Summary

Literature during the Renaissance period was highly conscious of the language of form. Form is at once ambiguous, questionable, and has ramifications for a number of fields, including issues of line, meter, and versification on the one hand and broader questions of genre on the other. The verse line in 16th-century English literature shows in practice the tensions between humanist idealism and vernacular traditions, as writers of different generations struggled to find a form that would best capture the potential of a politically marginal, culturally ambitious, language. The sonnet is considered as a morphic form of enormous influence that shaped thinking and practice throughout Europe, as in texts by Louise Labé, Edmund Spenser, and Anne Locke. The typically Renaissance form of the stanzaic epic showcases another novel form, illustrated by the interlocking stanzas of Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* (1590–1596), and the ironic mimicking of that form with difference in Donne’s *Metempsychosis* (dated 1601 but not published until 1633).

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opening of the same poem, substituting “les grands murs de Paris” (“the huge walls of Paris”) for Virgil’s *altae moenia Romae* (“the walls of high Rome”). New literary walls were being self-consciously built from the ruins of the old throughout this period.

Form isn’t only a literary phenomenon, and it is worth pointing out that many of the changes in artistic orientation and practice typically cited as evidence of the literary Renaissance find ready parallels in other art forms. To give one straightforward yet pivotal example: the paintings of Pieter Bruegel the Elder—an almost exact contemporary of Ronsard—mark a decisive shift in the subject matter of painting away from predominantly religious subjects to the fabric of everyday life. Yet as Joseph Leo Koerner observed in 2016, “were it not for *how* Bruegel paints, *what* he paints would be of much less interest.” The visual qualities of Bruegel’s oil paintings mark a decisive break with previous practice, a radical departure in artistic forms, which has significant implications for later practice. The sense that forms in other media—painting, sculpture, music—were rupturing and mutating under the pressure of both changes in fashion and extraordinary events remains a generative context for the understanding of literary form. Much that we take for granted about the arts—the subjects themselves, how we read them, why they might be important—ultimately derives from changes initiated during this period. This is not to say, however, that the 16th-century literary Renaissance should invariably be seen as a decisive break with previous practice: one of the central flaws of Burckhardt’s argument was his insensitivity to continuities with the medieval past, a mistake that has been repeated by many later scholars. The recognition, reassertion, and reexamination of those complex debts to medieval sources as much as Classical ones remains central to a discussion of the Renaissance.

To maintain that the vocabulary of the Renaissance still makes sense when describing the writings of the later 16th century, should not entail the reflex denigration of the work of 14th- and 15th-century writers, whose formal entanglements are again generative contexts for what was to follow. And if we still continue to use the vocabulary of the Renaissance, it is incumbent on us to be as specific as possible about *how* the work of this period marks a significant change in practice.

Like many key literary terms, form as both noun and verb has complex histories and connotations across a number of fields. Frederick Garber’s cautionary note that form “is one of the most ambiguous [terms] that we have” is salutary. Though the use of the word in the sense of “style of expressing the thoughts and ideas in literary or musical composition, including the arrangement and order of the different parts of the whole” was common during the 16th century, this raises broader questions of usage and semantics. How was the term used in the later 16th and early 17th centuries, and what values were encoded in its use? Was their form the same as ours? We eavesdrop now on a few contrasting uses of the term, both celebrated and less familiar, to develop a sense of this word in motion at the time in question.

Euery natural thing consisteth of matter and forme whereunto Genus and Difference
answere in Logick. Whence the Logicians say, that Genus declareth the essence of
things; and difference their forme and essential quality.\textsuperscript{11}


\begin{quote}
As the matter of poesy is diverse, so was the form of their poems and manner of
writing, for all of them wrote not in one sort, even as all of them wrote not upon one
matter.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

3. Anne Dowriche, \textit{The French Historie} (1589):

\begin{quote}
This Booke which proceedes vnder your protection, if you consider the matter, I
assure you it is most excellent and well worth the reading; but if you weigh the manner,
I confesse it is base & scarce worth the seeing. This is therefore my desire; that the
simple attire of this outward forme, maie not discourage you from seeking the
comfortable tast of the inward substance.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

4. John Donne, “To Mr B. B.”\textsuperscript{14} (2) (published 1633; written c.1591-1594)

\begin{quote}
these Rymes, which never had
Mother, want matter, a[n]d they only have
A little forme, the which their Father gave;
They are profane, imperfect, oh, too bad
To be counted Children of Poetry.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

5. Sir Philip Sidney, from \textit{A Defence of Poetry} (published 1595; written c.1579-1580):

\begin{quote}
Only the Poet disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of
his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better
then nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature: as the
Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies, and such like: so as he goeth hand in
hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely
ranging within the zodiac of his own wit.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

All things from thence doe their first being fetch,
    And borrow matter, whereof they are made,
Which when as forme and feature it does ketch,
    Becomes a bodie, and doth then inuade
The state of life, out of the griesly shade.
That substance is eterne, and bideth so,
Ne when the life decayes, and forme does fade,
    Doth it consume, and into nothing go,
But chaunged is, and often altred to and fro.\(^\text{17}\)


Poesy in all kind of speaking is the chiefe beginner, and maintayner of eloquence, not
only helping the eare with the acquaintance of sweet numbers, but also raysing the
minde to a more high and lofty conceite. For this end haue I studyed to induce a true
forme of versefyng into our language: for the vulgar and unarteficiall custome of
riming hath, I know, deter’d many excellent wits from the exercise of English Poesy.\(^\text{18}\)

8. Shakespeare, Sonnet 85 (1609)\(^\text{19}\)

I think good thoughts, whilst other write good words,
    And like unlettered clerk still cry “Amen”
To every hymn that able spirit affords,
    In polished form of well-refinèd pen.\(^\text{20}\)

These various “forms” are broadly indebted to Aristotelian traditions, circulating around the
dichotomies stated by Puttenham, Dowriche, Lomazzo, and Donne. Puttenham and Dowriche
distinguish between literary form, or “manner,” and subject matter, using a vocabulary
ultimately deriving from Aristotle’s theory of causes. This finds an authoritative statement in
Lomazzo’s influential treatise on painting (first published in Italian in 1584), as he
distinguishes between “matter and forme,” or, in Aristotelian terms, what something is made
of, and what its form is.\(^\text{21}\) Deploying this context, Lomazzo can present painting as “an arte;
because it imitateth naturall things most precisely.”\(^\text{22}\) Of course, in several of these texts, the
philosophical hinterland is at best a smudged outline, a distant memory—the dichotomy works
less because of detailed knowledge of Aristotle, but more because the matter/form binary was
baked into the way people thought. Dowriche’s formulation offers a touchingly downbeat self-
assessment of her skills as a poet which nonetheless magnifies the importance of her
polemical religious subject matter: though the “the simple attire of this outward forme” may
be discouraging, she hopes “the inward substaunce” of her work will provide—gently shifting
her metaphor from clothing to digestion—a “comfortable tast.”\(^\text{23}\) In striking contrast, Donne—
with the gleeful zest of an Inns of Court showman—latches onto Aristotelian sexist biology (in
which mothers provide the raw material shaped by male seed) in an ultimately implausible
gesture of poetic incapacity.\(^\text{24}\)
Nevertheless, the conflict between broadly Aristotelian notions—where form is “emergent and dynamic [. . .] coexistent with the matter in which it develops towards its fullest realization”—and Platonic ideas of form as the “unsullied perfection” of an ideal model—remains at the heart of 16th-century thinking. The Platonic tradition is audible in Sidney’s ecstatic celebration of the poet-maker who creates “forms such as never were in nature”: here the fallen world of nature is transformed and corrected by “a ‘golden,’ imperishable nature of ideas.” Similarly, Spenser’s visionary presentation of the Gardens of Adonis as a myth of origin depends on a canny amalgam of Platonic and Aristotelian associations, which has long perplexed commentators. At once poetically oracular and philosophically numinous, the forms in this stanza respond well to Richard Neuse’s caution that “the enigma of Spenser’s Garden remains largely intact,” as meaning shifts unhurriedly between ideas of a thing’s visible aspect to the more Scholastic usage of the essential determinant (or soul) of a thing, while still keeping Neoplatonic ideas in play.

Literary form may be far from the surface of Spenser’s usage, but the dynamism of his inventive stanza as a mode of poetic utterance is a constant, almost theatrical, reminder that philosophical vocabulary is always prone to punning returns to literary and other discourses. This characteristic Spenserian shift is visible here in the extravagant metaplasmic distortion “ketch,” as “forme and feature” catch in a new body. The final two examples approach something more like modern understandings of form as a term. Though Campion’s first sentence demonstrates his commitment to the dominant, idealizing strain in 16th-century theory, his notion of form is narrower. Though, ironically, Campion is one of the last champions of the doomed movement to make English meter work according to the quantitative scansion of Classical Greek and Latin, his usage of “form” primarily connotes issues of style and arrangement. Like Roger Ascham, Richard Stanyhurst, William Webbe (and indeed Spenser and Sidney), Campion believes that the accentual basis of English verse is inauthentic and unconvincing; the Observations thus provide a relatively modest and even workable template for a different style—or form—of versification. Yet Campion’s usage sounds oddly contemporary, even if his models of style are not.

