

Toadstool Poetics: Alliteration in *The Faerie Queene*

If, in *The Shepheardes Calender*, Colin Clout's evocation of the "formall rowmes" of the honeycomb suggests Spenser's pursuit of a rational, classical poetics, then what are we to make of their displacement by "the grieslie Todestoole growne"? This article proposes that Spenser's usurping "Todestoole" – as a twin image to Harvey's "HOBGOBLIN runne away with the Garland from APOLLO" – fixes in view *The Faerie Queene's* deviations from honeycomb order, and specifically its proliferous alliteration. It shows how sixteenth-century censure of alliteration was grounded in the tenets of classical rhetoric; it then explores the evidence for an incipient awareness and, eventually, qualified acceptance of the role played by alliteration in vernacular metre. Having in this way shown that alliteration, in the period's own literary-critical discourse, was more vulgar "Todestoole" than Apolline honeycomb, this article offers a reading of alliteration in *The Faerie Queene* as generative of Spenser's "toadstool poetics". Reducible neither to narrative nor metric functions, Spenser's alliterative patterns – entangled, irregular, and prone to excess – habitually overrun forms of honeycomb containment.

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In the December eclogue of *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579), Spenser's shepherd-cum-poet, Colin Clout, reflects on the progress of his poetic and pastoral career:

Where I was wont to seeke the honey Bee,

Working her formall rowmes in Wexen frame:
 The grieslie Todestoole growne there mought I see
 And loathed Paddocks lording on the same.¹

Since Northrop Frye, in 1963, asserted that there is likely “a touch of Spenser himself in Spenser’s admiration for the honey bee ‘Working her formall rowmes in Wexen frame’”, scholars have pointed to the parallels between the creative processes of the bee and Spenser’s own, often noting how the honeycomb offers an analogue for the careful order and attention to proportion manifest in the structure of the *Calender* and other of Spenser’s poems.² Judith Dundas sets her analysis of the “honeycomb of structure” underpinning the “dissolvings and reformings” of images in *The Faerie Queene* in the context of apian symbolism in Renaissance literary culture, reminding us of how the bee provided a model for the humanist poet tasked

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¹ Edmund Spenser, *The Shorter Poems*, ed. Richard A. McCabe (London; New York: Penguin, 1999), 150.

² Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1963), 69; Paul Alpers, “The Eclogue Tradition and the Nature of Pastoral”, *College English* 34, no. 3 (1972): 352-371 (366); Kathleen Williams, “Spenser and the Metaphor of Sight”, in *Renaissance Studies in Honor of Carroll Camden*, ed. J. A. Ward (Houston: Rice University Press, 1974), 153-169 (156-57); Richard Mallette, “Spenser’s Portrait of the Artist in *The Shepheardes Calender* and *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*”, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 19, no. 1 (1979): 19-41 (26); M. L. Stapleton, “Spenser, the ‘Antiquitez de Rome’, and the Development of the English Sonnet Form”, *Comparative Literature Studies* 27, no. 4 (1990): 259-274 (270); Patrick Cheney, *Spenser’s Famous Flight: A Renaissance Idea of a Literary Career* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 106; also, “Genre: The Idea and Work of Literary Form”, in *A Companion to Renaissance Poetry*, ed. Catherine Bates (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 183-197 (190); editorial note to II. ix. 51 in Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed., A. C. Hamilton et al. (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 244. All verse quotations from *The Faerie Queene*, cited in the text parenthetically, refer to this edition.

with gathering nectar from the flower garden of classical literature.³ Seneca's instruction to "follow [...] the example of the bees", who "arrange and sort in their cells all [the nectar] they have brought in", was at the centre of this skein of early modern bee iconography, but humanist poets were further influenced by the Pindaric tradition which associated bees with Apollo and with the power of prophesy.⁴ To identify Spenser with his "honey Bee" is thus to foreground the poet's self-conscious classicism, casting him in the mould of "that same gentle Spirit" in

³ Judith Dundas, *The Spider and the Bee: The Artistry of Spenser's Faerie Queene* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 2-4, 193.

⁴ Unless otherwise specified, I use the Loeb Classical Library editions of all classical texts. Seneca, *Epistulae Morales*, lxxxiv.3. Cf. Horace, *Horace: Odes IV and Carmen Saeculare*, ed. Richard F. Thomas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 2. 27-32: "I, after the way and manner of the Matinian bee, that gathers the pleasant thyme laboriously around full many a grove and the banks of well-watered Tiber, I, a humble bard, fashion my verses with incessant toil". Both the Senecan and Horatian examples figured in discussions concerning the poet's imitative practices throughout the Renaissance. On this, see Carol Everhart Quillen, *Petrarch, Augustine, and the Language of Humanism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 133-134; also, Ita MacCarthy, *The Grace of the Italian Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, Jan 2020), 133-39. In his *Pythian Odes*, Pindar refers to the Oracle of Delphi (the vehicle of Apollo's prophesy) as "the Delphic Bee", see Pindar, *Pythian* 4.61; cf. *Pythian* 10.54. On the "common *topos*" of an infant's mouth being visited by a swarm of bees, see Meyer Shapiro, "Leonardo and Freud: An Art-Historical Study" in *Renaissance Essays*, ed. Paul Oskar Kristeller and Philip P. Wiener (New York: Harper & Row, 1968; repr. Rochester: Rochester University Press, 1992), 303-336 (311). On "the 'bee-poet' trope" in Pindar, and its connections with Apollo and prophesy, see Nancy Worman, *Landscape and the Spaces of Metaphor in Ancient Literary Theory and Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 152. On Pindar and Spenser, see Stella P. Revard, "Pindar," in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A. C. Hamilton et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990; repr., Oxford: Routledge, 1996), 543-44.

