



A Decade of Style

By David Wilson-Okamura (East Carolina University)

From the beginning, and for centuries after, the main questions about Spenser were aesthetic.¹ In the last one hundred years, interests have broadened—but almost no one stays a Spenserian who doesn't enjoy the poetry as poetry. In the last ten years, Spenserians have published five books on style: my own *Spenser's International Style* (Cambridge UP), which came out in 2013; *A Concordance to the Rhymes of The Faerie Queene* by Richard Danson Brown and J. B. Lethbridge (Manchester UP), which was published the same year; Jeff Dolven's *Senses of Style*, from 2017; Brown's *Art of The Faerie Queene* (Manchester UP), published in 2019; and Paul J. Hecht's *What Rosalind Likes: Pastoral, Gender, and the Founding of English Verse* (Oxford UP), which came out last fall. One thing most of these books agree on is that Spenser experimented with

¹ David Wilson-Okamura, "The Formalist Tradition," in *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser*, ed. Richard McCabe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 718–32; Robert Durling, *The Figure of the Poet in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965); David Wilson-Okamura, "Spenser's Drone," in *On Rhyme*, ed. David Caplan (Liège: Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2017); Richard Danson Brown and J. B. Lethbridge, *A Concordance to the Rhymes of The Faerie Queene* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Michael Murrin, *The Veil of Allegory: Some Notes toward a Theory of Allegory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Kubla Khan," *Poetry Foundation*; Jeff Dolven, "The Method of Spenser's Stanza," *Spenser Studies* 19 (2004): 17–25; Theresa Krier, "Time Lords: Rhythm and Interval in Spenser's Stanzaic Narrative," *Spenser Studies* 21 (2006): 1–19; Thomas Greene, *The Descent from Heaven: A Study in Epic Continuity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963); Catherine Addison, "Rhyming against the Grain: A New Look at the Spenserian Stanza," in *Edmund Spenser: New and Renewed Directions*, ed. J. B. Lethbridge (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006), 338–52; Paul J. Hecht, *What Rosalind Likes: Pastoral, Gender, and the Founding of English Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Jeff Dolven, *Senses of Style* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954); C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936); Bethany Dubow, "Toadstool Poetics: Alliteration in *The Faerie Queene*," *Spenser Studies* 36 (2022): 91–135; David Wilson-Okamura, *Virgil in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Jean Leconte, *L'idéal et la différence: La perception de la personnalité littéraire à la Renaissance* (Geneva: Droz, 1993); Image credits: Adriaen van Utrecht, "Banquet Still Life," 1664, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam Online Catalogue, www.rijksmuseum.nl.

The Spenser Review

style his whole life, not just in *The Shepheardes Calender*, and was still experimenting when he died. His boldness in politics was matched by a boldness in style.

My book *Spenser's International Style* was an amplification of something that Robert Durling, the translator of Petrarch, said in 1965: that a lot of *The Faerie Queene* is written in the middle style (Figure 225–26). That term *middle style* has been confusing. Sometimes it means an intermediate style, between the high style of tragedy and the low style of pastoral. But the middle style can also mean the “sweet,” flowery style of love poems, lyrics, and ceremonial speechmaking. The sweet middle style is marked by minute verbal symmetries: the kind that Aristotle said you should *not* put in epic or tragedy, because they require too much planning to simulate real passion. Stylistically, *The Faerie Queene* is too “middle” for an epic, but not “middle” enough for a series of lyrics.

Why does Spenser's epic sound softer and sweeter than Virgil's *Aeneid*? I proposed several reasons. One, modern audiences wanted love stories mixed in with their battles; and that was held to justify a certain amount of lyric sweetness. Two, Spenser and a lot of other people liked sweetness for its own sake. Finally, Spenser died before he could write his epic books on public virtue. Modeled on the second half of Virgil's *Aeneid*, these books would have entailed war; and Spenser would have adopted a rougher style to accommodate that rougher subject. (*Rough* is a period term, as are *middle* and *sweet*.) Also, I speculate, he would have changed with the times. If we can extrapolate from the ways that Samuel Daniel changed his style in the mid-1590s, the later books of *The Faerie Queene* would have had less alliteration, less archaism, less feminine rhyme, and fewer plays on words. It's even possible that Spenser would have abandoned rhyme, as Tasso did in his late poem on the six days of creation, published in 1605.