Issues of how things might be different underwrite Shakespeare’s sonnet, as it contemplates the “good words” written by other(s), and laments the speaker’s incapacity to compete on the same terms. As so often in the Sonnets, “polished form of well-refinèd pen” is itself a detailed and suggestive metonymy for the poetry Shakespeare—or his speaker—doesn’t, or cannot, himself write. It is deeply congruent with modern ideas of form partly because the Shakespearean voice—at once anguished, self-deprecating, and utterly distinct, at home by implication in its preeminence even as it envies the rival’s polish—has become such a signal element in the way that we understand literary form. That’s not to say that the Shakespearean “form” is an easy word, or one which should be assimilated seamlessly to contemporary usage. Even with the awkward accent grave of the inflected past tense that editors graft onto the text of the 1609 quarto, we tend to hear “polished form of well-refinèd pen” because of Shakespeare’s cultural status and familiarity as though it were contemporary, in ways that we don’t with, say, Sidney’s more grandiose “forms such as never were in nature.”
Excerpting from Sidney’s *Defence* draws attention to broader questions of form, while underlining questions of poetic technique. Sidney’s text is an essence a defense of literature *tout court* by recourse to a Classical hierarchy of genres, in which epic poetry and tragedy are the dominant demonstrations of the value of poetry. “Forms” in this sense are kinds of literature, and Renaissance thinkers like Sidney, Puttenham, and Julius Caesar Scaliger devoted much energy to the taxonomy and description of genre. Sidney’s assertion of the value of epic poetry is typical: “all concurreth to the maintaining the heroical, which is not only a kind, but the best and most accomplished kind of poetry.”

A different kind essay could be written about the Renaissance formalism of genres; as Polonius’s aptly pedantic disquisition on “pastoral-comical-historical-pastoral, scene indivisible” demonstrates, such formalism was accessible enough to be played for laughs on the London stage, and taps into again the broader contexts of Renaissance Aristotelianism. This needs to be borne in mind as a caveat, while my attention remains on—to adapt Campion—the “forme[s] of versefying” in English.

This discussion underlines the particularity of form during the later 16th and early 17th centuries, and the uneasy translations we must perform as we read the word between our idioms and those of what is an increasingly distant, alien culture. “Form” is misleading, as in the case of Shakespeare, because we flatten that space in time as we reread these familiar lines. To adapt another sonnet, when reading “the chronicle of wasted time,” we can mistake “descriptions of the fairest wights” as establishing a powerful equivalence between our language and that of the Renaissance period, just as Shakespeare’s speaker does in Sonnet 106: “I see their antique pen would have expressed/Even such a beauty as you master now.”

We need to resist that automatic sense that the past speaks in the same language, or easily uses congruent forms.

**Changing Lines**

These verse examples show the huge influence of the iambic pentameter line by the later 16th century—a form that was to predominate in English poetry for the next three centuries. Yet this success was by no means inevitable; indeed, the story of the verse line in English during this period provides a case study that problematizes key aspects of formal history. Is iambic pentameter a *dominant* form, a quasi-imperial facet of English verse which, in John Thompson’s venerable metaphor, contributes to the “founding” of English poetry as a distinctive category? Or does it respond better to the musical metaphor offered by George T. Wright—a “keyboard a young poet learns to master [ . . . ] stretching its capabilities of harmony and expressiveness”? Wright goes on to set the form into a historical framework, this time more wistful: “The demise of iambic pentameter as the chief meter of English poetry probably owes much to its coming to be understood even by the poets themselves as an available prosodic form, a meter to write poems ‘in,’ a Roman road, rather than as a kind of heroic adventure or even a haunted house.” Wright’s transition from heroic adventure to poignant ruin points up the form’s persistence, as well as the overlap between formal vocabulary and the nostalgic ghosts of former glories. And indeed, that Roman roads are still visible in the
English road system may articulate the hold iambic pentameter continues to have as a constitutive, if historical, practice, almost welded into the fabric of the language as roads like the Fosse Way and Watling Street—originally the motive routes of Roman *imperium*—crisscross the land.

Wright’s keyboard captures the flexibility of the iambic pentameter line, a flex which is audible in all three of the verse examples just quoted. Shakespeare’s “I think good thoughts, whilst other write good words” shows the way in which the ten-syllable iambic line is at its best both readily speakable, at home with frequent monosyllabic words, and—in one of Wright’s key perceptions—heavily reliant on syllabic ambiguity.\(^{37}\) Consider the repeated word “good,” a term which is semantically at the heart of Sonnet 85, as it contrasts the speaker’s “good thoughts” with the rival poet’s “good words.” In both cases, “good” is an unstressed syllable, gently ceding metrical place to those dominating nouns, which are doing the heavy lifting: Shakespeare wants the reader to weigh the speaker’s thoughts as against the poet’s apparently “good”—but in truth flimsy—words. The phonic difference between the substantives and the repeated modifier is at best slight: it would be possible (if knowingly clumsy), in performance to realize the line such as to stress, or rather overemphasize, those uncertain “goods”: “I think *good* thoughts, whilst other write *good* words.” Iambic pentameter as handled by writers like Shakespeare enfranchises this intrinsic instability within metrical terms. This is a trick Shakespeare learned from Spenser and others; though this particular stanza (III.vi.37), amply supports Jeff Dolven’s observation of *The Faerie Queene*’s “massive commitment to iambic movement,”\(^{38}\) syllabic ambiguity is audible in lines like “All things from thence doe their first being fetch” (does the first syllable pull against the second; to what extent does “first” snag against the disyllabic “being”?), and “The state of life, out of the griesly shade,” where “out” in the unstressed position overbears the weaker “of” in the stressed position.

Donne usually is taken as a marked change in practice from the supposedly smoother meters of Spenser and Shakespeare, and this example confirms that his practice is more permissive.\(^{39}\) “Mother, want matter, and they only have” is a trochaic inversion, where the initial foot of the line is substituted for its metrical opposite.\(^{40}\) Though Spenser and Shakespeare provide numerous examples of trochaic onset, Donne’s manipulation of syntax is freer than Spenser’s typically is, as sentence structure freely overrides lineal form. However, it’s the final line quoted here which is the real outlier: “To be counted children of Poetry” is decasyllabic, but the organization of stresses within the line produces only four unambiguous stresses. Compare

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{x/x/x/x/x/} \\
\text{A little form, the which their father gave}
\end{align*}
\]

with

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{x/x/x/x/x/x/} \\
\text{To be counted children of Poetry}
\end{align*}
\]
The first line is one of the most conventional realizations of the decasyllabic line in 16th-century English, the 4/6 line with its predictable realization of iambic pentameter into two contrasting units: four syllables on one side leading to a caesural breath are followed by six syllables on the other, which normatively are succeeded by a syntactic pause at the end of the line. Precisely the same pattern is audible in Spenser’s “The state of life, out of the griesly shade,” and Shakespeare’s “I think good thoughts, while other write good words.” As Wright rather wearily noted (after reading many such lines), this shape “evidently gave distinct pleasure to Elizabethan listeners.” The second line in contrast is almost completely anomalous. While it does produce five feet, the first one is a pyrrhic (two consecutive unstressed syllables), followed by two trochees before the iambic engine once again resumes control by the end of the line. There is a sense, however, in which conventional metrical vocabulary does not fully describe the effects Donne was after: the line emphatically works poetically because it rounds out the biological imagery advanced earlier, while the rougher metrical effect wittily substantiates the claim that his verses are “too bad / To be counted children of Poetry.” In effect, the orthodox metrical “deficiencies” of the line mimetically reinforce—and thus comically militate against—the speaker’s assertion of poetic ineptitude. Such an aesthetic is certainly in keeping with Donne’s verse letters, even if he wasn’t precisely concerned to mimic the “speaking voice,” a desideratum of many modern theorists. The unit, as manipulated by Donne, Spenser, and Shakespeare, is above all flexible and permissive, a vehicle with which to think. Though Elizabethan readers were certainly capable of tart discriminations about the infringement of technical rules—the quantitative debate provides many good examples, with even supposed allies disagreeing about the precise metrical value of certain words—the “dominant” form remains remarkable for its range and its comparative inclusivity. Crucially, iambic pentameter is not an advanced poetic party trick, as, say, the villanelle or the sestina, but is rather a form that lends itself to thinking: because of its flex on the one side and its predictability on the other, this line shape leant itself to a wide range of uses and articulations. At the same time, as a suggestive essay by Miroslav Holub highlights, like free verse, iambic pentameter is cannily keyed to the three-second duration of cognitive process: lines like “To be counted children of poetry,” “That substance is eterne, and bideth so,” or “And like unlettered clerk still cry ‘Amen’” make aesthetic sense partly because they mimic the duration of thinking. Without this productive tension, arguably the line is much less likely to have achieved such preeminence.

This leads to the broader question of line shape during the 16th century. As is apparent, these examples are all from a confined historical period of about twenty years—it is during this period, from roughly 1580 to 1600, that the iambic pentameter lines becomes predominant. Yet alternative models were available—as the quantitative debate indicates, some advocated a radical overhaul of the agreed metrical basis for English scansion. Moreover, a longer view of metrical practice indicates that the privileged position of the iambic line was by no means a foregone conclusion.