The Teares of the Muses (c. 1580) “from whose pen / Large streames of honnie and sweete Nectar flowe”.⁵

It is also to identify Spenser’s poetics with those of the honeycomb, a structure that early modern writers construed as an exemplar of rational ingenuity. In *Euphues and his England* (1580), John Lyly commends the bees’ “combes”: “*Dedalus* could not with greater arte or excellencie, better dispose the orders, measures, proportions, distinctions, ioyntes, & circles”.⁶ Lyly’s bee rivals Daedalus, the paradigmatic craftsman of Greek mythology. His appeal to the language of practical geometry at the same time suggests the esteem in which the honeycomb had long been held amongst poets and natural philosophers who, since antiquity, had speculated on the mechanism underwriting its beauty and economy.⁷ Heirs to this line of

⁵ Spenser, *The Shorter Poems*, 197. The apian imagery continues into the following lines as Thalia describes how the bee-like “Spirit” “Doth rather choose to sit in idle Cell” than pander to the debased tastes of his time.

⁶ John Lyly, *The Complete Works*, ed. R. Warwick Bond, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), 2: 45. Cited in Dundas, *The Spider and the Bee*, 2. Cf. Michael Drayton, “The Quest of Cynthia”, in *The Works of Michael Drayton*, ed. J. William Hebel, 5 vols. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1932) 3: 147-154 (153):

The waxen Pallace of the Bee,
 We seeking will surprise
 The curious workmanship to see,
 Of her full laden thighs.

Wee’ll suck the sweets out of the Combe,
 And make the gods repine:
 As they doe feast in Joves great roome,
 To see with what we dine.

⁷ Virgil wrote of the bee’s “divine intelligence”, and Pliny of the men who devoted their lives to the observation of apian industry. The influential fourth-century mathematician, Pappus of Alexandrine, proposed that “a certain geometrical forethought” must be nascent to the bee. For these references and more, see D’Arcy Wentworth

enquiry, early modern natural philosophers studied what Elizabethan entomologist, Thomas Moffet, described as the honeycomb's "skilful Architecture", the cells of which "are tyed to a strict Geometrical form".⁸ In the seventeenth century, Johannes Kepler and Thomas Browne adduced the comb's hexagonal structure in support of a Neoplatonist theory of cosmic order – as evidence that God patterned the world mathematically.⁹ The Platonic source for these ideas was the cosmological myth of the *Timaeus*; its influence on early modern natural philosophy, as well as on the period's aesthetic and poetic ideals, is well-known.¹⁰

To find in Spenser's image of "the honey Bee, / Working her formall rowmes in Wexen frame" a self-reflexive metaphor for poetic creation is therefore to emphasise how Spenser, in dialogue with contemporary literary and cosmological orthodoxies, cultivated a poetics oriented towards proportional, even geometrical, form. It is to see him as a poet who, in Frye's analysis, "thinks inside regular frameworks", and whose verse innovations, as M. L. Stapleton argues, reflect a predilection for "sequences and order".¹¹ In his reading of the *Calender* as "a

Thompson, *On Growth and Form*, ed. and abr. John Tyler Bonner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961; repr. 2014), 108-9.

⁸ Thomas Moffet, "The Theater of Insects: or, Of lesser living Creatures", in Edward Topsel, *The History of Four-footed Beasts and Serpents* (London, 1658), 889-1130 (895). Moffet's work, completed by 1590 and left in manuscript at the time of the author's death, was first published in Latin as *Insectorum sive Minimorum Animalium Theatrum* in 1634. See Victor Houlston, 'Moffet [Moufet, Muffet], Thomas (1553-1604)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁹ See Johannes Kepler, *The Six-Cornered Snowflake*, trans. Colin Hardie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), esp. 17-19; Sir Thomas Browne, "The Garden of Cyrus", in C. A. Patrides, ed., *The Major Works* (London: Penguin, 1977), 317-388 (355); Wentworth Thompson, *On Growth and Form*, 107-9.

¹⁰ See S. K. Heninger, *Touches of Sweet Harmony: Pythagorean Cosmology and Renaissance Poetics* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1974), as well as the works cited in n13, below.

¹¹ Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 69; Stapleton, "Spenser, the 'Antiquitez de Rome', and the Development of the English Sonnet Form", 270.

self-conscious portrait of the Spenserian artist”, Richard Mallette notes how the phrase “formall rowmes” alludes to the derivation of the term “stanza” from the Italian word for “room”, and that elsewhere in the poem “frame” is used in relation to versification.¹² This meticulous poet, who proportions his stanzas as the bee does its “rowmes,” is likewise the Spenser revealed by the many critical works which have analysed his verse through the lens of literary Neoplatonism and numerology, and in relation to the humanist revival of classical, quantitative metres.¹³ Insofar as honeycomb form translates into a rhetorical mode, it is perhaps best expressed in what classical rhetoric considered the “middle style”, characterised by such calculated “ornamental symmetries” as parison, isocolon, parallelism, antithesis and the rhetorical period.¹⁴ As Russ McDonald points out, sixteenth-century humanists especially valued these schemes for their instantiation, at the level of syntax, of the cosmic and

¹² Mallette, “Spenser’s Portrait of the Artist in *The Shepheardes Calender* and *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*”, 26.