The other style book that came out in 2013 was Richard Danson Brown and Julian B. Lethbridge's *Concordance to the Rhymes of The Faerie Queene*. It's a luxurious book: long, large-format, with lots of alleyways where the scholar can get lost and lounge, languorously. (Those *l* sounds are too much, but they would have registered as “sweet” to readers in the Renaissance). In addition to the concordance, there are also lists: an alphabetical list of rhymes with frequency and distribution; all the words in *The Faerie Queene* arranged alphabetically; rhymes in order of frequency of occurrence; and so on. The concordance proper doesn't start until page 181. That's because it's preceded by two critical studies, each of which could have been published separately as a short monograph.

The Spenser Review

I summarized them earlier:

Brown's study is of all the interesting things that Spenser does with rhyme. He argues convincingly that Spenser uses rhyme, not just for decoration, but to forge semantic connections between verses, stanzas, and even whole episodes. In Brown's view, all of the laudations, lazy and otherwise, that students and critics have lavished on Spenser's rhymecraft are more than justified. Lethbridge's essay is combative, a study of all the interesting things that Spenser does *not* do with rhyme. According to Lethbridge, Spenser "drastically suppresses" and "systematically weakens his rhymes" (77, 157): by refusing to align his syntax with the rhyme scheme of his own stanza; by enjambment, which shifts focus away from the rhymes; and by choosing rhymes words that are trivial, common, redundant, or formulaic. He also thinks the retarding effect of Spenser's alexandrine has been exaggerated, and that Spenser wants to be read quickly. ("Spenser's Drone" 193–206, at 195)

Lethbridge's most controversial claim is about the quantity of formulaic rhymes in Spenser. "Spenser," he says, "rhymes with a repetitiveness that in a lesser poet would ruin the poem completely" (134–35). The point isn't that Spenser is bad, but we've been praising him for the wrong thing, being melodious. In fact, Lethbridge argues, Spenser wants his rhymes to fade into the background.

Lethbridge estimates that "very nearly half of the lines in *The Faerie Queene* use rhyme formulae" (*Concordance* 136–37) such as "of mickle might" (a phrase that occurs 7 times) and "with all his might and main" (which occurs 8 times). Why did Spenser write like this—and why has it taken so long for readers to complain? In a 2017 article titled "Spenser's Drone," I argued that Spenser is orchestrating his rhymes like instruments in music. The end rhymes aren't meant to stand out; instead, they are supposed to hum in the background, like the drone of Colin's bagpipe.

But Lethbridge has a more penetrating thesis: he thinks that Spenser's rhymes are generic because *The Faerie Queene* is an allegory, in which meaning takes precedence over form. "Spenser's language," he writes, "aspires to the condition of transparency" (*Concordance* 78). My late teacher, Michael Murrin, spent the first half of his career writing about allegory. If he were alive to comment, I think he would make two observations. One is that allegory is usually veiled, not transparent. It deliberately makes itself difficult, partly in order to protect its message from hostile readers, and partly to make its message valuable to those readers who make the effort of pulling back the veil.

The Spenser Review

That's necessary, because the "moral conclusions" of allegory tend to seem "hollow at the core," if we skip the "experience" that leads up to them (*Veil* 114). And on this point, I think Murrin would agree with Lethbridge: there is something generic about Spenser—which means there is also something universal.

Brown offers a third explanation. In *The Art of The Faerie Queene*, he argues that Spenser's effects are usually meaningful and, frequently, mimetic. This includes the formulaic, "place holder" rhymes enumerated by Lethbridge (*Concordance* 112). Lethbridge and I think these rhymes are supposed to sink down to a level where they don't compete with the message or other sound effects. Brown insists, rather, that all of the rhymes, including the tired ones, are meant to be heard; and the redundant rhymes are strategic (148). As a poem, *The Faerie Queene* advances by repetition. Most of us knew this about the episodes: the fight with the dragon is like the fight with Orgoglio is like the fight with Error. Brown's claim, which is hard to prove any way but piecemeal, is that this strategy applies on the micro- level of style along with the macro- level of narrative. The formulaic rhymes either convey an idea (usually of stasis or gradation) or they mime an event: for example, "In set piece combats...devices of repetition...[are used to] render the heavy metal clashes of chivalric combat" (*Concordance* 182).

Brown calls his book a "complement" to mine (18), but it's also a corrective. *Spenser's International Style* was about international trends and international influences; I wanted Spenser to be seen as European. Brown's Spenser is explicitly not a "Little Englander" (116), not a "Brexit laureate" (56). But he rightly calls attention to the native, English precedents for things like feminine rhyme and stanzas, especially the rhyme royal stanza of Chaucer's *Troilus*. My book will tell you how theorists in the Renaissance rationalized the use of stanzas instead of classical meters. But for how poets actually used stanzas, you must read Brown.