Consider a poem which was written between 1412 and 1420, but not printed until 1513: John Lydgate’s *Troy Book*. As well as the intrinsic interest of Lydgate’s poem, the textual form of Richard Pynson’s Henrician print is a pregnant reminder of the difficulties scansion posed for
early Tudor readers. While modern scholars agree that Lydgate was writing mostly in
decasyllabic lines, often with “headless” nine-syllabic variants, the Pynson text would have
posed many problems to early readers. Here’s an excerpt from Lydgate’s lament for Hector
in Book 3 that illustrates some of the problematics:

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O worthy Ector / oonly for thy sake
Of thy deth / I am so lothe to wryte
O who shall now / helpe me to endyte
Or vnto whom / shall I clepe or calle
Certys to none / of the Musys alle
That by accorde / synge euer in oon
Vpon Pernaso / byside Elycon
So aungelyke in theyr Armony.
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Pynson’s virgules—as in many early verse prints—offer some guidance to line shape and
caesura, while at the same time testifying to the blurred metrical edges of the Lydgatian text.
The first line scans easily as decasyllabic iambic pentameter, but other lines are less clear-cut.
“Of thy deth / I am so lothe to wryte” is a headless pentameter, requiring a firm—yet
semantically counterintuitive—emphasis on the initial “Of.” The next two lines are probably
resolvable by a similar expedient in the middle of the lines: both “now” and the first syllable of
“helpe” take a stress, as do both “whom” and “shall.” Yet such lines point to a further
historical anomaly: To what extent did Tudor readers understand the residual syllabic force of
final -e in Middle English verse? Elizabethan commentary suggests that the failure to read
Chaucer metrically reflects that this particular usage was no longer remembered even by elite
readers. With Lydgate, though sounding the final -e may resolve some of the metrical
problems, the passage—like the poem as a whole—does not readily conform to later norms.
Consider the final line quoted, “So aungelyke in theyr Armony”; this is difficult to reconcile,
since it’s not obviously headless, and the final -e of “auungelyke” would likely have been
syncopated even in Middle English.

In making these observations, it’s important to be clear that I do not denigrate Lydgate, nor
indeed Pynson, as was the practice of earlier generations of commentators. This is moving,
affective verse, which amply showcases late medieval rhetoric in the service of a self-
conscious complaint. Though such writing may not be fashionable, Lydgate’s “chere of
drerynesse” has its own somber majesty, which resonated with Tudor readers. At the same
time, Lydgate’s historical epic showcases a broader uncertainty about line shape and
scansion. This can be further illustrated by one of Lydgate’s most devoted early 16th-century
readers, Stephen Hawes, who in The Pastime of Pleasure, credits Lydgate as his “master” and
—rather too generously—as the originator of the rhyme royal stanza. Hawes is an intriguing
figure. While he lived into the 16th century and the majority of his work was published during
that time, literary history typically characterizes him as a late medieval throwback. As his
editors put it: “Hawes’s metrical usage is the clearest index of his position as one of the pre-
Renaissance poets, from whose pedestrian verse the productions of the ‘new courtly makers’
were such a dazzling departure." While Hawes’s meter is certainly bizarre, the
determination to present him as “pre-Renaissance,” inept, and not a courtly maker—in fact, he
was a groom of the chamber of Henry VII—masks the fascinatingly haphazard metrical effects
he produced. As Gluck and Morgan diagnose, a poem like the Example of Virtue (1509) shows
the huge variance of line length and stress pattern Hawes produced in a text ostensibly
written in the predictable shape of the rhyme royal stanza—lines vary between six to fourteen
to syllables at the most extreme. Consider a typical case: in this stanza, the dreamer enters
a castle with his guide, Discretion:

Forth she me ledde to the castell warde
Where we were let in by humylyte
And so after she lede me forwarde
Tyll that I sawe a royal tre
With buddys blossomed of grete beaute
And than we wente into the hall
That glased was truly with crystall

What is striking about this stanza, as so much in Hawes, is the range of line shapes and
possible metrical realizations. Most lines suggest iambic tetrameter, as in “Tyll that I sawe a
royal tree,” where the conventional iambic pattern is readily audible. Other lines are not so
simple: is “And so after she lede me forwarde” a headless tetrameter, or a free trimeter? The
rhyme with “warde” further suggests that the final syllable of “forwarde” needs to take the
stress, a similar pattern as is observable in the fifth line, as “beaute” rhymes with “huminylte”
and “tre.” The final line has the same problem: the rhyme suggests the final syllable of
“crystall” takes the accent, but in any event it’s hard to find four stresses even if “glased” is
inflected. To earlier critics, Hawes was—in E. M. W. Tillyard’s formulation—“simply
barbaric”—the best approach for reading his poems was “to gabble them breathlessly with the
hopeful intention of lighting on four main accents a line.” Such a procedure would hardly
work with “That glased was truly with crystall”; readers like Tillyard underline the inflexibility
of early 20th-century academic taste as much as they explain Tudor meter.

Yet flexibility is precisely what the reading of Hawes demands. Some lines demonstrate his
ability to produce conventional iambic pentameter: “Where we were let in by humylyte” bears
a passing resemblance to a line from The Faerie Queene: “Arriued, shee with great humility.”
But this is not norm. Rather, reading Hawes suggests a loose, even a random, understanding
of the metrical contract between the writer and the reader. This is not to impute great artifice
to him so much as to register that during the early 16th century, the iambic road was
effectively under construction, or reconstruction. The reader who approaches Hawes
without expecting him to write like either Chaucer or Spenser may hear in his work a moment
of cultural fluidity, where norms had not ossified into rules. On the one hand, his poems
hanker back to the medieval tradition of dream visions. On the other, the variety of his line
forms shows changes within the English language, and hints at a broader permissive
uncertainty about line shape and structure. In his major work, The Pastime of Pleasure,
Hawes’s juxtapositions of line shapes do not necessarily jeopardize coherence. Consider a stanza from the long passage in praise of Lydgate (“these thre” are Gower, Chaucer, and Lydgate):

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Were not these thre/ gretely to commende
Whiche them applyed suche bokes to contryue
Whose famous draughtes no man can amende
The synne of slothe they dyde from them dryue
After theyr dethe for to abyde on lyue
In worthy fame by many a nacyon
Theyr bokes/ theyr actes do make relacyon
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Viewed through a Tillyardian lens, this is typically barbaric: the first and fifth lines here may read as pentameters, but the predominant is a looser tetrameter, as in the second line:

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x / x / x x /
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Other scansion would be legitimate: as this stanza demonstrates, The Pastime of Pleasure is generally closer to decasyllabic norms than the Example of Virtue. This line could be read as a five-beat line with an omitted unstressed syllable after the normative caesura after “draughtes” and before “no,” producing a more less regular line ending, “no man canamende.” Nevertheless, the literary-historical point that needs to be stressed is that loose metrical patterns are no more than that: a flexible approach to line structure which, viewed from a historical perspective, demonstrates broader changes between Middle English and Early Modern English. Spenser’s Shepheardes Calender (1579) knowingly makes use of similar flexibility, particular in “Februarie,” “Maye,” and “September,” as metrical experiment repeatedly overwhelms iambic orthodoxy. In both cases, “irregular” lines are at once challenging and yet perfectly resolvable, so long as the reader is prepared to be as fluid as the text they read. The key difference between The Shepheardes Calender and The Pastime of Pleasure is one of authorial design: Spenser was fully in control of his haphazard measures, whereas Hawes likely was not.

This particular stanza from The Pastime has an interesting afterlife, when John Skelton glances at it in Phyllyp Sparrowe (c.1505) in a context that scholars have seen as suggestive of friction between the two poets. Skelton is provocative as a major Henrician poet, whose experiments with meter are largely ignored by authoritative accounts of 16th-century changes in poetic practice. The Skeltonic—that marvelous, free-ranging, free-style, high-wire, quasi-doggerel form that gestures to ideas of oral performance and anticipates stand-up comedy—does not fit with the narrative of the construction of the pentameter line. That’s precisely why it is important for understanding the fluidity of meter in earlier 16th-century England: the Skeltonic does not anticipate the iambic pentameter of the 1580s and 1590s. What it does do, however, is to emphasize the range of stylistic options in play at the start of the century. And
what we hear in *Phyllyp Sparrowe* is anarchically different. C. S. Lewis characterized the poem as ventriloquizing the “small reed-like voice” of a little girl, seeing the text as “our first great poem of childhood,” which catches the knowing malice with which Jane, the bereaved nun who speaks most of the poem, provides a parodic version of Hawes’s reverential literary history:  

Also Johnn Lydgate  
Wryteth after an hyer rate;  
It is dyffuse to fynde  
The sentence of his mynde,  
Yet wryteth he in his kynd,  
No man that can amend  
Those maters that he hath pende;  
Yet some men fynde a faute,  
And say he wryteth to haute.

Though the praise of Lydgate remains almost intact, Skelton’s relocation of the Hawesian phrase “No man that can amend” highlights his satirical agenda: while Jane notes the “hyer rate” of Lydgate’s aureate diction, she can’t help noticing as the “dyffuse” nature of his “sentence.” The critical agenda becomes explicit in the next paragraph:

Wherfore hold me excused  
If I have not well perused  
Myne Englyssh halfe-abused;  
Though it be refused,  
In worth I shall it take,  
And fewer wordes make.

