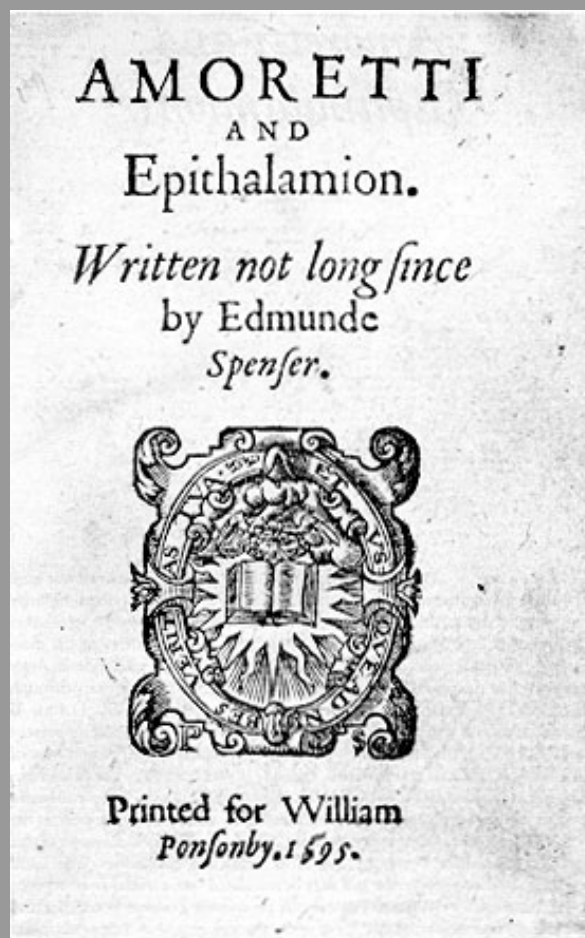


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**STRUCTURE AND CEREMONY IN SPENSER'S  
*EPITHALAMION***



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## STRUCTURE AND CEREMONY IN SPENSER'S *EPITHALAMION*

BY MAX A. WICKERT

The structure of Spenser's *Epithalamion* is a comparatively recent preoccupation of commentators. An older generation confined itself to celebrating this poem's considerable imagistic riches and rhythmical energies. The latter, especially, were generally singled out for special praise.<sup>1</sup> James Russell Lowell lauds its "organlike roll and majesty of numbers"; R. W. Church, its "impetuous and unflagging" energy, so "orderly and yet . . . rapid." H. S. V. Jones's handbook long popularized the view that it is "sound, more than sight or thought, that links the stanzas." William Minto was delighted by the way in which the verses "soar and precipitate themselves," while de Selincourt spoke no less highly of their "linked melody" and "varying rhythms." Such near-exclusive emphasis on the tricky, qualitative element of lyrical flow had, in treating a poem of such length, certain inevitable drawbacks. It ignored or slighted those quantitative dispositions which prevent the unflagging speed from turning into motoric dullness. John Erskine's notorious misreading of the *Epithalamion* as a work in which each stanza "is a song in itself, and the complete poem is a series rather than an organic whole"<sup>2</sup> was perhaps the reduction at absurdum of that approach which, fixed in Coleridgean organicism, kept its eyes so fixedly upon the "beauties" of the literal text that it became a little myopic to the overall plan of the poem. Until the second quarter of the present century, no one to my knowledge, for instance, felt it worth his while to point out even the most rudimentary aspect of that plan—the fact that the poem, dealing with the events of twenty-four hours, has twenty-four stanzas.

More recently, we have witnessed a shift of emphasis. On one hand, scientific study of Renaissance rhetoric has revealed that the "lyric flow" of a poem like the *Epithalamion*—so easy and energetic, so apparently unpremeditated and precipitous—is, when viewed genetically, the

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<sup>1</sup> The unannotated citations which follow can all be conveniently found in the second volume of the *Variorum Minor Poems*, pp. 645-56 *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> *The Elizabethan Lyric* (New York, 1903), p. 189.

product of a highly calculated manipulation of formalized prosodic “devices.”<sup>3</sup> Behind such manipulation stands a functionalist conception of sound which subordinates it to the larger dispositions of sense. On the other hand, investigation of Spenser’s ideological roots, of his conception of time and process, has made it more and more apparent that he viewed poems as opportunities to create microcosmic models of the macrocosmic order. Recent research in Renaissance numerology by Hieatt, Roestvig, and Fowler<sup>4</sup> has strengthened the thesis that, as William Nelson puts it, “Spenser uses time as a structural principle.”<sup>5</sup> The *Epithalamion* emerges in this view as a kind of *horologe cosmologique*. Yet this view, too, has its dangers. Though it is firmly structural, it is also too referential. The plan of the poem tends to dissolve into the metaphysical master conceptions of which it is, presumably, an analogue. The textural surface and dynamic continuity of the poem are in danger of appearing arbitrary or irrelevant. Moreover, the master conception, once isolated, tends (since it is “outside” the poem) to introduce a priori distortions in the structural analysis.

The most provocative modern reading of the *Epithalamion*, A. Kent Hieatt’s *Short Time’s Endless Monument*<sup>6</sup>, is a case in point. Its hallmarks—the demonstration of Spenser’s symbolic use of 365 long lines to indicated the days of the year, the 359 before the envoy hinting at the discrepancies between solar and sidereal measurements; and of twenty-four stanzas to signify the hours of the day, the sixteen before the change of refrain referring to the hours of daylight in Ireland on June 11, 1594—have a virtually unshakable validity and, doubtless, give the poem a macrocosmic reverberation which, though sometimes suspected, has never been so convincingly documented. With the bulk of Professor Hieatt’s demonstration the present essay has no quarrel. But in the course of it a series of inferences is made about the structure of the *Epithalamion*, which, while it provides additional support to Hieatt’s view of the master conception, is not indispensable to it, and which, in my opinion, introduces considerably greater

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<sup>3</sup> Veré L. Rubel describes the basic pattern of the *Epithalamion* as “polysyndeton closing with epinome . . . [studded] by means of plocce.” (*Poetic Diction in the English Renaissance*, New York, 1941; pp. 266-67). See also Herbert David Rix, *Rhetoric in Spenser’s Poetry* (State College, Pa., 1940).