¹³ For an analysis of Spenserian form vis-à-vis Neoplatonism and numerology, see, e.g., A. Kent Hieatt, *Short Time’s Endless Monument: The Symbolism of Numbers in Edmund Spenser’s “Epithalamion”* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960); Alastair Fowler, *Spenser and the Numbers of Time* (London: Routledge, 1964); *Triumphal Forms: Structural Patterns in Elizabethan Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 161-73; Carol V. Kaske, “Spenser’s ‘Amoretti and Epithalamion’ of 1595: Structure, Genre, and Numerology”, *English Literary Renaissance* 8, no. 3 (1978): 271-95; S. K. Heninger, *Sidney and Spenser: The Poet as Maker* (Pennsylvania; London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 307-95. On Spenser and the quantitative movement, see Derek Attridge *Well-Weighed Syllables: Elizabethan Verse in Classical Metres* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 188-92, 196-97; David Scott Wilson-Okamura, *Spenser’s International Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 37-49.

¹⁴ On these “ornamental symmetries” as indices of the “middle style”, see Wilson-Okamura, *Spenser’s International Style*, 81-88.

Neoplatonist ideals of order and harmony.¹⁵ It is this classically-inspired, “honey Bee” Spenser that emerges wherever we find “symmetry” in his repetitions, “harmony” in his intensive sonic patterning, and “unity” in his design.¹⁶

Yet, in these lines from the *Calender*, Spenser sets Colin’s admiration for the honeycomb in a landscape that lacks its ordered form. Where the hive once was is now “The grieslie Todestoole growne” with “loathed Paddocks lording on the same”. With the exception of Kathleen Williams (who interprets these tokens of “corruption, ugliness, decay” as “farewells to poetry and all life”), those who have read Spenser’s honeycomb as an analogue for a proportionate poetics have not considered the narrative of displacement and disfigurement that is its context.¹⁷ Thus, it has so far gone unnoticed that Spenser’s “grieslie Todestoole” held significance in early modern literary culture, too, albeit in the context of a different, oppositional, generic tradition. In this period, toadstools were associated with fairies and the diminutive beings of folklore.¹⁸ A “puckfist” was another name for a toadstool (a “puck” being a mischievous sprite or hobgoblin), and the ring-like formations in which toadstools perennially

¹⁵ See Russ McDonald, “Compar or parison: measure for measure”, in *Renaissance Figures of Speech*, ed. Sylvia Adamson, Gavin Alexander and Katrin Ettenhuber (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 39-58 (50).

¹⁶ Although today we use these terms quite automatically to describe the effect of patterns of repetition and variation in poetry, we must not forget that in the sixteenth century they belonged to a normative critical apparatus aimed at securing the analogy between the artist’s ordered work and the divinely proportioned world. On this analogy, see Heninger, *Touches of Sweet Harmony*.

¹⁷ Williams, “Spenser and the Metaphor of Sight”, 156-57.

¹⁸ Vivian Thomas and Nicki Faircloth, *Shakespeare’s Plants and Gardens: A Dictionary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 232, 337. According to Thomas and Faircloth, while “toadstool” was used synonymously with “mushroom”, toadstools were more consistently associated with “the world of magic” (337).

appear were reputed to mark the site of fairy activity.¹⁹ Importantly, consonant with Spenser's portrayal of the "grieslie Todestoole" as antithetical to the bee's "formall rowmes", the oral folkloric tradition with which toadstools were allied was often constructed in antagonistic relation to classical literature and learning.²⁰ If the honey bee was recruited to a humanist pedagogy as a model for classical emulation and inspiration, then the toadstool was relegated to what Desiderius Erasmus, in line with other early sixteenth-century educators, deemed "the old wives' fairy rubbish" that must be kept out of the schoolroom.²¹

As Spenser scholars have long understood, Gabriel Harvey's censure of an early draft of *The Faerie Queene* is rooted in precisely this binary. In a 1580 letter, he rebukes Spenser's choice of subject, arguing that to prefer "the FAERYE QUEENE" over the classical "NINE MUSES" is to let "HOBGOBLIN runne away with the Garland from APOLLO".²² Harvey, perhaps more so than Spenser himself, willed Spenser to be his "Honey bee"; the poet who

¹⁹ As in Ben Jonson, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, ed. Helen Ostovich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), at 1.2.159: "This clod? A whoreson puckfist? O God, God, God, God!". See also, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "puckfist, n.", accessed December 1, 2020. On Shakespeare's allusions to the magic of toadstool rings, see Thomas and Faircloth, *Shakespeare's Plants and Gardens*, 232, and Todd Andrew Borlik, *Ecocriticism and Early Modern English Literature: Green Pastures* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 119.