If the modesty topos belies the sophistication of the critical intervention—“Myne Englyssh halfe-abused”—the promise to deliver her text with “fewer wordes” deftly implies the verbigation of both Lydgate and Hawes. Indeed, the emphasis on brevity at this point in the text reads as a metapoetic gesture, as Skelton implicitly highlights his own technique and his divergence from the practice of his forebears. Shortness is at the heart of the scandal of the Skeltonic; as George Puttenham was to write later in the century, “he used both short distances and short measures, pleasing only the popular ear”; versions of this humanist dismay are still audible even in otherwise sympathetic writers like Lewis. Even as it takes in Latin tags and scraps of the Mass, the Skeltonic makes no pretension to imitate high-cultural forms; its appeal is precisely in its energetic demotic verve, where the commitment to “short distances” paradoxically coexists with a seemingly limitless rhyming fecundity (see for example the morphic twists from “fynde” to “pende” in the first extract given). Skelton celebrates rhyme as a resistant condition of English verse, and is still marginalized as a result; Spenser’s adoption of the pseudonym Colin Clout and Drayton’s “A Skeltoniad” are suggestive reminders of his vestigial presence in the work of later writers.
I now jump forwards to the later 16th century to observe how this situation—of various metrical permutations and a lack of agreed models—played out between the 1560s and 1580s. This necessarily requires excisions and simplifications: I omit the fascinating meters of Sir Thomas Wyatt and others for reasons of space, and because their story is more familiar.\textsuperscript{70} The quantitative debate similarly remains a significant background—a more or less academic theory, which for periods of time engaged the attention of several important writers, yet which did not lead to agreement about the basis for a new metric, nor produce enough original poems written in those meters to lead to more universal adoption. Once again, however, examples like Wyatt’s sonnets and Richard Stanyhurst’s quantitative translation of the first four books of the \textit{Aeneid} (1582) emphasize that the range of formal options for writing lines of English verse remained in important ways open and unfixed across the 16th century.\textsuperscript{71}

By the later 16th century, significant moves had been made in the direction of a regularizing the poetic line according to simple rules. The primary document that records this process is George Gascoigne’s \textit{Certayne Notes of Instruction} (1575), a pragmatic manual of practice that tells us much about how Elizabethan poets considered their medium. For instance, in his insistence that poets follow the “natural Emphasis” of words, Gascoigne gives the example of “treasure,” noting that putting the stress on the second syllable would be “cleane contrarie to the common vse wherewith it is pronounced.”\textsuperscript{72} In contrast, Hawes’s \textit{Pastime} is characteristically promiscuous in its scansion of the same word: sometimes it rhymes with “endure” on the second syllable; sometimes it follows the more modern pronunciation on the first syllable, rhyming with “pleasure.”\textsuperscript{73} In terms of lineation, Gascoigne’s advice is for regularity: caesura position should be standardized according to the line length, and regularity of iambic rhythm should be enforced over all other considerations. In contrasting two examples with identical semantic content, “I understand your meaning by your eye” and “Your meaning I understand by your eye,” Gascoigne insists on the virtues of the first over the second: the problem with the second line is the stress it places on the middle syllable of “understand,” which is again “contrarie to the usual or natural pronunciation.”\textsuperscript{74}

The constitutive force of such strictures can be shown in mid-century poetry. By this stage, one of the dominant forms was the fourteener couplet, which, like the closely related poulter’s measure, constituted a stable metrical unit.\textsuperscript{75} Though fourteeners are not often widely read (other than in specialized contexts like the ghost scenes of \textit{Cymbeline} which consciously recall older forms of writing),\textsuperscript{76} during the middle decades of the 16th century, the seven-stress line was almost an automatic choice across genres as varied as lyric, pastoral, epic, and even drama. This speaks both to the form’s flexibility and to the advantages poets and their readers found in the form’s predictability. Consider the beginning of Barnabe Googe’s second eclogue, a poem which echoes Virgil’s own second eclogue in its representation of a lovelorn shepherd:

\begin{quote}
MY beasts, go fede vpon [th]e plaine, and let your herdman lye,
Thou seest her mind, & fearest thou nowe, Dametas for to dye?
Why stayest thou thus? why doste thou stay? thy lyfe to longe doth laste:
Accounte this flud, thy fatall graue, syth time of hope is paste.
What meast thou thus to linger on? thy life wolde fayne departe,
Alas: the wounde doth fester styll, of cursed Cupids darte.\textsuperscript{77}
\end{quote}
This passage demonstrates some of the strengths and idiosyncrasies of the fourteener. Compared with Hawes, the iambic accent is never in doubt: names and polysyllabic words are efficiently subjected to metrical pattern. In the aesthetic context of a short lyric, Googe makes a virtue of the fourteener’s tendency to repetitiveness; the phrase “Dametas for to dye” becomes a refrain, which will be modulated to the pathos of the poem’s close, “O Shephardes all, be Wytnesses, Dametas here doth dye.” Yet there is no doubt that the verse is predictable, lacking any element of syllabic ambiguity. A line like “Accounte this flud, thy fatall graue, syth time of hope is paste” takes its energy from a relentless iambic formalism; in Gascoigne’s terms, “natural Emphasis” is never endangered by the downward spiral of the speaker’s dejection.

Such constrained aesthetic inevitability was achieved in part by one of the characteristic effects of the fourteener: the tendency to have a strong caesura after the eighth syllable. This quirk was so marked that fourteener couplets were often typographically presented as quatrains, rhyming Abxb, or even Abab; this is the form Spenser uses for the arguments in The Faerie Queene. In his 1563 octavo, Googe’s long lines are broken after the eighth syllable, though the lack of capitalization for the second half of each line indicates that the long-line pattern dominates. The impact of this simple metrical design can be felt in a wide range of mid-century poetry, from the great classical translations of Thomas Phaer, Arthur Golding, and George Chapman, to the metrical psalter of Sternhold and Hopkins. Though Golding and Chapman show that the fourteener could be engineered into a flexible form that might reproduce something of the “loud and bold” clangor of Classical epic, the fourteener remains at heart a relatively simple meter. Its deictic shape, with its propensity for direct alignment of metrical pattern with syntax—in the manner of the ballad stanza to which it is a close cousin—made it an effective vehicle for a broad range of poetry. The next passage is from Isabella Whitney’s “Wyll” (1573), a brisk inventory of contemporary London. Here the speaker makes a comic bequest to the “Gentylmen” of the Inns of Court:

And when they are with study cloyd:
    to recreate theyr minde:
    Of Tennis Courts, of dauncing Scooles,
    and fence they store shal finde.

Though the subject matter is far different from Googe’s, the working of the metrical pattern in the long-line shape is virtually identical. Polysyllabic words like “recreate” are sure-footedly placed in iambic context; the fall of the caesura after the eighth syllable creates a seesaw pattern from which Whitney hardly swerves. As with Googe, Whitney’s poem was published in the octavo format, so the breaking of long lines into shorter units is at once a necessary printing economy, and an index of how such lines were experienced. As Beth Quitslund’s work has demonstrated, this metrical template proved remarkably durable; indeed, though Googe and Whitney suggest at best the form’s conservatism and managed regularity, it is worth noting that through its influence on Anglican hymns, the same pattern provides the ground bass for Emily Dickinson’s innovative poetics.
This greater sureness in iambic writing was not only witnessed in the fourteener. Gascoigne himself demonstrates the way in which what is to modern eyes the almost merciless infliction of a repetitive metrical design could guarantee iambic orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{86} The \textit{Steele Glas} (1576) is an estate satire in blank verse; Gascoigne’s use of this form, probably in imitation of Henry Howard, earl of Surrey’s translation of Books II and IV of the \textit{Aeneid} into this “strauenge metre,” was innovative and partly presages later dramatic writing.\textsuperscript{87} The reading experience of \textit{The Steele Glas} is, to modern ears, complicated; Lewis dismissed it as “medieval in everything but metre,” but this is a misleading dichotomy.\textsuperscript{88} In fact, the poem is a procession of unrhymed lines following the 4/6 caesura pattern with a strictness that mirrors the advice of \textit{Certayne Notes}\textsuperscript{89}: 

\begin{quote}
I see and sigh, (bycause it makes me sadde)
That peuishe pryde, doth al the world possesse,
And euery wight, will haue a looking glasse
To see himselfe, yet so he seeth him not:
Yea shal I say? a glasse of common glasse,
Which glistreth bright, and shewes a seemely shew,
Is not enough, the days are past and gon,
That Berral glasse, with foyles of louely brown,
Might serue to shew, a seemely fauord face.\textsuperscript{90}
\end{quote}