<sup>4</sup> Maria-Sophia Roestvig, *The Hidden Sense* (Norwegian Studies in English, no. 9, 1963), pp. 82-92; A. Kent Hieatt, *Short Time’s Endless Monument* (New York, 1960); Alastair Fowler, *Spenser and the Numbers of Time* (London, 1964).

<sup>5</sup> *The Poetry of Edmund Spenser* (New York, 1963), p. 93.

<sup>6</sup> See note 5. Hereafter cited as *Short Time*.

strain in an integral reading of the poem than the facts seem to warrant. These inferences spring from the assumption that Spenser's set of twenty-four stanzas is organized in two sub-sets of twelve stanzas each, the members of which, stanza for stanza, are in one-to-one correspondence. Stanza 1, in this view, is said to make important symbolic and thematic cross references to stanza 13; stanza 2, to stanza 14; and so forth.<sup>7</sup>

It is obvious to the most cursory reading of the poem that stanzas 12 and 13 provide an emphatic and mathematically exact midpoint, and that the two halves on either side of this midpoint invite some kind of matching. I intend to show that such matching must be performed not, as in Professor Heatt's attempt, on the assumption of congruity but on the assumption of symmetry; that the imaginative order of the poem's second half is not a *da capo* repetition but a mirror-inversion of the imaginative order of the first half. In other words, stanza 1 matches stanza 24; stanza 2, stanza 23; and so forth. Such a revision of Heatt's view seems to me of critical import, not only because it fits the facts with greater justice, but also because it removes the necessity for dislocating elements in the narrative sequence of the poem when considering cross-relationships in its architecture. It removes, in fact, a difficulty which Professor Heatt is himself inclined to grant when he says that the meaning of the structural symbolism proceeds "on a line parallel with the literal one, but is *not constantly and intimately generated by it.*"<sup>8</sup>

The question is: what kind of structural pattern can the literal meaning of the *Epithalamion* in fact constantly and intimately generate? To answer this we must first determine what that literal meaning is. Evidently, it is implicit in the cumulative significance of the many felicitatory hortatives (*makarismoi*) uttered by the bridegroom-speaker within the narrative context of his wedding procession. The literal meaning is, to use Francis Ferguson's nomenclature, the *action* or *praxis* of the poem. Just as the procession has a goal (the altar) to and from which it moves, so the invocations point toward a rhetorical entelechy, a *topos* of repose and of orientation where, if only momentarily, the continual optatives and imperatives give place to the indicative, where the wishes, the commands, the prayers resolve

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<sup>7</sup> *Short Time*, pp. 16-30.

<sup>8</sup> *Short Time*, p. 7. Italics mine.

themselves in an assertion or credo. We seem close to such an assertion at line 263 with the declarative "This day is holy,"<sup>9</sup> an universalization of the more personal "This day for euer to me holy is" in the preceding stanza. But the hallowing of the wedding day, close as it is to the central impulse of the poem's invocations, is generated in turn by an even more fundamental "assertion." This occurs at the mathematically exact center of the poem (lines 216-17) in the final clause of the following sentence:

Bring her vp th' high altar that she may,  
*The sacred ceremonies* there partake,  
 The which *do endlesse matrimony make.* [Italics mine]

The emphatic position in which the rhyme places the verb "make" strengthens the suggestion, latent in the remainder of the poem, that Spenser thinks of the Rite of Matrimony as somehow essentially constituting the Estate and Perpetuity of Marriage. He is in fact using "to make" in the technical, scholastic sense of "to be sufficient to constitute; to be the essential criterion of."<sup>10</sup> The relation of sacred ceremonies to matrimony is analogous to that of soul to body in lines 133-34 of *An Hymne in Honour of Beautie* (which, in their syntactical and prosodic use of the verb "make," echo the *Epithalamion* lines exactly) :

For of the soule the bodie forme doth take.  
 For soule is forme, and doth the bodie make.

It is in this light, too, that we must understand the employment of the same verb by Phedon at *Fairie Queene* II.4.21:

Accord of friends, consent of parents sought,  
 Affiance made, my happinesse begonne,  
 There wanted nought but few rites to be donne,  
 Which manage make.

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<sup>9</sup> All citations from Spenser follow the Variorum text.

<sup>10</sup> *OED*, q. v. "make" (verb), I.24. While the *OED* definition fits Spenser's meaning exactly, the *OED* samples are not exactly parallel. But this use of "make" is attested at least as early as Chaucer; cf. *Boece* II.6: "the nature of everything maketh his propretee"; and *ibid.* V.4-6: "Every signe sheweth and signifyeth only what the thing is, but it ne maketh nat the thing that it signifyeth . . . the propre nature of it ne maketh it nat, but he tadieccioun of the condicioun maketh it."

It seems then that the action or *praxis*, the literal meaning of the *Epithalamion*, can be indicated in the simple infinitive "to go . . . through the marriage rite." This suggests both the physical procession that constitutes the "story" of the poem and the psychological "plot" of which the sacramental epiphany at the poem's center is paradigmatic. The makarismic utterances of the speaker are totally "in character" with that action: they instigate it, they describe it, and they orient it in constant reference to the central rite. The assertion that the "sacred ceremonies *make* "endlesse matrimony" signals the "intention" of the *poem*; the command "This day is holy; doe ye write it downe, / That ye for euer it remember may," signals the "intention" of the *poet*. In the former case, we are dealing with the pivotal element in what Professor Heatt would call the literal meaning; in the latter, we are confronted by that "eternizing" function about which Professor Heatt has so much to say. That the function is subordinate to the meaning, and not vice versa, should be immediately apparent. It is, in fact, a corollary of it.

In any approach to the structure of this poem, the literal level ("to go through the marriage rite"), the sequential continuity and coherence of the processional and its attendant rhetoric, seems to me of overriding importance. It is not only unwise to forget about it, it seems next to impossible to do so, since the very syntax does not permit it. In fact, by remembering that we are dealing with a linear "going" we are brought without difficulty to an awareness of structural dimensions. A procession follows a path, and that path must conform to the features of the terrain it traverses. Each event which occurs, each attitude which is struck along that path is precisely limited by the point of view or horizon which the terrain from that particular vantage point permits. Conversely, only attention to the continually shifting accidents of the point of view along the path will enable us to reconstruct those features of the terrain through which the way leads.