²⁰ See Mary Ellen Lamb, "Gloriana, Acrasia, and the House of Busirane: Gendered Fictions in *The Faerie Queene* as Fairy Tale", in *Worldmaking Spenser: Explorations in the Early Modern Age*, ed. Patrick Cheney and Lauren Silberman (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 81-100, for an account of the opposition between classical and folkloric literary traditions in the context of the "highly masculinized culture of the schoolroom" (83-84).

²¹ Desiderius Erasmus, *De pueris statim ac liberaliter instituendis* (1529), as translated in Desiderius Erasmus, *Concerning the Aim and Method of Education*, ed. William Harrison Woodward (Carbondale: South Illinois University Press, 1964), 214.

²² Gabriel Harvey, "Spenser-Harvey Correspondence. 1579-80", in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1904) 1: 87-122 (116).

transforms the nectar of classical literature into a rational English poetics uncontaminated by the stuff of folklore. Gordon Teskey extrapolates Harvey's critique into rival "principles of form": where the "Olympian Apollo" is "beautiful, ideally proportioned, and sublime", the "fairy Hobgoblin" is "spirited, energetic, and unpredictable – and always stealing".²³ Working with Teskey's categories, we find that these same principles of form distinguished the grisly toadstool from the bee's formal rooms in early modern England. That the honeycomb was associated with classical and geometrical ideals we have already seen. By contrast, fungi – in addition to figuring in fairy lore – were characterised as "unpredictable" both in their growth patterns and potential toxicity (note the homophonic slippage between Spenser's "Todestoole growne" and a "groan" of pain or sickness).²⁴ The suddenness with which fungi were seen to materialise, and encroach upon pristine ground, made their presence uniquely discomfiting: hence the use of "toadstool" or "mushroom" as a disparaging term for a political usurper or upstart.²⁵ The same terms served, more broadly, as insults for any person whose physical or

²³ Gordon Teskey, *Spenserian Moments* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2019), 51.

²⁴ See Thomas and Faircloth, *Shakespeare's Plants and Gardens*, 232, 337; Michael Walkden, "'Excrements of the earth': Mushrooms in early modern England", Folger Shakespeare Library, accessed March 27 2020, <https://shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu/2019/08/20/mushrooms-in-early-modern-england-excrements-of-the-earth/>.

²⁵ See, e.g., *Thomas of Woodstock, Or, Richard the Second, Part One*, eds. Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 4.1.160-61: "and I do not join with thine uncles and turn traitor, would I might be turned to a toadstool!". In their notes to the same (136n160), Corbin and Sedge offer comparisons with George Chapman, *Bussy D'Ambois*, at 3.1.117: "Fortune's proud mushroom shot up in a night"; and Francis Bacon, *Sylva sylvarum: or A natural historie In ten Centuries [...]* (London, 1627), 140: "*Mushromes [...]* come vp so hastily; As in a Night: And yet they are Vnsowne. And therefore, such as are Vpstarts in State, they call, in reproch, *Mushromes*". See also, William Turner, "Preface" to *The seconde part of vülliam turners herball [...]* (Cologne, 1562): "Dark Doctores [...] which soddenly lyke todestolles stert vp Physicionen".

moral constitution was considered defective.²⁶ For the sixteenth-century physician, Thomas Cogan, the appearance of toadstools signified an imminent plague outbreak.²⁷

While this article is grounded in the same logic that drew Dundas and others into reading Spenser's "honey Bee / Working her formall rowmes in wexen frame" as a metapoetic image of verse artistry, rather than making the case for Spenser's honeycomb, it takes the "grieslie Todestoole growne" as an invitation to trace the poetics of *The Faerie Queene*. It is likely that Spenser had begun drafting *The Faerie Queene* at the point at which he was preparing the *Calender* for publication, and even possible that the displacement of the honeycomb by the toadstool in the *Calender*'s final eclogue anticipates the embrace of fairy themes that led to Harvey's accusation in 1580.²⁸ Yet, where Harvey's laureate hobgoblin has generally encouraged attention to Spenser's intertexts and narrative structure, the twin image of the usurping toadstool encourages attention to the textures of his verse.²⁹ This article asks how – by undercutting the logic that inspires analyses of Spenser via the honeycomb hermeneutic of proportion, symmetry and harmony – the analogy of the toadstool might reveal a Spenserian poetics which, in its patterning, grows more haphazardly, unpredictably – and perhaps, even, with a momentum akin to agency. I propose that Spenser's toadstool poetics

²⁶ Thomas and Faircloth, *Shakespeares's Plants and Gardens*, 337, give the example of Ajax to Thersites, an inferior warrior, in *Troilus and Cressida*, 2.1.21: "Toadstool! Learn me the proclamation".

²⁷ Thomas and Faircloth, *Shakespeare's Plants and Gardens*, 232.

²⁸ See the chronology as set out in Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, xiv-xv.