The central problem such verse poses is that the pattern is so vigorously enforced it overbears variety and becomes a normative poetic syntax. What Gascoigne says is largely dictated by the medium he has chosen, which—despite the absence of rhyme—imposes a syntactic straitjacket. Lines and phrases which in other cases might be effective—the alliteration of the first two lines, or the elegiac “the days are past and gon”—are efficiently regimented by the dominating pattern. Poetically speaking, the would-be lyrical content of “The Berral glasse, with foyles of louely brown” is too close to the moralizing iteration of “That peuishe pryde, doth al the world possesse.” This recalls Spenser, Shakespeare, and Donne, who, while they recognized in the 4/6 a device for the achievement of metrical regularity, had the artistic sense to use it more sparingly. That said, in literary-historical terms, Gascoigne stands at the start of the tradition these later writers inherit. What was exciting about \textit{The Steel Glas} to Elizabethan readers was the sense that unrhymed poetry could flexibly encompass Gascoigne’s “satiric” agenda through the use of the 4/6 schema. In a later passage, Gascoigne shows the ability to vary emphasis in the light of vocative expostulation:

\begin{quote}
How liue the Mores, which spurne at glistring perle,
And scorne the costs, which we do holde so deare?
How? how but wel? and weare the precious pearle
Of peerlesse truth, amongst them published.\textsuperscript{91}
\end{quote}
In the third line, Gascoigne shows his characteristic appreciation of the effects which might be afforded by repeated monosyllables: “How? How but wel” suggests a spondaic onset before the falling back to an iambic norm.92

Versions of this same realization can be seen in Christopher Marlowe’s Tamburlaine, where the protagonist’s death unleashes a series of what are essentially lines written to the same formula as The Steele Glas:

   Farewel my boies, my dearest friends, farewel,
   My body feeles, my soule dooth weepe to see
   Your sweet desires depriu’d my company,
   For Tamburlaine, the Scourge of God must die.93

At one level, Marlowe displays a shared cultural understanding of the 4/6 line as a medium for a certain kind of solemnity; the line shape is mandated because the Scourge of God is dying in front of us. At another, small shifts of technique and intonation underline how the great writers of the 1580s and 1590s tweaked iambic pentameter toward what may be described as a more sophisticated psychological realism. In the first line, the normative sweep of the 4/6 pattern is disrupted by the second, hesitating caesura after “friends.” Similarly, “My body feeles, my soule dooth weepe to see” suggests a further hiatus in Tamburlaine’s speech. Though Tamburlaine’s syntax is zeugmatic—his death will deprive his sons of both his body and his soul—rhetoric dovetails with the sense that as in the previous line’s caesura, the dying Tamburlaine loses track of his thought. Indeed, the predominance of the somatic, “My body feeles,” over the spiritual, cannily undermines the undaunted vigor the hero still wants to convey. Tamburlaine is in agony. This midline wander is a Marlovian donné to the basic 4/6 pattern, as sure an indication of changing literary mores as the ambiguous syllables at the start of the speech: “Pierce through the coffin and the sheet of gold.”94

Morphic Forms: The Sonnet and the Stanzaic Epic

Renaissance formalism coexists with, and is a reaction to, the variety and permissiveness of possible poetic lines inherited from earlier practice. Poets like Hawes, Skelton, and Gascoigne are not so much “transitional” as symptomatic of broader changes in spoken English and consequent uncertainties in poetic practice.95 These writers are better read as evidence of formal variety than formal aberrance. The codification apparent in key practical and theoretical texts of the later 16th century, including Gascoigne’s Certayne Notes, Puttenham’s The Art of English Poesy, William Webbe’s Discourse of English Poesy, and Sidney’s Defence of Poetry, is ultimately an attempt to impose order on practices which had flourished in despite of such theorization.96 As the quantitative debates indicate, the lack of established precedents for poetry in English (beyond the uncertain father figure of Chaucer) was a felt need, as university-educated poets and theorists attempted to stabilize practices they could not condone. This is the force of Sidney’s characteristically backhanded reviews of both The Shepheardes Calender and Troilus and Criseyde in the same paragraph of the Defence. The
humanist-trained intellectual “dare not allow” Spenser’s archaisms and cannot eliminate the condescension which underpins his view of Chaucer: “Yet had he great wants, fit to be forgiven in so reverent antiquity.”  

Even if Sidney was wrong about Virgil’s use of archaism, the stigma of divergent practice remains vivid in his reading, and continues to influence the formal presumptions of many later readers.

There is thus a tension between practice and theory in Renaissance poetry; the close relationship between the two in *The Steele Glas* is perhaps an exception to this rule. The period’s morphic forms had neither Classical pedigrees, nor substantive coverage in any of the period’s poetic treatises. The sonnet and the stanzaic epic tend to run ahead of—and in the case of *The Faerie Queene*—to erase its own theoretical explanation.  

The Petrarchan sonnet remains an important case study in literary history both because of its widespread diffusion across Europe and because of the intensity with which writers in different places repeatedly and obsessively turned to this form. A celebrated poem by Louise Labé, first published in 1555, has been repurposed repeatedly since then. An example of its continuing charge is the appropriation of its first line by the singer Nick Cave for the final track of *The Boatman’s Call* (1997). The French poem is itself an update of a Classical text, in this case Catullus’s Poem 7, with its restless, multiplicative accounting of the number of times the speaker would kiss Lesbia. Labé, however, doesn’t need to compete with Catullus’s macho enumerations:

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Baise m’encor, re baise-moy et baise:
Donne m’en un de tes plus savoureus,
Donne m’en un de tes plus amoureus:
Je t’en rendray quatre plus chauds que braise.

Las! te plains-tu? ça que ce mal j’apaise,
En t’en donnant dix autres doucereus.
Ainsi, meslans nos baisers tant heureus,
Jouissons nous l’un de l’autre à notre aise.

Lors double vie à chacun en suivra.
Chacun en soy et son ami vivra.
Permets m’Amour penser quelque folie:

Toujours suis mal, vivant discreettement,
Et ne me puis donner contentement
Si hors de moy ne fay quelque saillie.
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There are many translations of Labé’s poem, but I have chosen to write my own to bring out the comparative lack of endstopping in the French: in most lines, sense ends neatly with the line end, and such syntactic patterning is arguably as important as the rhymes. Labé’s
poem may also illustrate the different metrical practices in French and English verse. Though
her lines look similar to iambic pentameter, in fact they are (like most classical French poetry)
written on the basis of syllable-counting. These are decasyllabics, in which the final -e is
syllabic when preceding a consonant; “Baise m’encor, rebaise-moy et baise” thus requires an
extra syllable and ends with a feminine rhyme. Like other major poets both of the Pléiade
group and their forerunners, Labé follows the la loi de l’alternance des rimes, whereby
rhymes on two syllables are succeeded by rhymes on one.\(^{104}\) Though I have not followed this
“law” throughout, it is visible in the sestet:

Kiss me again and then rekiss and kiss:
Give me now one of your tastiest ones,
Give me now one of your sexiest ones:
I’ll roast you with four hotter ones than this.

Are you grizzling, love? I’ll stop it feeling worse
By giving you ten more of the sweetest ones.
By mixing up our kisses and our groans
We have each other gladly in our bliss.

Then each of us will lead a double life
Living in ourselves and in our love.
But let me tell you something rather sappy:

I’m always poorly, living on my own;
Unless I leap outside of number one,
It will be quite beyond me to be happy.

As has often been observed, the artistry of the Petrarchan sonnet lies in the asymmetric
relation between its two components, the octave (generally rhyming Abbaabba) and the sestet
(where a broader range of permutations exist). Labé’s poem finds its distinctive energy in this
contrast. Where the octave is rooted in the giving and exchanging of kisses, with the strong
implication of an achieved erotic equipoise,\(^{105}\) the sestet turns to a more tentative interiority,
as the speaker recommends “a double life,” with connotations of concealment and frustration.
Arguably, the pathos that the poem generates is in the smallness of its final gesture—unless
she can make “quelque saillie,” some leap or spring—outside of herself (“hors de moy”), the
speaker is enveloped in the unobtrusiveness of “vivant discrettement.” The brilliance of the
sonnet lies then in its juxtaposition of an imagined paradise of sensual fulfillment with the
more contained “double life” of the sestet.

Though Sidney’s influential Astrophel and Stella (c.1581–1583) follows the Petrarchan
structure, the sonnet in England developed a range of alternate, sometimes easier, forms. The
Shakespearean sonnet (rhyming Ababdcdefefgg) is visible as early as Tottel’s Miscellany
(1557), in which Surrey showcases the simpler structure.\(^{106}\) Such decisions about sonnet
structure are important because the rhyme scheme dictates the way the poem will work as a structure for thinking with; many commentators have objected to the Shakespearean sonnet because the couplet can seem like a loosely connected afterthought rather than an integrated part of a coherent argument. In this context, the Spenserian sonnet—or more properly, the Scottish interlaced sonnet—is an intriguing variant, rhyming Ababbcbbccdcdee.

Coming to kisse her lyps, (such grace I found)
Me seemd I smelt a gardin of sweet flowres:
that dainty odours from them threw around
for damzels fit to decke their lovers bowres.
Her lips did smell lyke unto Gillyflowers,
her ruddy chequees lyke unto Roses red:
her snowy browes lyke budded Bellamoures,
her lovely eyes lyke Pincks but newly spred,
Her goodly bosome lyke a Strawberry bed,
her neck lyke to a bounch of Cullambynes:
her brest lyke lillyes, ere theyr leaves be shed,
her nipples lyke yong blossomed Jesemynes,
Such fragrant flowres doe give most odorous smell,
but her sweet odour did them all excell.