The imaginative landscape of the *Epithalamion* is laid out concentrically, the church in the middle, surrounded in order by the town (society), the countryside (nature), and, on the outer fringes of that countryside, the earthly manifestations of that supernatural which like a dome arches over the entire territory. The dwellings of both the bride and the married couple seem to be erected on the border between town and country, at analogous distances from the church at the center. Their positional similarity in the cosmos of the poem permits a similarity of point of view in either dwelling: the speaker in both can cast his

eye out the front window, as it were, at the goings-on which involve merchant maidens and young men of the town, and out the back window at a vividly realized countryside interanimated by supernatural powers. The topography of the poem is strictly symmetrical. The quantitative distribution of stanzas seems to conform to that symmetry. It appears that they are grouped in the following proportions: (1) - (3-4-3) - (2) - (3-4-3) - (1) . The setting for the outer triads is nature shadowed by the gods; both the tetrads take place in the confines of a chamber; and the dyad at the center is flanked by the two inner triads distinguished by the onlooking presence of urban society in some form. A closer look will also reveal that, in terms of the processional movement, progressions and halts alternate with some regularity. The breathless forward rush of muses and nymphs in the first triad is arrested by four stationary stanzas from the viewpoint of the bride's tiring-room; the stately procession in the second triad ends in the fulcrum] stasis<sup>11</sup> of the church ceremony. The kinetic " bring home the bride againe " at line 242 initiates, if not a physical movement, at least the thematic dynamics of the bridegroom's anticipatory impatience (" the longest day in all the yeare " becomes problematical) , which in turn find repose in the amorous solemnities of the second tetrad, again localized in a chamber. Finally, the movement of the last three stanzas before the envoy is patently the apothotic ascent of rapture or " ecstasie " from earth through Luna's sphere to the " haughty pallaces " of a Christian-Platonic heaven. In short, the triads *move* while the dyads and tetrads alternating with them *stand*.

This then is the model I propose for both the structure and the topography of the *Epithalamion*: a series of concentric circles diametrically intersected by a processional line which passes through each circle twice, once before, and once after the transforming rite at the middle. It is now time to descend to particulars. These conspire to show the following: (1) the coherence of the stanza groups, in the manner indicated above, through echoic devices of rhetoric and prosody; (2) their differentiation through decisive shifts in the point of view; (3) the accentuation of these shifts through the use of planetary events as signals of transition; and finally, (4) the pervasive matching of thematic and imagistic detail in corresponding stanzas from beginning and end.

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<sup>11</sup> My colleague, Victor Doyno, whose many helpful comments are here gratefully acknowledged, suggests that even the central dyad is subdivisible into a "moving" (stanza 12) and a "static" (stanza 13) half.



The dominant organizing elements in the rhetoric of the poem tire echoic—the devices of refrain, incremental repetition, or rhetorical fragmentation which Puttenham and his ilk called *anadiplosis*, *anaphora*, *antistrophe*, *merismus*, *ploce*, *traductio*, etc.<sup>12</sup> These are the means by which the entire poem literally "rings" with echoes—not merely the clockwork recurrences of the refrain proper, but also the forays which its key sounds "sing" and "ring" (perhaps also "praise" and "joys") make into the stanzas themselves, either by downright repetition or assonantal or consonantal variation. Thus "ring" vibrates through the first half of the poem from stanza 2 onwards: "long" (twice), "bring" (thrice), "wrong," "along," "hang," "sings," "song," "among," "things," and so forth; and through the second half, starting with stanza 14: "bring" (four times), "sprinkle," "drunken," "ring" (twice), "long" (five times), "twinkling," etc. It is worth noting that Spenser's procedure is not merely a kind of aural pointillism, assuring homogeneity of texture through liberal daubing with similar sounds, but that in more cases than not the individual daubs form parts of small, formal rhetorical chains in which the repetends act as energy-generating devices to keep things moving; witness the anaphoric use of "long" in the first eight lines of stanza 16, or of "bring" in the following extremely characteristic passage:

Now al is done; bring home the bride againe,  
 Bring home the triumph of our victory,  
 Bring home with you the glory of our gaine,  
 With ioyance bring her and with iollity. [Lines 242-45]

Echoes, in other words, are Spenser's means of harmonizing homogeneity in the poem's surface with continuity in its argumentative line.

Since the model I have suggested for the structure of the *Epithalamion* is both a map of its overall spatial dimensions and a yardstick of its consecutive linear divisibilities, one might expect concentrations of particular echoic materials themselves to suggest the structural boundaries. This is, in fact, the case. Consider, for instance, the two chamber-tetrads (stanzas 5-8 and 17-20). The most conspicuous repetend in the first of these is surely the word "day": "To this dayes merriment"; "In loves sweet paradice, of Day and Night"; "Fit for so ioyfull day, / The ioyfulst day that euer sunne did see"; "But let this day let this one day be

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<sup>12</sup> See note 3 above.

myne " (lines 84-124 *passim*) . The rhymes lend additional support: "laies-praise-playes," " aray-day-ray," "face-disgrace," and perhaps "noyce-voyce."

Similarly, in the later tetrad, the *leitmotif* is "night": "Now day is doen, and night is nighing fast "; " Now night is come"; "Now it is night "; " Now welcome night, thou night so long expected "; " But let the night be calme and quiet some "; " Be heard all night within nor yet without "; "the night Rauen "; " trew night watches "; " Conceald through couert night "; " All night therefore attend your merry play,/For it will soone be day " (lines 208-368 *passim*) . Again, there is assistance from rhymes: "sights-affrights-sprights," "delight-night." (We incidentally notice that in the group where the "day" sound dominates, the sound of "night" becomes a kind of second subject, and vice versa—a matter of some thematic importance.)<sup>13</sup> It must be granted, of course, that " day " and "night " are almost too natural to the subject of the poem to be made much of, and that rhymes in *-ite* and *-ay* are not uncommon in Spenser's vocabulary. Both the rhymes and the words, in fact, occur elsewhere in the *Epithalamion*. But when they do, their concentration is nothing like the one achieved in these two quartets of stanzas. The one exception proves the rule: the frequency of the word "day " in the stanza triad immediately after the altar ceremony serves to bring the following four "night " stanzas into sharp contrastive focus. It does not, indeed, compete with the previous "day " tetrad.