²⁹ Harvey's hobgoblin is often identified as a figure for the narrative structures of "romance", see, e.g., Richard Helgerson, "Tasso on Spenser: The Politics of Chivalric Romance", *The Yearbook of English Studies* 21 (1991): 153-167; Donald Cheney, "Narrative, Romance and Epic", in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1500-1600*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 200-219 (215-18); Teskey, *Spenserian Moments*, 22, 51-56; Tamsin Badcoe, *Edmund Spenser and the Romance of Space* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 119-132.

derive not only from a popular literary tradition which existed in uneasy relation to the project of sixteenth-century humanism, but also from those impulses in his verse which tend towards excessive proliferation, disproportion and infectious opportunism. Here, I concentrate on an aspect of Spenser's poetics which, being bound neither by the dictates of the poet's metre nor stanza, is peculiarly given to luxuriance and unpredictability: alliteration in *The Faerie Queene*.³⁰

Alliteration is one of the most prominent (yet critically understudied) characteristics of Spenser's poetics in *The Faerie Queene*.³¹ It is also the case that, in the literary circles of sixteenth-century England, opinions were divided as to whether alliteration had a place in what was routinely metaphorised as the "garden" of English eloquence or poetry.³² The repetition of words formed of the same letter did not feature in the taxonomies of rhetorical figures that early modernity inherited from classical rhetoric, and where description of a sound pattern resembling alliteration does appear – as in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* – it is presented only

³⁰ A longer study might seek to explore how, in addition to alliteration, other aspects of Spenser's style participate in his "toadstool poetics" – his orthographic irregularities, for instance, or licentious use of rhyme.

³¹ The last article or chapter to be written on alliteration in *The Faerie Queene* was R. J. Schoeck, "Alliteration as a Means of Stanza Connection in The Faerie Queene", *Modern Language Notes* 64, no. 2 (1949), 90-93, discussed in this article at 27.

³² On how the nation "becomes identified as a 'garden' or 'field' of eloquence" in early modern English rhetorical treatises, see chap. 1 ("Common Rhetoric: Planting Figures of Speech in the English Shire") in Jenny C. Mann, *Outlaw Rhetoric: Figuring Vernacular Eloquence in Shakespeare's England* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2012), 29-54 (31). On the connections between English poetry and gardening, see Susan C. Staub, "Dissembling his art: 'Gascoigne's Gardnings'", *Renaissance Studies* 25, no. 1 (2011): 95-110, and Rebecca W. Bushnell, *Green Desire: Imagining Early Modern English Gardens* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 90-93.

in negative terms, as a potential fault in *elocutio*.³³ In the eyes of many of Spenser's contemporaries, alliteration was an insipid affectation used especially, and improperly, by writers who were not invested in the humanist project of capturing, in English, the syntactic order of Greek and Latin literature. In *The Defence of Poetry* (c.1583; 1595), Philip Sidney refers to alliteration via the admonitory idiom "coursing of a letter", identifying the practice as one of the "spots of the common infection grown among the most part of writers".³⁴ With imagery that compares with Spenser's vision of the toadstool replacing the honeycomb, Sidney portrays alliteration as one of the disorders in "diction" which, having been allowed to spread unchecked, has despoiled the apian figure of "that honey-flowing matron Eloquence".³⁵ As Sidney saw it, contemporary literature, enfeebled by such "spots of the common infection", had gone "somewhat awry" and it was the task of his generation – by "bend[ing] to the right use both of matter and manner" – to bring English poetry in line with a classical model of proportion.³⁶

Still, we know from the literary texts of the period and of those that followed it that alliteration was neither excised from English writing, nor kept at the peripheries of acceptable rhetoric. In *The Faerie Queene* – published the decade after Sidney warned of the threatened

³³ Indeed, while I use it here, "alliteration" did not in fact feature among the various terms and idioms with which Spenser and his contemporaries referred to the phenomenon. Our "alliteration" seems only to have entered English print in the seventeenth century, although the Latin *alliteratio* was coined by Pontano in the late fifteenth century to describe the repetition of like syllables and consonants in classical Latin compositions. On this etymology, see Ian Cornelius, *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse: The Pursuit of a Medieval Metre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 28-9.

³⁴ Philip Sidney, "The Defence of Poesy", in *Sidney's "The Defence of Poesy" and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. Gavin Alexander (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 1-54 (49-51).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

status of honey-flowing eloquence – the “infection” of alliteration is rife. With this in mind, consider that Spenser’s “grieslie Todestoole growne” does not, as Williams says, betoken “farewells to poetry and all life”. Rather, the freshly grown fungal ecology models a different, perhaps stranger, formal system, one which, fomented by decay, lives on. In this, the concerns of this article interleave with the broader question of formal “open-endedness” in *The Faerie Queene*; a theme long discussed in Spenser scholarship in terms of the tension between the teleological thrust of “epic” and the more dilatory, decentred structures of “romance”.³⁷ A key difference here is one of scale. While the more universalising categories of “epic” and “romance” ask that we think outwards – across a text, texts, and a millennia-long tradition – the honeycomb and toadstool, as abstracted from Spenser’s own metapoetic musing, offer site-specific touchstones for attending to some of the peculiarities of small-scale Spenserian form.

This article falls into three parts. The first supplies a fuller context for late sixteenth-century English warnings against alliteration as framed by the discourses of classical and early modern rhetoric; the second explores the evidence for an incipient awareness and, towards the end of the century, qualified acceptance of the role played by alliteration in articulating the accentual metres of English poetry. Having in this way suggested that alliteration, in the context of the period’s own literary-critical discourse, was more vulgar toadstool than ordering honeycomb, the final and most substantial part of this article offers a reading of alliteration in *The Faerie Queene* as generative of Spenser’s toadstool poetics. It shows how the poem’s alliterative patterns are reducible neither to their narrative nor metric functions; rather –

³⁷ See, e.g., Patricia A. Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), esp. 54-113; Colin Burrow, *Epic Romance: Homer to Milton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 100-146; John M. Steadman, *Moral Fiction in Milton and Spenser* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 73-89; Patrick J. Cook, *Milton, Spenser and the Epic Tradition* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996). See also, n29 above.

entangled, irregular, and prone to excess – they habitually overrun types of formal limit. If the honeycomb refers us to Spenser at his most exacting and artificial, the toadstool points up those aspects of his verse which push against his honeycomb control.

