or five, home or abroad? The answer is both; or rather, four then, five now. The song in *Aprill* was written by the old Colin, a Colin who was still at ease in the country and in the company of shepherds, praising an Elizabeth who had not yet tested her subjects with the vivid prospect of a French marriage. The Colin of the *Calender's* present tense—of that precarious year 1579—has become a poet of melancholy and incipient exile, who no longer trusts his own rusticity, who aspires to a solitary kind of greatness, and whose signature line has become the pentameter. The verse offers a metrical allegory of the whole poem's dilemma. The *Calender* is caught between the requirement to put away childish things—a requirement of ambition, and also of disappointment—and an abiding sense that the truest wellspring of an English poetry is still tended by a shepherdess. Five and four stand for those alternatives. Meter is a register for working through questions of personal growth, poetic career, and linguistic nationalism, and Spenser's skill in handling the strict forms makes possible the passages of ambiguity that figure something like a struggle for Colin's poetic soul.

But this metrical ambiguity is not an experiment that Spenser would attempt again. Why not? The answer may have something to do with that brief enthusiasm for quantitative verse, which seems to have taken hold of him in the months following the *Calender's* publication. The letters to Harvey reveal a susceptibility to transports of strong judgment that finds expression throughout his poetry. Like most of those transports, this one did not last. Neither, however, did he go back to the up-for-grabs passages of the *Calender*, nor did he ever again allow the native seductions of the ballad line such free play. It may be that his commitment to such a regular iambic pentameter—the line he did so much to consolidate for English poetry ever after—was what was left over after his dalliance with reformed versifying. It was his own reformation, a magnificently consistent compromise between English rhythms and classical stature. Surrey had found that line first, in his *Aeneid*, but Spenser (p. 400) forged his version anew by staging a contest, in his twenty-eighth year, between the ballad and the *Areopagus*. He was loyal to the pentameter line that resulted to the end of his writing life.

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Notes:

(1.) Gascoigne also describes a third kind: 'the circumflexe accent is indifferent, sometimes short, sometimes long, sometimes depressed and sometimes elevate' (Smith 1904: I, 49). This is not, however, a third level of stress; rather a way of talking about words, especially monosyllables, where the accent is indeterminate and will be established only in context. He uses only grave and light for his scansion.

(2.) There is a useful survey of Spenser's meters given at the end of W. R. Renwick, *Edmund Spenser: An Essay on Renaissance Poetry* (1933: 189–91).

(3.) Moments such as these are occasions of frequent disagreement among metrists. Hearing '-ott of great name', Derek Attridge—whose system in *The Rhythms of English Poetry* avoids feet altogether—might describe the same moment as a 'stress-final pairing' (Attridge 1982: 175–86), taking the two unstressed syllables to be sufficiently light as to function as a 'double off-beat', with an unstated off-beat introduced between the two stressed syllables. David Keppel-Jones gives the same formation the classical label 'minor ionic' (Keppel-Jones 2001: 7). My scansion is again based on the assumption that Spenser's meter rides his sentences especially hard.

(4.) Dialectical in a strict sense: the thesis of the norm encounters the antithesis of the actual line; the synthesis is the adjusted norm, which in turn encounters the next actuality, and so on. As Thomas Cable puts it, 'It takes words to set up a linguistic beat, but the beat in turn modulates the words'; 'As often happens in historical metrics, both the phonology and the meter are uncertain. A degree of circularity, and of going back and forth, is always involved in reasoning through these matters' (Cable 2002: 125, 131).

(5.) Richard McCabe notes that Spenser's schoolmaster, Richard Mulcaster, gave a political cast to the adoption of loan words, speaking of the terms of their 'enfranchisement'—though Mulcaster aspired to more stable principles of orthography, for example, than his pupil ever did (McCabe 2002: 194).

(6.) For the last possibility, and an account of the system of four stress levels proposed by Jespersen and some other linguists, see Steele (1999), 31–6.

(7.) George Wright reaches essentially the same conclusion: 'Spenser's tens of thousands of iambic pentameter lines are notable for their regularity, fluency, and grace'; 'metrical variations are used conservatively' (Wright 1988: 61, 63). He allows a slightly greater incidence of inversions within the line, or of spondaic or pyrrhic substitutions, generally pointing to moments that I prefer to regard as moments of strain against the meter rather than metrical variation.

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(8.) The classic treatment of the stanza is still William Empson's in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Empson 1966: 33–4). See also Woods (1984), 148–52, and Dolven (2004).

(9.) On the matter of the stanza's rhymes: it is a curious fact that the 1590 *Faerie Queene* has only one feminine rhyme (i.e., a two syllable rhyme, the second syllable weak, as 'soft-en' and 'often'), while the new books of 1596 have one hundred and sixty-three (Wilson-Okamura 2007).

(10.) On the influence of French (and Italian) verse on Spenser, see O. B. Hardison's *Prosody and Purpose in the English Renaissance*, which offers a very different approach to understanding prosody of the period, emphasizing the importance of syllabic verse and 'the control of syntax and syntactical rhythms' (Hardison 1989: xii).

(11.) Such percentages can never be exact, not least because the prevailing metrical assumptions of the sequences might mean that the same line would be scanned differently in each: Sidney's 'Great expectation, weare a traine of shame' (Sidney 1962: 175) is probably best sounded with a first inversion in his sequence, but if it were transposed into Spenser's, with an initial iamb.

(12.) For the stanza and metrics of *Fowre Hymnes* see Chapter 16 above.

(13.) John Thompson's *The Founding of English Metre* gives a particularly thorough account of the *Calender*, and he also observes the difficulty of the eclogues *Februarie*, *Maye*, and *September*. He entertains the idea that their meter is a sixteenth-century reconstruction of Chaucer's line, without the benefit of sounding the final *-e*, but he concludes that 'a very powerful metrical pattern' of four beats presides and is 'to be maintained at no matter what expense to the language...the results are crudities in mis-using language, the decorum of shepherds—not new or shifting metrical patterns' (Thompson 1966: 93–4).

(14.) Susanne Woods argues that among the signs of Spenser's allegiance to a native tradition is the importance of the hemistich, or half line, defined by a strong medial caesura: in the 'rollicking four-stress nine and ten-syllable verse of "Februarie"' (Woods 1984: 141), but also in *The Faerie Queene*, even if the half lines there will always split the accents unevenly. For the half line see above pp. 214–15.

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