But in the case of the two tetrads, we have further evidence of cohesion. Consider the following lines:

Wake, *now* my loue, awake; for it is time....

My lone is now awake out of her dreames....

*Now* is my loue all ready to come forth . . [Italics mine]

They open, respectively, stanzas 5, 6 and 7. Then consider the following:

*Now* cease ye damsels your delights forepast....

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<sup>13</sup> Jove's "paradise of Day and Night " ushers in the rhymes "delight-dight-arightsmite-quite" in the first group. In the second, we begin with "Now day is doen" and we end with "For it will soone be day," not to mention the rhymes "disarray-lay-display-defray-aye-play."

*Now* welcome night, thou night so long expected....

*Now* none doth hinder you, that say or sing....[Italics mine]

These occur, respectively, in stanzas 17, 18 and 20, the first two being again opening lines. The word "now" which several times occurs elsewhere in these stanza groups, recurs only twice in the poem outside them.<sup>14</sup> We have already noted that both the chamber tetrads are moments of stasis in the wedding procession. Hence the insistence on the "now" not only relates and unifies these stanza groups, but is also thematically relevant to suggest the near-simultaneity of events which here occur. The fact that the "now" is unexplicit in stanzas 8 and 19 controverts nothing. Beginning with the "now" theme, each tetrad also develops its own variations on it. In the first, the initial "Wake, now" (line 74) generates the echo "Hark how" four lines later. "Harke how" is allowed to introduce stanza 8 (line 129), so that the entire group of stanzas begins and ends, as it were, with two harkenings: the first to the concert of birds, the second to that of the minstrels—the music of nature and the music of man. In the later tetrad, "Now welcome night" in stanza 18 introduces a series of "let" clauses, and it is this series which is continued in the first line of stanza 19, taking the place of a mechanically repeated "now" line.

The cumulative weight of the evidence seems to me conclusive: the anaphoric uses of "day" and "night," ringing on in appropriate rhyming sounds, combined with a formal insistence on the word "now" unique in the poem, gives these two stanza groups an aural texture all their own, setting them off from other stanzas and relating them *vis-a-vis* each other. The cohesiveness of the triads on either side of these tetrads seems to me susceptible of similar demonstration. I shall merely sketch out the main lines along which it could profitably be conducted. In the first of them (stanzas 2 to 4), the key word is "awake," strongly stated in the four repetitions of stanza 2 and gradually attenuated through rhyme words: "flake-make-lake-take-make." (The attenuation is functional; because of it the brief decisive revival of "wake" as a subsidiary theme of the following stanza group is felt as a new beginning.) The stanzas in the second triad (stanzas 9 through 11) are variations on the themes of "eyes," "see," and "gaze," with their derivatives (here sound and sense overlap) "seeme,"

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<sup>14</sup> At lines 12 and 242, against fourteen instances of the word in the two stanza groups at hand.

"weene," "praise," " amaze," and so forth. The third triad (stanzas 14 through 10) is a set of formal excursions from the incrementally repeated combination "this . . . day":

Neuer had man more ioyfully day then *this*...

Make feast therefore now all *this* line long *day*,

*This day* for euer to me holy is...

*This day is* holy; doe ye write it downe...

*This day* the simile is in his chiefest bight .

But for *this* lime it ill ordained was,

To chose the longest *day* ill all the yeare

Ah! when will *this* long weary *day* have end ...[246-78 *passim*, my italics]

The contrastive relation of this stanza trio to the quartet that follows it has already been mentioned. Finally, the organizing repel end of the last triad (stanzas 21 to 23) is simply the progression "timely seed" (line 380), "timely fruit" (line 404), and "tymely ioyes" (line 425).

There is then in the whole poem a strict, though flexible, woof of musical relationships. The themes which go into its weaving are, in the main, incremental or anaphoric repetends, undergoing subtle variations, expansions, decompositions, and interactions. Here and there, indeed, the thematic material of one "movement" spills over into the next. (The last "all night" of the second tetrad, for instance, is briefly echoed at line 375), or is anticipated in the preceding one (there is a presentiment of the concluding "timeliness" theme at line 355) . But on the whole, the echoic surface of the poem is more than mere homogeneous (even if iridescent) texture. Close inspection of its ingredients hints at structural dispositions of stanzas in groups, alternating by threes and fours on either side of the altar stanzas. The musical texture seems constantly and intimately to generate the structural configurations; the literal surface, the thematic plan.

There is nevertheless something like a law of diminishing returns about the employment of verbal music in the simultaneous service of overall texture and sequential structure, for structure means differentiation as well as connection. The more a part is assimilated to the whole, the less it is distinguishable as a part. The sound patterns in the *Epithalamion* are so complete and interpenetrative—in fact, so continuously self-generating—that, it might be argued, as they gravitate together in clusters it becomes difficult to assign precise boundaries to each separate cluster, though its approximate center of gravity is establishable enough. It is certain that stanzas 2 to 4 of Spenser's poem constitute one such cluster, and stanzas 5 to 8, the next. But whether the transition from one to the other occurs precisely after line 73, or perhaps a little later or sooner, is, on the basis of the evidence we have so far considered, considerably less certain. There are many purely auditory signals for connecting parts of this poem, but few for differentiating them. But here we again remember that a song implies a singer, and that the singer in the *Epithalamion* is engaged in a procession. His "voice" at any point along his path is largely a function of his point of view. The questions we must all along ask about the narrative persona of the *Epithalamion* are: where is he now? what is he looking at? whom is he addressing? Shifts in vocative or locative implication may be gradated, but can scarcely be ambiguous; they may not, be few, but they must be denumerable. Along any finite path, one can stop and look only so often. Certain shifts in the point of view in Spenser's poem are, I think, decisive and, not surprisingly, correspond with the opening lines of the major divisions roughly indicated by the sound patterns.