I. ‘They do so hunt a letter to death’: Alliteration and Classical Rhetoric

In his 1579 epistle to *The Shepheardes Calender*, E. K. applauds the “worthiness” and “wittinesse” of “our new Poete”, Spenser, whose rational and “proportioned” calendrical poem he considers the antidote to the verses contrived by

the rakehellye route of our ragged rymers (for so themselues vse to hunt the letter)
which without learning boste, without iudgement iangle, without reason rage and fome,
as if some instinct of Poeticall spirite had newly rauished them aboue the meanenesse
of commen capacitie.³⁸

Parodying the classical concept of *furor poeticus*, E. K. inveighs against the popular, “ragged rymers” who, in their pursuit of alliterative patterns, “hunt the letter”. To E. K., such an alliterative mode is the symptom of the writer who, possessed of an irrational frenzy, has succumbed to the sheer possibilities of sound, neglecting to calculate the meaning of each of his words. This pejorative take on alliteration – and the accusation of “letter hunting” which was its marker – was commonplace in the final decades of the sixteenth century. In his *Certayne Notes of Instruction* (1575), George Gascoigne upbraids those poets who, knowing no other figure “than that whiche is expressed in repeticion of sundrie wordes beginning all with one letter”, “do so hunte a letter to death”.³⁹ The phrase reappears in Webbe’s poetic treatise (which

³⁸ E. K., “Epistle”, in Spenser, *The Shorter Poems*, 25, 28-29.

³⁹ George Gascoigne, “Certayne Notes of Instruction. 1575”, in Smith, ed., *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, 1: 46-57 (52).

quotes E. K. directly),⁴⁰ and it was a favourite of Harvey's.⁴¹ It likewise had a life on the early modern stage. Feeling his powers of pretence exhausted, Malevole, in *The Malcontent* (1604), concedes: "I can hunt the letter no further – [Aside] O God, how loathsome this toying is to me!"⁴² Shakespeare's Holofernes offers a variation on the hunting theme when, airing his "extemporal epitaph on the death of a deer", he resolves to "something affect the letter, for it argues facility".⁴³ Sidney, in the *Defence*, mocks those versifiers who compose "with coursing of a letter, as if they were bound to follow the method of a dictionary".⁴⁴ In *Astrophil and Stella* (c. 1580; 1591), he further ridicules: "You that do dictionary's method bring / Into your rhymes, running in rattling rows".⁴⁵ Here, as in E. K.'s rebuke of "our ragged rymers", a caricature of alliteration doubles as an attack on the popular rhyming verse with which it was associated, and which, as is well-known, humanist advocates for the reform of English verse viewed as a contemptible alternative to the intricate order of classical poetics.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ William Webbe, "A Discourse of English Poetrie. 1586", in Smith, ed., *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, 1: 226-302 (247).

⁴¹ Twice in "Spenser-Harvey Correspondence. 1579-80", 93, 126; also, Gabriel Harvey, "Pierce's Supererogation or A New Prayse of the Old Asse", in Smith, ed., *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, 2:245-282 (276). The fourth recorded instance in which Harvey uses the phrase is in his annotations to his copy of James VI's *The Essayes of a Prentise, in the Diuine Art of Poesie* (1584) and is discussed below (13).

⁴² John Marston, *The Malcontent*, ed. George K. Hunter (London: Methuen & Co., 1975; repr. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 5.3.43-44.

⁴³ The joke, presumably, is that he "hunts the letter" in a poem about hunting. See William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, ed. William C. Carroll (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4.2.45-50.

⁴⁴ Sidney, "The Defence of Poesy", 49.

⁴⁵ Sonnet 15, lines 5-6. See Sir Philip Sidney, *The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989; repr. 2002), 158.

⁴⁶ A useful overview of this debate is given in Richard Danson Brown, "'Charmed with inchaunted rimes': An Introduction", in *A Concordance to the Rhymes of The Faerie Queene*, ed. Richard Danson Brown and J. B.

With acid humour, these writers characterise an overreliance on alliteration as the vulgar cipher of true rhetorical and metrical technique. To be led by alliteration is to forfeit moderation, and so sacrifice the moral seriousness of one's composition. And yet, one detects in their remonstrations the recognition that the urge to "hunt the letter" is powerful, and the drawing out of alliterative patterns temptingly easy. As Holofernes avows, it "argues facility". In a 1579 letter to Spenser, Harvey quips that to match the length of his "Masterships" missives he must succumb to the same alliterative prolixity:

[...] in good soothe my poore Storehouse will presently affourd me nothing, either to recompence or counteruaile your gentle Masterships long, large, lauish, Luxurious, Laxatiue Letters withall (now, a Gods name, when did I euer in my life hunt the Letter before? but, belike, theres no remedie; I must needes be euen with you once in my dayes), [...] ⁴⁷

The analogy between alliteration and a disease in need of remedy is one we saw earlier; Sidney identifies alliteration as one of the spots of infection beleaguering English writing. But Harvey makes clear his own rhetorical virtuosity by showing alliteration as an agent of infection over which he has gained mastery. Though ostensibly a startling invasion ("a Gods name, when did I euer in my life hunt the Letter before?"), his alliterated "**long, large, lauish, Luxurious, Laxatiue Letters**" is really a witty illustration of his theme.⁴⁸ A similar rationale underlies E.