"Elizabethan readers," he says, "were almost instinctively stanzaic;...this was a culture which had a marked tendency to think and conceptualize in stanzas" (*Concordance* 150–51). But different stanzas encourage different ways of thinking. According to Brown, stanzas with an even number of lines, such as *ottava rima* and the *sixain* (whose popularity Brown chronicles), tend to resolve into couplets, units of two lines each. In a *sixain*, there are three such units; in *ottava rima*, four. Couplets are not the only way, but they're the obvious way to organize a stanza with an even number of

The Spenser Review

lines; and most writers, Brown shows, took the obvious way. With odd-numbered stanzas, like rhyme royal and the Spenserian stanza, there is no obvious way to divide up the box; and the result is a cascade of variety: varied syntax, varied pauses within a line, varied line breaks within a sentence. Admittedly, this is more challenging to read than a series of couplets; and Brown shows that Spenser's new stanza was not to everyone's taste when it first came out. It was, he argues, as exciting—and as polarizing—as synthesizers were when they transformed popular music in the 1970s.

To us now, of course, the Spenserian stanza is “a miracle of rare device,” like Kubla Khan's pleasure dome. Everyone admires the stanza, but we're not sure how long to pause when we reach the end of a stanza. The old view was that the final couplet, combined with the alexandrine, serves as a brake on our progress through the poem. Thus Jeff Dolven in his 2004 article “The Method of Spenser's Stanza”: Spenser “may have sleepwalked through the rooms of his accumulating memory palace...but we have to allow that he had the peculiar presence of mind to shut the door behind him, every time” (“Method” 24). Two years later, Theresa Krier described the physical distance of blank space between stanzas, which she gave the impressive name of “interlunations” (“Time Lords”) as an opportunity for reflection. In my book, I collected evidence that English poets, including Spenser and Gascoigne, had an aversion to what I called “leaking” stanzas, where a stanza ends but the sentence continues. Leaking stanzas are common in Petrarch, Ariosto, and Tasso, but not in Spenser, *A Mirror for Magistrates*, or Fairfax's translation of Tasso.

Lethbridge, however, thinks that *The Faerie Queene* should be read quickly; in his view, the final couplet of a Spenserian stanza should be read as a mile-marker, not a stop sign. Recent work supports this. Instead of emphasizing the “final[ity]” (*Descent* 327) of Spenser's concluding couplet. Catherine Addison, Richard Brown, and Paul Hecht have drawn attention to the ways that Spenser connects stanzas, with repeated rhymes, relative pronouns, and alliteration. Their conclusion is unanimous: Spenserian stanzas may not leak, but they do flow.

Hecht's book, *What Rosalind Likes*, is partly about Spenser, partly about Thomas Lodge, and partly about Shakespeare. Hecht starts with a claim that he knows will raise hackles: In *The Shepheardes Calender*, Spenser “didn't really know what he was doing” (28). Effects that Dolven admires as “neat” (*Senses* 122), Hecht “find[s] stiff, contrived, and too obvious to elicit much pleasure” (6). He calls the whole sequence “a productive

The Spenser Review

failure” (*Rosalind* 28). The last person who dumped on *The Shepheardes Calender* like this was C. S. Lewis in 1954, when he said, “it commits the one sin for which, in literature, no merits can compensate; it is rather dull” (*English* 363).

Stylistically, *The Shepheardes Calender* has two defects. First, says Hecht, the stanzas are “stiff” (37). There is “a lack of connection and propulsion between stanzas” (*Rosalind* 31); and within stanzas, the rhythms are predictable. Both problems are fixed in *The Faerie Queene*. The rhythms are more varied, and stanzas are better connected. Hecht gives some examples; and if those aren’t enough, there are more in Brown.

According to Hecht, the other defect in Spenser’s pastoral is “it just hunts the letter way too much” (39). The evidence that early readers disliked excessive alliteration is clear. The evidence that early readers liked copious alliteration is also clear, abundant, and overwhelming. According to Hecht, Spenser didn’t so much solve this problem in *The Faerie Queene* as make it less noticeable. The amount of alliteration is about the same, but it’s less emphatic, because the rhythms of that poem are more varied. This accords with Lethbridge’s finding on syntax: that it doesn’t align with rhyme.