The point of view of the first triad is determined by three things. First, all three stanzas are engaged in an orderly exposition of the poem's peripheral geography. There is a calculated narrowing of focus from the cosmic perspective of "worlds light giuing lampe" to the rural one of "riuers and the forrests greene," to the Irish one of Mulla and Kilcolman's fishless lake, to the "heere" (line 71) which indicates the door of Elizabeth Boyle's house. Second, all three stanzas are addressed to the same group of personages (muses and nymphs), again in an orderly sequence which recreates their gradual approach to a goal: "Go to the bowre" (line 23) begins the procession; stragglers are picked up along the way ("Bring with you all the Nymphes," line 37); the destination is pointed out ("doe at her chamber dore awayt," line 52); and finally the hortative-narrative *persona*, getting ahead of the

by now sizeable train, waits at that destination for the rest of the procession to catch up ("Be also present heere," line 71) . Third, the viewpoint in all three stanzas includes repeated recognitions of lurking natural evil, precariously held in check: night's "vnchearefull dampe" (stanza 2), sharp stones in the flowerstrewn road (stanza 3), predatory pikes and wolves (stanza 4).

At line 74 the narrator's point of view shifts drastically: he directly addresses the bride. In relation to the bride, his imagined location, formerly outdoors looking towards her house, is now indoors, looking out with her. The characteristic verb of the first three stanzas was "go"; now it is "come ": the coming of the bridegroom himself (lines 87 and 113), of the graces and hours (stanza 6), and of the human attendants (stanza 8). The descriptions are carefully limited to things that can be seen or heard from a lady's chamber window. We look out at the late dawn, "harken" to the concert of birds, bid the damsels enter, look up at the ascendant sun, and finally catch a confused, panoramic impression of the milling and expectant crowd which has gathered in the street below.

In the first line of the ninth stanza, the viewpoint is again radically altered. For the first time there is a workable merging of the narrative persona (who has been "with " the bride in the foregoing section) with the bridegroom (who seems to have been denied physical access to the bride's bower). He is now out in the street, greeting the emerging bride with three stanzas of epideictic description. The conventionalized and indeed ceremonially abstract quality of this description makes for further unity of viewpoint, as does the fact that this triad is the first section addressed to human wedding attendants (the " merchants daughters "), with a further transformation of the point of view, from the street to the church interior, we reach the pivotal pair of stanzas (12 and 13). Their unity is also heightened by the simple, but highly significant contrastive relation between terrestrial, anthem-singing choristers and celestial, alleluia-chanting angels—not to speak of the bride's characteristic stance, looking neither proudly up, or "vnsowndly awry. In the following triad (stanzas 14 to 16) we find ourselves, after a hurried transition, in the social context of a banquet hall, corresponding to that of the street in stanzas 9 and 11. The merchant maidens addressed in the earlier triad are matched here by the "yong men of the towne "; the list of the bride's perfections balances the description of the bridegroom's reactions. A sudden change of refrain brings us back to a chamber, this time the spousal chamber itself, and the ensuing four stanzas invert the point of

view of stanzas 5 through 8. The first group began with a look outside (dawn and birds) and ended with a first glimpse of the human attendants; the present group begins with a farewell to these attendants and closes with a look outside (owls, stork, ravens in lines 345 ff. and the soon threatening dawn of line 369). The concluding three stanzas before the envoy are a mighty triad of prayers, restoring and transcending in stanza 23 the initial cosmic outlook of stanza 2's "worlds lightgiuing lampe."

The major shifts in the point of view order the processional movement in the poem's time by exactly the same proportions as the important landmarks in its geography order the permanent features of the poem's space. The poem possesses stately and solemn dynamics because it enacts a temporalization of spatial order; its significant and vital symmetries are significant and vital because they are spatializations of temporal inevitabilities. Professor Heiatt's close attention to the function of the mythological Hours is of central relevance here precisely because, to the Renaissance, the Hours are mythic images, not of mere space, nor of mere time, but of the interdependence of both, of space-time. The *Epithalamion* is a true *mimesis*, an imitation or ritual re-enactment of a ceremony which itself reenacts the cosmic order. The processional is "in step" with supernal cycles, so that the supernal phenomena seem ultimately and magically to be "in time" with the processional itself. It is not only the action of man, but the action of the very universe, "to go through the marriage rite."<sup>15</sup> And the universe does signal its participation in the rite by a series of planetary ratifications. The risings of celestial bodies, sun and moon and evening star, occur at times in the poem which correspond to the structural divisions already indicated.

Sunrise occurs at the beginning of stanza 5. When "Phoebus gins to shew his glorious hed" (line 77), his appearance marks the transition from the first triad to the first tetrad of stanzas. Looking to the second half, we find that the last triad and tetrad are similarly set apart by the rising of the moon in the first line of stanza 21.<sup>16</sup> The evening star rises at the conclusion of the sixteenth stanza. It announces the transition to the second chamber tetrad. Looking to the corresponding position in the first half, we find that at the beginning of stanza 9 there is

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<sup>15</sup> A commonplace notion in the Renaissance; see, e. g., Erasmus's *Encomium Matrimonii* (1518).

<sup>16</sup> The matching of sunrise and moonrise is surely more plausible than Heiatt's (*Short Time*, pp. 102-3) of moonrise and the bride's metaphorical moonrise in stanza 9, of which see below.

another rising, albeit only a metaphorical one, for the bride is "Lyke Phoebe from her chamber of the East, /Arysing forth to run her mighty race" (lines 149-50). In true classical spirit, Elizabeth Boyle has been stellified. Her and Phoebe's maidenly chastity stand, of course, in functional thematic contrast to the hallowed sexuality of Venus, the evening star.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, as Heatt has pointed out, Spenser in stanza 16 has Venus rising in the *east*, an error<sup>18</sup> which in as astronomically learned a poet as him is difficult to explain. It seems to be a verbal lapse, and as such is easier to understand if we assume a semiconscious intent to echo stanza 9, with its image of an *eastern* moonrise. These celestial events, then, shed their influence upon their respective sections of the poem's structure, and set these sections apart from one another. Important as they are as beacons of a hypermundane order mirrored in the structure of the poem as a whole, related as they are to Spenser's metaphysical notions of time and mutability and to his ambition to provide poetical models of them, their appearance in this poem is nevertheless constantly and intimately generated by the literal meaning. They are only what the speaker at given junctures of his ritual "going" could and would see and imagine.