Rather than establishing a pointed contrast between octave and sestet, the Spenserian is an accumulative form, which through its inwoven, shared rhymes composes a poetic daisy chain: the b-rhyme seeds the second quatrain as the c-rhyme seeds the third quatrain. Seeding is, of course, highly germane to this sonnet, in which the poet-speaker contrives a blazon of the woman as “a gardin of sweet flowres”; as often in Amoretti, Spenser enjoys the construction of enumerative lists, connected by anaphora (“Her lips did smell lyke [. . .] her ruddy cheeks lyke”) as well as the shared rhymes. To a reader looking for argument or the development of thought, Spenser offers relatively meagre fare: the sonnet is focused on a leisurely erotic complimenting that does not want to be distracted from the woman’s lips, cheeks, and breasts other than through the ornamental contrasts the poet offers. Whatever the poem’s sexual politics, it shows the writer of The Faerie Queene at his most fashionable, adapting a form of the moment to his own idiom and purposes. The kiss is much less arresting than the mutual kisses of Labé’s poem, but again, the scopophilic, or rather olfactophilic, speaker is himself less interested in the moment of physical contact than in the “grace” he finds in contemplating and describing “her sweet odour.” Note that the couplet is consciously constructed as an afterthought, cued by the demonstrative, generalizing phrase “Such fragrant flowres,” before making its final discrimination between different kinds of smell. Similar to the pre-canto arguments in The Faerie Queene, Spenser uses the couplet as a convenient aide memoire.
The huge success of the Renaissance sonnet lies in its comparative plasticity and availability. Petrarch’s *Rime Sparse* includes political and religious texts alongside the poems to and about Laura as he constructs what Gordon Braden has called “a poetics of radical impressionability [...] into which the outside world all but disappears.” The sonneteer persona that Petrarch bequeaths to his successors may be a narcissistic obsessive, yet what keeps the form alive over a long period is precisely the sense that the perceiving ego, the ego in anguish, may assimilate the outside world into his or her own concerns. “Vivant discréttement” is, as we have seen with Labé, a condition from which the sonneteer seeks to make “quelque saillie” outside. An earlier sonnet, first published in 1560, by the Genevan exile Anne Locke, an outsider by virtue of her religious dissent, merits attention in this context. In contrast with Petrarch, Spenser, and Labé, Locke is an altogether more self-effacing figure: her sonnet sequence appears as an appendix to her translation of a sermon by Calvin, and takes the form of a metrical paraphrase of Psalm 51. These texts are written in the form of the Shakespearean or English sonnet, yet their subject matter refers resistantly to a different order of love.

As Kimberly Anne Coles suggests, Locke’s work offers a “renovation of form” for religious poetry. This is apparent in her careful modulations of caesura position: while the 4/6 shape is readily apparent in lines 5, 7, and 9, Locke offers significantly more variation than *The Steele Glas* with lines that either omit the expected caesura, or suggest differential positioning according to semantic content. Thus the opening, “But render me my wonted ioyes againe” (whose abrupt onset signals its close connection to the previous sonnet, and their shared dependence on the same verse of Psalm 51), conveys an almost conversational resumption of a frustrated dialogue. In contrast, “Senceless of grace the absence of thy sprite” suggests the 4/6 pattern (without explicit pointing), while the closely related “The swete retorne of grace that I haue lost” satisfyingly varies the expected pause to a 6/4 shape. Throughout the sequence, Locke’s speaking voice—at once a modern setting of the lamenting psalmist and an echoing fragment of the Petrarchan tradition—anticipates the “sowre-sweet”
lamentations of George Herbert in the projected intimacy of the imagined relationship between the speaker and an unpredictable deity. Lines like these or (from a different poem), “Refreshe my yeldyng hert, with warming grace,/And loose my speche, and make me call to thee” have touches both of the formal assurance and metaphoric richness Herbert would find for poems like “The Flower.”

If the sonnet remains a form that is both still widely used and taught—the advantages of fourteen-line poems in the classroom are considerable, both in terms of attention spans and the ways in which such texts tend to reward close reading exercises—the stanzaic epic is a more restricted form, the study of which has long since become a special interest. Though 16th-century readers would have been as familiar with stanzaic long poems as they were with texts in dactylic hexameter, fourteeners, or indeed alliterative verse, the fashion for epics in rhyming stanzas did not have the staying power of the sonnet, despite periodic revivals of interest. As David Scott Wilson-Okamura has argued, Spenser’s decision to use stanzas for *The Faerie Queene* was at once idiosyncratic, cannily keyed into the mainstream of contemporary Italian literary practice, and conceivably intended as a distinctively English imitation of the dactylic hexameter through other means.

At the same time, commentators have perhaps not dwelt sufficiently on the complexity of the Spenserian stanza as an aesthetic and heuristic device. The peculiar nature of the Spenserian (rhyming *Ababbcbcc*, where the final line is an alexandrine), with the high premium it sets on the discovery of multiple rhymes within the same grid, is at once a bravura demonstration of technique and—as Gordon Teskey has argued—a supple instrument for thinking. In constructing this aesthetic form, Spenser was conscious of multiple traditions—the stanza repays debts to Ariosto and Tasso yet is most dependent on the rhyme royal of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*—while developing this novel structure as a vehicle for his own intense ambitions.

And again, if *The Faerie Queene* follows the didactic promise of the Letter to Raleigh, the stanza on which this intention is based is a curiously mixed form, which does not lend itself to the hortatory moralization we have seen in *The Steele Glas*. If sonnets work in the classroom because they lend themselves to excerpting, one of the resistant conditions of *The Faerie Queene* is that a work so vast is not best experienced by unrepresentative samples. This is a poem that seldom means one thing at a time, and that is in large measure because of its stanza form. Close reading is, however, a key condition of literary criticism as much as contextualization or generic analysis—we don’t read *The Faerie Queene* better only by looking at it from a distance, and its complex literary entanglements may be shown by quotation from almost any page. In what follows, I describe how the stanza works, and how that work modulates the reader’s reaction to the events it describes.

Two consecutive stanzas may illustrate the often strong formal connections between the poem’s adjoining formal “rooms”; this a miniature demonstration of the broader principle of networked interrelation in *The Faerie Queene*. The passage comes from a violent episode near the beginning of Book VI, just before the end of Canto III: at this point, Serena has been bitten by the Blatant Beast, while her lover Calepine has failed to secure them shelter in the cowardly Turpine’s castle. Calepine (on foot) here is under attack by Turpine (on horseback):
Yet he him still pursew’d from place to place,
With full intent him cruelly to kill;
And like a wilde goate round about did chace,
Flying the fury of his blody will.
But his best succour and refuge was still
Behinde his Ladies backe, who to him cryde,
And called oft with prayers loud and shrill,
As euer he to Lady was affyde,
To spare her Knight, and rest with reason pacifyde.

But he the more thereby enraged was,
And with more eager felenes him pursew’d:
So that at length, after long weary chace,
Hauing by chaunce a close aduantage vew’d,
He ouer raught him, hauing long eschew’d
His violence in vaine, and with his spere
Strooke through his shoulder; that the blood ensew’d
In great aboundance, as a well it were,
That forth out of an hill fresh gushing did appere.124

Many of the characteristic effects of *The Faerie Queene* as a stanzaic epic are legible in this extract. Pronouns drift densely—is the “he” of the first line Turpine or Calepine? Does Serena cry to Turpine, Calepine, or (conceivably) to an amalgam of the two? Though the final line clarifies that she wants Turpine to “spare her knight,” as has long been noted, Spenser solicits the confusion with the line “Behinde his Ladies backe, who to him cryde,” where the first pronoun refers to Calepine but the second to Turpine.125 This fused confusion is both characteristic, and in context, purposive: Spenser allows the reader to conflate the “good” Calepine with the “bad” Turpine in order to highlight the problematics of courteous behavior. One editor was horrified by this “lame and impotent” conclusion to the canto, asking “why in courtesy’s name did [Calepine] hide behind his lady?,” yet this psychological blurring of hunter with hunted was precisely what Spenser was after.126 The poetry insists that at a crucial moment, you can’t quite tell the one from the other.

This mixing is in turn a product of the peculiar architecture of the Spenserian, and in particular, the inwoven aspect of the rhyme scheme. In stanza 50, the b-rhyme cluster pursew’d: vew’d: eschew’d: ensew’d maps the cat-and-mouse game between Turpine and Calepine, resulting in the latter’s wounding. This rhyme cluster is seeded by the first line stanza 49, “Yet he him still pursew’d from place to place,” as the second stanza picks up the verb and moves it from mid-line to the rhyming position.127 A further complexity is shown by the linkage of these stanzas through the a-rhymes: place: chace modulates to was: chace, insisting on the contiguity of action. This is a characteristic device, which Spenser deploys almost obsessively through the poem; if the Spenserian is a technically challenging stanza, the adoption of such linkages further underlines the relational aspect of meaning within episodes,
while also showcasing the poet’s skills of rhetorical organization. Thus the *chase: chase* coupling deploys identical rhyme, or *rime riche*; Spenser shifts from the verb in the first stanza (describing Calepine’s attempts to avoid capture) to the noun in the second (describing Turpine’s pursuit). A different kind of interstanzaic clinch is visible in the way “Flying the fury of his bloudy will” is answered by “as a well it were.” Though in this case, the second element of connection avoids the rhyming position, the half-rhyming echo is unmistakable, as “forth out of an hill fresh gushing” fully recalls the b-rhymes of the preceding stanza. The Spenserian characteristically works through such acts of verbal and metaphorical choreography as meaning is displaced and developed across stanzaic gaps, which are themselves—in Theresa Krier’s memorable formulation—resonant metaphors for the romance condition of sojourning. There is something peculiarly Spenserian about the transposition here, whereby the metaphor “bloudy will” in one stanza is literalized as blood “gushing” from a shoulder in the next. In a purposive sense, stanza 50 grows out of images and hints from stanza 49; the same process of accumulative development with variation is evident throughout the poem.