Hecht’s argument about style is part of a larger argument about ethics. Spenser’s contemporaries perceived something effeminate in Spenser’s style, which Spenser himself could have leaned into and rehabilitated, but did not, either for lack of vision or want of courage. I don’t know whether this is right. Dolven, though, points out that style is something that “Subcultures flaunt” when they don’t have access to actual power (*Senses* 184). “This dynamic helps explain style’s persistent feminization” (*Senses* 185).

I haven’t said much about Dolven’s book for a couple reasons. First, while Dolven is a Spenserian, his book *Senses of Style* is about Thomas Wyatt and Frank O’Hara, not Spenser. Also, *Senses of Style* is written in the aphoristic style of Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* or Benjamin’s *Illuminations*. It resists summary.

At its core is a definition of style as something we recognize as being imitable: “To respond to something in terms of its style is to ask...*would I want to do something like that, make something like that, live that way?*” (*Senses* 118). If Dolven is right, “The only way to know a style is by making it” (*Senses* 175).

How much of style is technique, something you can imitate, and how much of style is a way of being, something that expresses who you are? It’s hard to separate them cleanly. Lewis compared imitating Ariosto with wearing “another man’s armour”: it

The Spenser Review

influences, not just your “style of fighting,” but how you move and even what you can see (*Allegory* 304). In Greek, the main word for style is *character*. Dolven takes this idea to its extreme: “A true style,” he writes, “is a style that keeps decorum not with its subject, but with itself: what we seek in style is its self-consistency” (*Senses* 79). To poets who were schooled in rhetoric, like Sidney, Spenser, and Tasso, that sentence would be laughable. They would have learned that the style of an epic is high because its subject and speakers are lofty. When you write about a different subject, you choose a different style. But Spenser’s epic style, in *The Faerie Queene*, is not uniformly high. There’s a lot of middle style, mixed in with the high and diluting its effect. Spenser himself called his epic’s style “my afflicted stile” (I.proem.4).

That isn’t just him being modest, says Brown: Spenser’s poetry is “uneven” and does have “weak parts” (*Art* 9). This is another point these books have in common. They agree that Spenser was always experimenting with style; and they concede, collectively, that some of his experiments failed (or, as Hecht argues, failed on their first showing). This willingness to be critical of an artist we all admire is invigorating and salubrious. It is refreshing when Hecht says, in language that makes few concessions to academic decorum, that Spenser bumbled sometimes in *The Shepheardes Calender*; and it is invigorating when Lethbridge announces that the emperor of rhyme has no clothes. Again, we seem to be working up (or back) to a point that Lewis made almost a hundred years ago: “So far from being a poet whose excellent and sustained mastery of language is his only merit, [Spenser] is a poet whose chief fault is the uncertainty of his style” (*Allegory* 318).

Still unresolved is the question of character versus technique. Brown takes it as given that Spenser, as a great poet, is in control of his technique. (Hence the term *art* in his title.) For Brown, Spenser’s style is always functional, always means something. Whereas I think there is an element of Spenser’s style that he’s not aware of: out of his control, because out of his ken. It’s his character, the armor he fights in. (Hence the term *style* in my title.)

It isn’t just Spenser’s character, either. The whole atmosphere of this period is one of ornamentalism, ornament for ornament’s sake. It’s not that poets didn’t try to align their ornaments with their meaning. As Brown and others have shown, there is probably no stanza of *The Faerie Queene*, no rhyme, no flower of rhetoric that a skilled reader can’t

The Spenser Review

discover to have some meaning. But, as Bethany Dubow argues in a recent article on alliteration, Spenser's ornaments are like "toadstools": they multiply "far in excess" of any rule or programme ("Toadstool" 123). You can like Spenser for other things—his irony, his invented mythology, even his sense of humor—but you can't like Spenser in spite of his alliteration; there's just too much of it in Spenser's poetry to enjoy it on those terms.

When Spenser came of age, ornament was the default; and more was usually better. Even if you think *The Faerie Queene* is complete (which I don't), Spenser's six books are three times longer than Virgil's twelve. In the Renaissance, readers admired Virgil's minimalism (*Virgil* 101–42), but what most writers actually imitated was Cicero's *copia*. According to Jean Lecoq, *copia* is a world view as much as a style. But you don't get *copia*—don't pursue *copia* as an artistic goal—if you don't you relish ornament for ornament's sake.

The best part of art is not always its meaning.