All facts so far have hinted that the second half of the poem is the converse of the first half, that it is the going out corresponding to the first half's coming in. Sunrise occurs at the beginning of the first half, moonrise the end of the second; the second tetrad, in terms of point of view, reverses the order of the first; increasing echoes of "day" bring, past the middle of the poem, increasing echoes of "night"; we enter urban society toward the end of the first half, and prepare to leave it after the beginning of the second. Now if, despite all this, Heatt's matching of stanzas at intervals of twelve were convincing, it would largely neutralize the effect of everything we have so far pointed out, by being at essential cross purposes with the retrograde progression of the concluding half of the poem. In other words, unless the relations we have observed on the level of stanza groups also obtain for individual pairs of stanzas, either our argument or the poem must be fundamentally flawed. But, as shall become clear, these relations do obtain for individual stanzas.

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<sup>17</sup> We recognize here the familiar Belphoebe-Amoret motif; cp. *Fairie Queene* III.4.

<sup>18</sup> Her correct, position is near the western horizon.



In a way, the most obvious match are the two stanzas with which we have not yet concerned ourselves: stanza 1 and the envoy or *tornata*. They are personal references which bracket the body of the poem. Both of them put the *Epithalamion* into relation with other works Spenser had, or might have, written: the first stanza, with his public opus—*The Faerie Queene*, *Colin Clout*, *Astrophel*, *Complaints*—and the *tornata*, with his private "ornaments" for Elizabeth Boyle—among them, presumably, the *Amoretti*, written or unwritten. The rhymes "ornaments-accidents-recompense" and "ornament-moniment" in the *envoy* may be planned echoes of "lament-dreriment" in stanza 1. (A matching rhyme appears only once elsewhere in the poem.) Finally, the "hasty accidents" of line 429 are the poem's last variation on the theme of "fortunes wreck" introduced at line 8. The *Epithalamion* has two beginnings and two endings; these two stanzas are, respectively, the first and the last.

Proceeding to the relation between stanzas 2 and 23, we find an embarrassment of riches. Most obviously, the opening; "Doe ye awake" (line 22) is the direct antithesis of the closing "So let vs rest" (line 423). The "nights vnchearefull dampe" relieved by sunlight corresponds to the "dreadful darknesse" overcome by celestial light. There are only two occurrences of torches in the poem: the first is Hymen's "bright Tead that flames with many a flake" in the second stanza; the second, heaven's "thousand torches flaming bright" in the twenty-third. The "long delight" promised to the bride in the former suggests the "lasting happinesse" anticipated for her children in the latter. On the deepest level, both stanzas are dominated by the notion of a kind of moral economy, expressed in financial metaphors. The sun "gives" light to the world, heaven "lends" it to mortals; the temporal happiness and delight of the bride is payment, with usury, compensating for "paynes and sorrowes past," while the eternal happiness of her offspring is an inheritance or "guerdon" proportional to their earthly merit. We notice that almost all these correspondences are of such a nature that the initial theme is placed in a more deeply relevant or transcendent context when echoed later. The "dreadful darknesse" of mortality is of more deeply metaphysical import than the "vnchearefull dampe" of a natural night. Heaven's torches flame with an intenser brightness than Hymen's tead. All earthly delight, no matter how "long," pales before the lasting happiness of "blessed Saints"; and terrestrial compensations or "tymely ioyes" are eclipsed by eschatological guerdon. Juxtaposing these two stanzas, we see clearly a development implicit in the remainder of the poem—the gradual transformation of the

bridegroom's world-view by the agency of the rite through which he goes. The second half of the poem, while returning through the same ground and recurring to some of the same images, or even words, as the first, reflects a profound change of attitude, a change which occurs because the ceremony at the center is effective and "makes" matrimony. Thus the *Epithalamion* is true ritual poetry, not merely because marriage, which happens to be a rite, is its subject, but because its structure is informed by an experience of that rite's integrating power. Its dramatic progress bears witness to and recreates the effects of a ritual experience upon the speaker's sense of reality. It is a *rite de passage* which effects a deepening of his relation to all aspects of his universe—natural, social, supernatural.

Bearing this in mind, we proceed with our argument. Supernatural beings animate the landscape of the outer triads. But Cynthia, Juno, Genius, and the nameless powers of high heaven are more quintessentially supernatural than muses, nymphs, and graces. The ritualistic activities of the nymphs in stanza 3 are pretty and ornamental compared to the awful solemnities instituted by Juno (see stanza 22), of which they are nevertheless an aspect. "Eternally bind thou this lonely band" in the latter stanza recalls "Bound truelove wize with a blew silke riband" in the earlier; the mutual rhyme with "hand" reinforces the echo. But we understand the true nature of the lovely band better at the end. The profusion of flowers in stanza 3 is decorative merely until brought in to relation with the prevalence of fruit in stanza 22. A similar tie exists between stanzas 4 and 21, though they are a less obvious pairing than others. There are, of course, verbal echoes: "spie" at line 66 and "spy" at line 377; the nymphs' "faces as the christall bright" (line 64) and Cynthia's "faire face, that shines so bright" (line 373). But, as the last of these suggests, the chief relation between the two stanzas seems to be one of heightening again, this time of an awareness of the goddess's attendants to a vision of the goddess herself.<sup>19</sup> The reality of chastity as an ordering principle in nature is, in the *Epithalamion*, first seen through a glass darkly, with the self-mirroring virginal nymphs in stanza 4, and then apprehended directly with the epiphany of the maiden goddess (herself, however, no stranger to love) whom they serve.

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<sup>19</sup> Heatt (*Short Time*, pp. 22-26) matches stanza 4 with stanza 15, associating fish-tending nymphs with Venus (exalted in Pisces) and wolf-chasing ones with Phoebus (Apollo Lykeios). But surely the association of both wood and water nymphs with Dian is simpler and more obvious. Since we are dealing with Irish rivers, lakes and forest, we have a perfect analogue in the Molanna story of *Fairie Queene* VII.7.