Lethbridge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 1-75 (3-9). See also, Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 19-40.

⁴⁷ Harvey, "Spenser-Harvey Correspondence. 1579-80", 93.

⁴⁸ In this article, my notation for identifying alliterative patterns is similar to that developed by Paul J. Hecht in "Letters for the Dogs: Chasing Spenserian Alliteration", *Spenser Studies* 25 (2010): 263-83: where I wish to identify more than one pattern in a portion of verse, I differentiate through the use of bold, italic and underline formatting.

K.'s denunciation of "the rakehellye route of our ragged rymers". The alliterated "r", far from being a genuinely errant element, is yoked firmly to the machinery of E. K.'s argument. Seen through the lens of classical rhetoric, it abides by the all-important rule of *decorum* in that it is proportionate to the disproportionate (or "ragged") poetics which are the object of E. K.'s critique.⁴⁹

Indeed, proportion is at the heart of E. K.'s literary argument in the epistle, and is crucial to how he distinguishes permissible alliteration from letter hunting. As modern scholars have noted, although E.K. condemns letter hunting, his own critical idiom is rich in alliterative patterns.⁵⁰ In the passage quoted above, alliteration highlights antitheses ("iudgement iangle"; "reason rage") and cements semantic units ("commen capacitie"). Similar patterns emerge in his paratextual commentary. Responding to a line of Spenser's – "for lofty loue doth loathe a lowly eye" – he remarks that he considers "this playing with the letter" to be "rather a fault than a figure".⁵¹ E. K.'s habit of forming alliterated pairs ("fault" "figure") differs from the alliteration of "for lofty loue doth loathe a lowly eye" both quantitatively and qualitatively. Presumably, being limited to a single repetition, it is protected from the charge of mindless excess. More than this, the propositional balance his alliterated pairs effect (often a binarised "x" or "y" scheme) models how sound patterns can sponsor logical thinking. Conversely, while it may have something to do with metre, the alliteration of "for lofty loue doth loathe a lowly eye" is neither obviously in the service of narrative nor in that of argumentative strategy. To E.

⁴⁹ On how the concept of *decorum* might, in some instances, encourage a "decorous, proportionate, breaking of measure", see Gavin Alexander, "Sidney, Scott and the Proportions of Poetics", *Sidney Journal* 33, no. 1 (2015): 7-28 (21-22). On *decorum* in early modern literary criticism more generally, see Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, I: xli-xlvi.

⁵⁰ Hecht, "Letters for the Dogs: Chasing Spenserian Alliteration", 269; Cornelius, *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse*, 150.

⁵¹ Spenser, *The Shorter Poems*, 131, 136.

K.'s eyes, it is unjustified, favouring directionless play over serious thinking. E. K. claims that Spenser here commits the fault "called Cacozelon" – the error in *elocutio* that Quintilian finds wherever "the mind shows a lack of judgement" and "goes beyond the demands of good style".⁵²

Certainly, E. K.'s overall admiration of Spenser, as well as his occasional wrist-slapping when he finds him in error, is informed by what Ian Cornelius calls his "exquisitely classical" approach to composition.⁵³ In the epistle, E. K. praises Spenser's "knitting of sentences", the "ioyns and members" of which, he says, make "al the compasse of the speech" "round without roughnesse, and learned without hardnes".⁵⁴ E. K. presents Spenser's syntax as an example of classical periodic composition, a way of structuring the clauses of a sentence so that they come together with a unity akin to a circuit, often forming the syntactic symmetries (parison, isocolon, parallelism, antithesis) associated with the "middle style".⁵⁵ Accordingly, Spenser's verse, on E. K.'s analysis, is "well grounded, finely framed, and strongly trussed vp together" (here his alliterative pairs contour a tricolon).⁵⁶ E. K.'s material metaphors are of a

⁵² Ibid., 136. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 8.3.56-58. In the same passage, shortly after explaining that "the same name [cacozelon] covers the turgid, the trivial, the luscious, the redundant, the farfetched, and the extravagant", Quintilian describes the "decadent style", a defining feature of which is "a childish hunt for similar or ambiguous words". Possibly, this phrase, "a childish hunt for similar or ambiguous words [*vocunt similibus aut ambiguarum puerile captatione*]", inspired the early modern idea that to alliterate is "to hunt the letter" (which, as far as I can tell, first appears in Gascoigne).

⁵³ Cornelius, *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse*, 150. The wrist-slapping idiom, as applied to E. K.'s treatment of Spenser, is also Cornelius's (151).

⁵⁴ E. K., "Epistle", 28.

⁵⁵ On periodic composition in the Renaissance, and its cultural resonances, see Janel Mueller, "Periodos: Squaring the Circle", in Adamson et. al., *Renaissance Figures of Speech*, 61-80.