This complex stanzaic architecture depends on a small but significant decision: to opt for an odd number of lines for the stanza rather than an even. Seen from this perspective, the Spenserian is more akin to the seven-line rhyme royal stanza than it is to the sixain (an extremely popular form in late Elizabethan practice) or the *ottava rima* of Italian poetry. The important caveat is that despite the enveloping web of its restricted rhyme scheme, the Spenserian is, syntactically at least, a permissive structure, which enfranchises a great variety of sentence structures. Thus, where most sixains tend to have a break in sense between the *Abab* quatrain and the *cc* couplet, the Spenserian is less predictable. This can be shown by the contrasting syntax of these stanzas. In the first, there is a heavy pause, cued by a full stop, at the end of the fourth line. Spenser partitions Turpine’s pursuit of Calepine in the *Abab* quatrain from the second half of the stanza, which records Calepine’s ever more desperate attempts to find “refuge.” Though the halves are not equal, the contrast between a quatrain focused on pursuit and a *Bcbcc* quintain on Serena is clearly apparent. Stanza 50 opts for a completely different pattern, of 2 + 7. The first two lines introduce the action which follows: after becoming “more enrag’d,” Turpine finds the means to gain “a close aduantage” over his quarry; in effect, this structure allows Spenser to develop a description of unheroic violence: the imagery of the “chace” makes Calepine into a cornered animal (recalling the “wilde goate” of the previous stanza) and Turpine into a cruel but ineffective hunter. Note the emphasis on the length of time it takes Turpine to corner Calepine and the element of “chance” that enables him to strike; Spenser implies that a more efficient (or more courteous, or more heroic) knight would not have taken as long.

The principle of drawing back, of qualifying what we have just read with further, surprising information, is a crucial aspect of how we experience the Spenserian stanza—and thus the poem as a whole—in the process of reading. Both these stanzas begin with concessive conjunctions: “Yet” is followed by “But,” while the final stanza of the canto immediately after these two, begins with a further “Yet.” Unsurprisingly, perhaps, “But” is the most frequent stanza lead word in *The Faerie Queene*, a condition that again speaks to the poem’s genre as
an allegorical romance committed to an aesthetics of suspension. Though formally, these are minimal gestures—among the smallest words spatially and poetically within the text—they do significant semantic work in the way they position the reader in relation to the poem as an unfolding process of revelation, of deferred meaning. In sum, though the Spenserian is a complicated, recursive structure where interlinked rhyming is the norm, it depends on the paradoxical permissiveness of its syntax, and on the additive, qualifying impact of successive connectives that make up the chain across stanzas. The “endlesse worke” Spenser discusses toward the end of Book IV is at once a condition of his allegory and a characteristic of his formal choices.

Donne’s *Metempsychosis* is often read as a modernizing parody of *The Faerie Queene*. John Carey speculated about what would have happened had Donne finished his poem, offering a fantasy of literary-historical gazumping: “In place of Spenser’s dreamy conservatism, we should then have had (to inaugurate seventeenth-century poetry and to provide a model for the coming poets) a work which was not only progressive and contentious in its intellectual cast, but also wedded to immediacy and the real world.” “Progressive” is the key word: Donne and his poem are seen as an empirical shot in the arm to English poetry, a “model” that “inaugurates” explicitly better ways of thinking and writing. Irrespective of whether this is an accurate account of Spenser, it offers the reader a schematic view of Donne that overlooks *Metempsychosis’s* debt to *The Faerie Queene*. At the formal level, the relationship between the two poems is unavoidable: in place of Spenser’s nine-line form, Donne writes in a ten-line stanza, rhyming *Aabcdcbdd*, where the final line is, like Spenser’s, a six-stress alexandrine. This is not, however, to say that Donne is imitating Spenser; the point is rather that in this delightfully perplexing text about the transmigration of a soul, Donne experiments with a kind of stanzaic writing associated with Spenser for his own purposes. The point can be illustrated by an incident in the poem that is explicitly Spenserian: the story of an elephant being undermined by a mouse has its immediate source in one of Spenser’s *Visions of the Worlds Vanitie* sonnets from *Complaints* (1591). Donne’s elephant is, however, wholly Donnean:

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Natures great master-peece, an Elephant,
The onely harmlesse great thing; the giant
Of beasts; who thought, no more had gone, to make one wise
But to be just, and thankfull, loth to offend,
(Yet nature hath given him no knees to bend)
Himselfe he up-props, on himselfe relies
And foe to none, suspects no enemies,
Still sleeping stood; vex’t not his fantasie
Blacke dreames, like an unbent bow, carelesly
His sinewy Proboscis did remisly lie.
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The contrasts between such stanzaic writing and that of *The Faerie Queene* are extensive. Donne’s rhyme scheme is, in the first place, simpler than Spenser’s—it does not demand any quadruple rhymes, and Donne permits only one interleaving rhyme in the b-rhyme, which
begins in the third line and is completed with a couplet in the sixth and seventh lines. The basic stylistic condition of the *Metempsychosis* stanza is then, as in many of Donne’s lyrics, a sequence of couplets, and finally (with the d-rhyme), a rhyming triplet. Donne establishes an animating tension between stanza form and syntax: the norm is a broken, disrupted syntax that doesn’t coincide with line length—indeed, most modern editions print a comma at the end of the stanza to indicate that the sentence continues into the next stanza. Thus in the opening couplet, the rhyming term “the giant” initiates a new train of thought not fully integrated with into the syntax of the opening line and three quarters. Similarly, *Metempsychosis* stanzas often isolate the final triplet into an almost epigrammatic statement; this is visible in the coiled energy of the “sleeping” elephant, “like an unbent bow” “carelessly” allowing “His sinewy Proboscis” to lie “remisly.” Donne elevates the energy of a prose syntax over the repetitious interlacings in which Spenser specialized. Though both *The Faerie Queene* and *Metempsychosis* are unfinished, it’s perhaps harder to see how Donne would have developed his project, since the details of stanza connection and the business of narrative seem to have engaged his attention less than either the presentation of argument or (as here) the construction of a one-off “master-peece,” which is in effect a loose linkage of epigrammatic remarks: “The onely harmlesse great thing”; “nature hath given himself no knees to bend”; “foe to none, suspects no enemies.”

**Conclusion**

This article has problematized easy senses of equivalence between the Renaissance past and the present. While the great writers of the 1580s and beyond still seem to speak in the same language used today, their starting assumptions and critical idioms were often strikingly different. This has been illustrated first through the complex story of the poetic line in the 16th century, a case study that resists the progressive language of “founding” and “dominance.” Second, the mapping of 16th-century verse forms has taken more seriously than many modern scholars “transitional” writers like Stephen Hawes, and has given space to metrical forms not now much studied, such as the Skeltonic and the fourteener. Early modern poetry is characterized by the variety of practice, not easily captured by contemporaneous theory, which was almost invariably written from a determined ideological position. Finally, the case studies of the sonnet and the stanzaic epic as morphic forms have demonstrated how formal readings might enrich the understanding of a diverse range of texts. To recur to Sonnet 106, this is not simply a case of “beauty making beautiful old rhyme,” important as that jaded category may still be, but is rather an attempt to look back with ideally “divining eyes” at the complex, yet compromised and compromising, achievements of the past.

**Discussion of the Literature**

Renaissance formalism is a vast topic, and as David Scott Wilson-Okamura has insisted, has a longer and more extensive pedigree than many competing approaches. With this caveat in mind, formalism has been on the back foot in most branches of literature since critical theory challenged older models in the 1970s and 1980s. In general terms, formal approaches were
suspect because of their perceived divorce from history, and the potential for such readings—
heavily influenced by the New Criticism of writers like William Empson, Cleanth Brooks, and
Thomas S. Eliot—to elide political and material contexts in favor of what was seen as an
abstracted, or even aestheticist approach. During the 1980s and 1990s, with the rise of New
Historicism in the United States and Cultural Materialism in the United Kingdom, this trend
became pronounced; the work of Stephen Greenblatt provides an interesting witness to these changes,
as he charts his own progressive disenchantment with the formalism taught in many
universities and his desire for something more responsive to “the political and theoretical
forment of the 1970s.”

Nevertheless, excellent formal accounts of Renaissance poetry and verse continued to be
published: the work of John Thompson (The Founding of English Metre, 1966), Susanne Woods
(Natural Emphasis: English Versification from Chaucer to Dryden, 1984), George T. Wright
(Shakespeare’s Metrical Art, 1988), and O. B. Hardison (Prosody and Purpose in the English
Renaissance, 1989) shows the ongoing salience of questions about the form and texture of
16th-century verse, and some of the dominant models for interpreting the changes that took
place during this period. These studies, though different in interpretation and emphasis, are
united in their broadly literary concerns with how changes in metrical practice affect what
major writers are able to say; Wright’s, in particular, is an exemplary study of how to use
meter in the interpretation of literary texts. Because meter is about how language is
manipulated, either in response to changes in speech or to dominant educational models,
there is a rich literature of linguistic explanations of changes in poetic practice. Martin Duffell
(A New History of English Metre, 2006) gives an excellent overview of these different models;
Marian Tarlinskaja’s Shakespeare and the Versification of English Drama, 1561–1642 (2014) is
an example of this approach, based both on extensive empirical sampling and complex
modeling of metrical patterns.