An acute awareness of "time" pairs stanzas 5 and 20. As the action of the poem moves on, so time moves on, too. The time of the poem is a continuum of opportunities. It is of pressing importance to the decorum of the rite that all opportunities which arise are punctually grasped, that all things are done at the right time. Hence the urging of the bride to "awake; for it is time" (stanza 5) corresponds with the allusion to "tymely sleep, when it is tyme to sleepe" (stanza 20); so also, the speaker's anxious "why doe you sleepe thus long" (line 85) in the morning is related to his resigned "it will soone be day" (line 369) at night, for in both cases his attitude is imbued with a sense of temporal limitations. The difference in tone between his initial anxiousness and his final cheerful resignation is again the difference between an ordinary attitude and an attitude transformed by the marriage rite. There are other connections between these two stanzas also. The elaborately noisy concert of birds in the earlier stanza contrasts with the "stil Silence" and "sacred peace" of the later. Like the birds in stanza 5, who are twice called "merry," the cupids hovering over the bridal bed in stanza 20 are engaged in "merry play."<sup>20</sup> Finally, those cupids themselves are described in terms that clearly suggest the earlier birds: they are "winged" and "fethered," they "fly," they "flutter," they are like "doues."<sup>21</sup>

As the birds and cupids related stanzas 5 and 20, so the muses, nymphs, graces and hours of stanza 6 match the sprites, ghosts, hobgoblins and witches of stanza 19. Extrinsic evidence exists to confirm the parallel; Hobbinol's second speech in the June eclogue of *The Sphepheardes Calender* (lines 17-32) consists of two stanzas in exactly analogous contrast; there are witches and ghosts, ravens and owls in the first, graces and nymphs and muses in the second. Also, in the classical wedding tradition it is exactly the presence of graces which effectively bans birds and sprites of ill omen.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, these two stanzas are perhaps the

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<sup>20</sup> C. S. Lewis points out that "joy does not begin to pass into merriment . . . till strophe five." (*English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, Oxford, 1954; p. 373).

<sup>21</sup> Heatt may be right in observing that, typically, the Renaissance *amoretti* are "boys," and he cites *Fairie Queene* IV.10.42 as evidence. But the comparison of the two passages immediately reveals that the *Epithalamion* stanza is precisely *not* iconographically typical.

<sup>22</sup> Spenser may, in fact, be taking a hint from Tereus's wedding to Procne in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where owl and furies appear at the wedding precisely *because* the graces had not been invited. Cf. Golding's translation: "At this match . . . / Was neither Juno, president of manage went to bee / Nor Hymen, nor any of all the graces three. / The Furies made the Bridegroomes bed. And on the house did rucke / A cursed Owle the messenger of ill successe and lucke." (VI.547-53)

poem's central discussions of metaphysical "good" and "evil." The characterization of the hours as making and maintaining "al that soeuer in this world is fayre" surely has metaphysical overtones, related ultimately to the "eterne in mutabilitie" of the Gardens of Adonis; and there are repeated hints of the doctrine of the *privatio boni* in the vocabulary of stanza 19—the "deluding" unreality of dreams, the "names whose sence we see not" of the goblins, the terror of "things that be not"; in other words, the whole machinery of Archimago. The epithets of the two stanzas make their own point: "fair" (thrice), "goodly," "bright," and "sweet," against "dolefull," "dreadful," "griesly," "unpleasant," and "drery." The latter characterize the everlasting nightscape of hell, fitfully illuminated by lightning; the former, Jove's eternally alternating paradise of Day and Night. Finally, the "dreames" from which the bride awakes in stanza 6 match the "deluding dreams" interdicted in stanza 19.

Stanzas 7 and 18 both contain formal invocations. In the first, the bride is finally "all ready"; in the second, the bridal couple are at last alone. The first invokes Phoebus, father of the Muse, enjoining him to let his "lifull heat not feruent be"; the second invokes Night, mother of Majesty, enjoining her to be "calme and quietsome, /Without tempestuous storms or sad affray." The transformation of the almost egotistical note of the first invocation ("let this one day be myne") to the communal note of the first person plural in the second ("in thy sable mantle us enwrap") is again a measure of the way in which the ceremony is integrating and transforming the speaker. The two stanzas are also related by the fact that stanza 7 for the first time mentions the human participants in the procession ("virgins" and "fresh boyes" in lines 111-12) and stanza 18 mentions them for the last time in the poem ("mayds and yongmen" in line 332).

The single structural detail of the *Epithalamion* which has received universal attention is the change of refrain at the end of stanza 17. It indicates the cessation of a certain kind of music in the poem. But a fact which has, so far as I know, never been made much of is that the music which here ceases is of a specific nature. The poem has, after all, both its heard and its unheard melodies; what ends here is the former, the terrestrial, acoustically "real" song of the human wedding attendants. This has its beginning in stanza 8, and a very emphatic beginning it is. Minstrels "shrill aloud," pipe, tabor, croud, and timbrel resound. Stanza 8 is the unmistakable origin of a vocal and instrumental music which ends at stanza 17. And the verbal echoes of "damsel" and "delight" signal its commencement and conclusion: "But most of

all the Damzels doe delite" (line 133) becomes "Now cease ye damsels your delights forepast " (line 296).

This brings us to the inner triads which enclose the altar ceremony. We have noted moon and evening star in stanzas 9 and 16. On a secondary plane, Phoebe in the former is evidently also a foil to Phoebus in the latter, her "chamber of the East" corresponding to his dwelling in the "Western fome." Where she is rising, he is urged to set. If lines 149-50 ("Like Phoebe from her chamber of the East, /Arysing forth to run her mighty race") are, as seems likely, a reminiscence of Psalm 19: 4-5, they are further related to the setting sun in the sixteenth stanza, since in the psalm it is the bridegroom-sun who runs his mighty race. Perhaps the two stanzas are also tied by the way in which the image of the bride (maidenly like Phoebe), looking "vpon the lowly ground" and abashed by the many "gazers," suggests the image of Venus (lovely like the bride), looking cheerfully "from aboue," "ioying in the sight" of the glad many.

Stanzas 10 and 15, in the middle of their respective triads, are connected by being explicitly addressed to the "merchants maidens" on one hand, and the "yong men of the towne" on the other. If in the former we find the closest approximation to a sheerly erotic description of the bride, we find in the latter, as Professor Heatt notes<sup>23</sup>, the closest approximation to fescinnine humor on the part of the bridegroom: "But for this time it ill ordained was, /To chose the longest day in all the years, /And shortest night, when longest fitter weare " (lines 270-72). Finally, the movement of the phrase "declining daily by degrees" (line 267) seems to contrast that of "ascending vppe with many a stately stayre" (line 189).

Stanzas 11 and 14 are both under the proximate shadow of the sacred ceremonies. Appropriately, the first celebrates the saintliness of the bride, the second, the holiness of the wedding day. It is evident that such an association is not foreign to Spenser's mind, for we find a similar conceit in *Amoretti* XXII, where the holiness of the day and season are immediately associated with the virtue of the mistress. At any rate, in these stanzas of the *Epithalamion*, heavenly things are foremost in the speaker's consciousness; the bride's nature "garnisht with heauenly guifts" matches the bridegroom's fortune, for he is a man "whom

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<sup>23</sup> *Short Time*, p. 58.

heaven would heape with blis." Lastly, we note that the earlier stanza takes place in a street, the later in a banquet hall. These are both social settings. Their positions in the poem are again symbolic of the integrating power of the marriage rite. Before that rite, the speaker has found himself among the detached gazers or spectators on the pavement; after it, he is among the participants of, himself participating in, the love feast of the community. That banquet is a licentious, almost a Dionysian affair—the self control of the bride in stanza 11 guarantees the inoffensiveness of the later license.

In the second half of the poem we have witnessed the transformation of the bridegroom-speaker's entire universe: of the supernatural, from ancillary and subordinate nymphs and muses to overpowering and primary divinities; of nature, from decorative flowers and birds to vital fruit and portentous animals (even the croaking frogs affect us more directly than the stylized ouzels and larks); and of society, from the street to the banquet. Wonderingly, the speaker has returned from the altar, revisiting with opened eyes the universe which he has traversed on his way to it. In the altar stanzas we are given the efficient cause of that change, the ceremonies "which endlesse matrimony make." Within the church we have nature (flower garlands, roses, snow), we have society (maidens and choristers), we have the supernatural (angels). The two middle stanzas are a paradigm of the entire poem, and as we move from the human anthem in stanza 12 to the heavenly alleluia in stanza 13, we see recreated in miniature the transformations of the entire procession. The church of these two stanzas is the sacred space in which all time is seminally implicit. The center of the poem's territory is the *telos* of its movement. The node of symbolic structure is in intimately generative relationship to the literal meaning.

I know of no referential key to the structure of this poem, Heatt's included, which yields as rich a harvest of interrelations as the simple assumption that the action of the poem itself is a clue to that structure. This is not to imply that the modern discovery of a philosophical master conception regarding time and its operations is irrelevant or unimportant—in fact, much of what I have said should reinforce such a master conception. Perhaps a sketchy outline may here be appended to indicate how contributions like Heatt's can enter into relation with the structural patterns here discussed. It seems clear from modern treatments of the *Epithalamion's* numerological dispositions that the wedding day is a microcosmic image of the earthly year. The marriage rite occurs not only roughly at noon of the day, but at the summer solstice, the noon of the year, as it were. The sinking of the day into

night in the concluding stanzas is also the declining of the year after the solstice. Now the direction of these concluding stanzas is outward and away from the altar—as far out as the heavenly palaces of eternity. But as we have seen, in a very real sense these stanzas at all points look back inward, toward the ceremony. This simultaneity of opposed directions is of course closely related to the extraordinary tensiveness of the poem's conclusion, to the fact that, despite reaching its peripety and its highpoint in the middle, the poem does not end anti-climatically.<sup>24</sup> Has not this tensiveness another symbolic dimension? Since the rite is at noon, during the solstice, in a month under the zodiacal sign of the Crab, do not the stanzas after that turning point have exactly the same simultaneously forward and retrograde intention as the month and the declining year themselves, somewhat as Spenser describes it in the personification of June in *Mutability's* pageant (*Fairie Queene* V11.7.35) :

Vpon a Crab be rode, that him did beare  
 With crooked crawling steps an vncouth pace,  
 And backward yode, as Bargemen wont to fare  
 Bending their force contrary to their face.

These stanzas, too, bend their force contrary to their face. With all his elaborate numerological symbolifications, time's static models, Spenser never loses the concrete *feel* of time, its dynamic aspect. It is the feel of all time, and the feel of a specific time, that we get throughout the *Epithalamion*. It is the feel of marriage time.

As the Renaissance Laureate of Time, Spenser may have no peers, but he certainly has company: Drayton, Daniel, the lyric Shakespeare, Davies and the rest. But, as C. S. Lewis has reminded us, he is unique as the Renaissance Laureate of Marriage. The *Epithalamion* is a unique poem and its author's uniqueness not surprisingly appears most strikingly when he is writing of his own marriage. A look at Osgood's *Concordance* shows that Spenser felt a peculiar gravitation of the marriage theme to words like "solemn," "solemnity," and "solemnize." Over one third of his many uses of these words occur with reference to weddings. The *Epithalamion's* remarkable fusion of intimacy and formality, of geniality and stateliness, seems to me closely related to the evident fact that when Spenser discussed the most intimate

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<sup>24</sup> As critics unresponsive to the poem's structure have sometimes felt; cf. Thomas M. Green, "Spenser and the Epithalamic Tradition," *Comparative Literature* IX (Summer, 1957) p.

human relationship, he found the force of its intimacy directly proportional to its ceremonial solemnity. This is what makes him more than a love poet—a marriage poet. To our age, when the closest approximation to nuptial solemnity and ritual are parades of pinkly uniformed bridesmaids, clutching embarrassed floral arrangements, Spenser's ideal may seem quixotic. We are inclined, in the words of Marianne Moore, to view "the ritual marriage, / augmenting all its lavishness" with skepticism, dismiss the Spenserian ideal as an "amalgamation of which can never be more / than an interesting impossibility."<sup>25</sup> Perhaps our understanding of Spenser's marriage ode can never be complete and instinctive till we have got over that. If we ever do, the above argument will be so unnecessary that we may find ourselves back with Saintsbury and James Russell Lowell talking about Lyrical Flow and Majesty of Numbers.

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<sup>25</sup> "Marriage," *Collected Poems* (New York, 1951).