As the academy has pulled away from the theory wars of the 1980s, and in response to the
paradigm shifts occasioned by movements like New Historicism, there has, since 2000, been a
discernible shift back to the formal reading of literature. In relation to the Renaissance, this is
evident in the work of scholars like Wilson-Okamura, Lucy Munro, and Richard Danson
Brown, as well as in widely reviewed and controversial texts like Helen Vendler’s commentary
on Shakespeare’s Sonnets. Whether or not this amounts to a “new formalism” is a matter of
debate. What does seem certain is that the work produced by these different scholars, and
others, is almost invariably inflected by both theory in the broad sense and the challenges of
early 21st-century historicist work in the more particular. Put another way, the formalist
commentary of 21st-century scholars is usually contextually rooted, and is unlikely to see
questions of style and form as divorceable from other aspects of cultural and political
commitment. At the same time, the best of this work opens new questions about meaning and
orientation in Renaissance poetry, challenging the reader to think through familiar texts in
new ways.
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Early books accessed via Early English Books Online and Archive.org


Locke, Anne, in John Calvin, Sermons of John Caluin, vpon the songe that Ezechias made after he had bene sicke and afflicted by the hand of God, conteynd in the 38. chapiter of Esay. London: John Day, 1560.


**Further Reading**


Notes


5. Ronsard lived between 1524 and 1585; Bruegel was born in about 1525 and died in 1569.


9. See “form, n. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/73421>,” in *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). Definition 9 is particularly relevant to this discussion, though the examples given in what follows more freely range through both the noun and verbal uses of the word.


21. See Alexander’s commentary in William Scott, *The Model of Poesy*, ed. Gavin Alexander (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 95–96; see further Alexander’s introduction, 1–li, for Scott’s debt to Lomazzo. In the broader context of Lomazzo’s treatise and Renaissance thinking about the visual arts, it should be noted that the root of the word in aspects of the visible appearance or aspect of a thing is relevant; see again “form, n.,” *OED Online*.


23. See also Dowriche’s later comment, which is slightly more forceful in the assertion of the virtues of her work: “To speake truelie without vaine glorie, I thinke assuredlie, that there is not in this forme anie thing extant which is more forceable to procure comfort to the afflicted, strength to the weake, courage to the faint hearted, and patience vnto them that are persecuted, than this little worke, if it be diligentie read and well considered” (Dowriche, *The French Historie*, A4r).


30. Compare the glosses of Colin Burrow in Shakespeare, *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, 550; Katherine Duncan-Jones in *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 280; and John Kerrigan in *The Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint* (Harmondsworth, UK: Viking, 1986), 280. All three editors worry about the implication of the pen and its possible allusions to contemporary calligraphy, but only Burrow highlights the implication that “style and substance have collapsed together in the uniform glossiness in the work of the rival poet.”


34. On which, see, for example, Alexander in Scott, *The Model of Poesy*, xlv-xlvi.


40. Emphasis added.


42. Wright, *Shakespeare’s Metrical Art*, 45. Compare also Spenser’s “Doth it consume, and into nothing goe.”

43. See Thompson, *The Founding of English Metre*, 156, who sees Sidney as bringing “the full resources of speech” to English poetry, though see 165 for caveats about the differences between speech and metrical pattern.

44. See Attridge, *Well-Weighed Syllables*, 188–192, for the debates between Spenser and Harvey.

45. Miroslav Holub, *The Dimension of the Present Moment and Other Essays*, trans. David Young (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), 1–6. As an experiment, I timed myself reading these three lines a few times, producing a range from 2.96 to 4.46 seconds.

the time (103); like Hoccleve and other 15th-century writers, his understanding of metrics is as much based on French decasyllabics as the English iambic pentameter pioneered by Chaucer and Gower; see further Duffell, *A New History of English Metre*, 73–92.


49. See, for example, C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 240, which prefers Lydgate’s poems in stanzas to those in couplets: “the couplet offers no obstacle to his fatal garrulity.” Work originally published 1936.


55. See William E. Mead’s still useful remarks on Hawes’s stress patterning in Hawes, *The Pastime of Pleasure*, xcvi–xcviii, particularly on the free shifting of accent for metrical convenience.


60. Hawes, *The Pastime of Pleasure*, 56; ll.1366–1372. I have preferred the reading “synne” (from the 1509 and 1555 editions) in l.1369 over “syme” given by Mead.


68. See Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, 136: “A form whose only constant attribute is rhyme ought to be intolerable: it is indeed the form used by every clown scribbling on the wall in an inn yard.”


75. Poulter’s is an alexandrine of six stresses followed by a fourteener, and was widely used in *Tottel’s Miscellany*; see Amanda Holton and Tom MacFaul, eds., *Tottel’s Miscellany: Songs and Sonnets of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, Sir Thomas Wyatt and Others* (London: Penguin, 2011), 538. For a comic story of the origins of the term, see Gascoigne in Smith, ed., *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, 1:56.


92. See *Certayne Notes of Instruction* (1575), in Smith, ed., *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, 1:51, for Gascoigne’s nationalistic preference for monosyllables over polysyllables on the grounds that the former are “the most auncient English wordes.”


94. Emphases added.


98. Thus the Letter to Ralegh, first printed in the 1590 edition of *The Faerie Queene*, was omitted from both the 1596 and 1609 editions. For commentary with further bibliography, see Teskey, *Spenserian Moments*, 213–227.

100. See Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *The Boatman’s Call* (Mute Records, 1997, 2011), for the song “Green Eyes.” Cave plays sexualized games with Labé’s text. After the first line of translation (“Kiss me again, re-kiss me, and kiss me”), the speaker lurches into a quasi-pornographic register: “This useless old fucker with his twinkling cunt/ Doesn’t care if he gets hurt,” at once querying his masculine agency and attempting to rebrand the original poem as a text of male need and abjection.


103. Compare Annie Finch’s version in Labé, *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, 207: “Kiss me again, re-kiss me, and then kiss/me again.” Though a fine version, Finch’s syntax is unLabéan throughout.


105. A literal translation of “Jouissons nous l’un de l’autre à notre aise” would be “Enjoying ourselves, the one with the other, at our ease.” Note the syncopation of consecutive vowels toward the end of the line: the last syllable of “autre” and “à” are counted as one syllable. For further commentary on the poem in relation to Petrarchism, see Braden, *Petrarchan Love and the Continental Renaissance*, 117–118.

106. See Holton and MacFaul, eds., *Tottel’s Miscellany*, 15–18. Tottel also includes Surrey sonnets written to more restrictive patterns, such as “The soote season, that bud and blome forth brings” (rhyming *Ababbabababaa*), and “The fansy, which I have served too long” (rhyming *Abababacaccc*); see Holton and MacFaul, eds., *Tottel’s Miscellany*, 7, 50, and notes.

107. Don Paterson, *Reading Shakespeare’s Sonnets: A New Commentary* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), is impatient throughout of Shakespeare’s couplets, often seeing them as verbiage; see e.g. 489.


111. See also poems like *Amoretti* i, XV, XVIII, XXVI.


114. This sonnet repeats the a-rhyme in the third quatrain, as Locke echoes her starting point: “But render me my wonted ioyes againe”; “Restore my ioyes, and make me fele againe” (emphases added). In general, however, the English scheme predominates.
115. Anne Locke in John Calvin, *Sermons of Iohn Caluin, vpon the songe that Ezechias made after he had bene sicke and afflicted by the hand of God, conteyned in the 38. chapiter of Esay* (London: John Day, 1560), A6v.


118. Locke in John Calvin, *Sermons of Iohn Caluin, A7r*.


122. See Teskey, *Spenserian Moments*, 294, for a widely cited if problematic warning against close reading. I use one of Teskey’s key terms, “entanglements,” in what follows—a brilliant metaphor for the formal work done by the stanza. During the spring of 2021 (at the period this article was being written), the International Spenser Society led a monthly series of online seminars called “Spenser at Random” where a group of Spenserians would read a single stanza chosen at random for an hour. These sessions repeatedly posed the hermeneutic problem of relationship: how the single stanza is almost inevitably hinged to, and dependent on, its neighbors and fellow stanzas throughout the poem for issues of tone and meaning. Nevertheless, *The Faerie Queene* lends itself well to random reading precisely because it is a large whole composed of outwardly similar parts.


127. Emphasis added.


130. Emphases added.


132. See Brown, *The Art of The Faerie Queene*, 150–177, for a detailed account of literary genetics of the Spenserian.

133. See Brown, *The Art of The Faerie Queene*, 141–150.

134. William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Hogarth, 1984), 33–34, originally published in 1930, remains the classic account of the syntactic movement of the Spenserian, focusing on the work done by the fifth line in particular.


143. See Brown, “Caring to Turn Back,” 18.


147. See Munro, *Archaic Style*.

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