⁵⁶ E. K., "Epistle", 28.

piece with the analogies between practical artisanry and sentence-making found in classical rhetorical treatises.⁵⁷ But what E. K. admires in the “ioyntns”, “members” and “roundnesse” of Spenser’s sentences is also precisely what Lyly admires in the “orders, measures, proportions, distinctions, ioyntes, & circles” of the honeycomb. Both periodic composition and the poetics of the honeycomb shape a syntax distinguished by boundedness and by the proportional alignment of discrete units. The honeycomb manifests in organic form what the rhetorical period manifests in words. Moreover, in contrast to the order achieved by the period, E. K. indicates that where the unrestrained pursuit of alliteration determines composition the result is a defective and disorderly syntax. His censure of the alliterative style of “our ragged rymers” is intended in direct comparison to his regard for Spenser’s periods. The poet’s “strongly trussed vp” sentences, in E. K.’s eyes, stand in elegant relief to the “loose, and as it were vngyrt” sentences manufactured by popular, letter hunting writers.⁵⁸ From the perspective of classical rhetoric, these looser formulations barely hold together.

The link that E. K. makes between letter hunting and “loose” syntax finds comic expression in Harvey’s caricature of Spenser’s “Laxatiue Letters”. This may reflect the influence of the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium* which was a mainstay of the early modern rhetorical curriculum.⁵⁹ Here, alliteration appears as a potential and unnamed error in

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *On Literary Composition*, 6; Hermogenes, *On Types of Style*, trans. Cecil W. Wooten (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 1.220; Cicero, *De Oratore*, III.xliii.171-72; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 7. Prooemium.1-2.

⁵⁸ E. K., “Epistle”, 28.

⁵⁹ On the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* in university teaching, see Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 51-52, 66. On the treatise’s influence in the period more broadly, see Peter Mack, *A History of Renaissance Rhetoric 1380–1620* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 14-15.

elocutio, and is associated with the fault of *hiatus*, a symptom of which is syntactic “gaping”.

The relevant passage reads:

we shall avoid the frequent collision of vowels, which makes the style harsh and gaping [...]. We shall also avoid the excessive recurrence of the same letter, and this blemish the following verse will illustrate – for at this juncture, in considering faults, nothing forbids me to use examples from others:

*O Tite, tute, Tati, tibi tanta, tyranne, tulisti.*⁶⁰

The authors of the first English rhetorics to offer a treatment of *elocutio* follow this example in that they likewise discuss alliteration consecutively to *hiatus* and in passages detailing the faults of style. They imply that repetition of identical consonants is of the order of faults which, like the jolt of the hiatus, disarrange good syntax. Richard Sherry, in *A treatise of Schemes & Tropes* (1550), cautions against “To much repetyng of all one letter in the beginning of wordes” immediately after advising against “to often comyng together of vowels, which make the oracion wyde and gapyng”.⁶¹ Thomas Wilson’s description of “overmuch repetition of some one letter” in *The Art of Rhetoric* (1553) proceeds similarly, except that Wilson’s understanding of the phenomenon more closely recalls the *Ad Herennium*. Like the example it gives from Ennius’ *Annals*, “**Tite, tute, Tati, tibi tanta, tyranne, tulisti**”, Wilson’s allegorisation of “**presumption [...] procuring his passport to post it to hell-pit, there to be punished with pains perpetual**” allows that the syllables internal to words, as well as a word’s initial letter, contribute to alliterative patterns.⁶² In the *Institutiones Rhetoricae* (1521), one of the most

⁶⁰ [Cicero], *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, IV.xii.18. The example quotation is from Ennius, *Annals*, I.54.104.

⁶¹ Richard Sherry, *A Treatise of Schemes & Tropes very Profytable for the Better Vnderstanding of Good Authors, Gathered Out of the Best Grammarians & Oratours by Rychard Sherry Londoner* (London, 1550), Ciiii^r.

⁶² Thomas Wilson, *The Art of Rhetoric* (1560), ed. Peter E. Medine (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1994), 193.

widely read contemporary rhetorics and a source for Sherry and Wilson, Philip Melanchthon warns against too much repetition of any one letter. In a departure from the *Ad Herennium*, however, Melanchthon specifies the individual letters (“m”, “s” and “r”) that should be used sparingly.⁶³ He likely adapts these subdivisions from Martianus Capella’s cautionary account of alliterative patterns in *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* (c. 400).⁶⁴ Another influential Latin work that touches on alliteration is Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies* (c. 615-636).⁶⁵ Though Isidore begins by citing Ennius’ “*O Tite tute Tati [...]*”, he subsequently qualifies: “But Vergil moderates this well, when he uses this figure not through the entire verse, like Ennius, but sometimes only at the beginning of a verse [...] and at other times at the end”.⁶⁶ As ever, the trick to alliteration is firm moderation.

Thus standing behind sixteenth-century criticism of letter hunting was a longstanding rhetorical tradition, classical in origin, which identified alliteration as a potential weakness in style and urged against its overuse. Harvey makes explicit reference to this tradition, via allusion to the example from Ennius, when he complains of Thomas Nashe’s alliterative tendencies: “Dare the pertest or deftest of you hunt the letter, or hauke a metaphor, with such

⁶³ Philip Melanchthon, *Part 2 Principal Writings on Rhetoric*, ed. William P. Weaver, Stefan Strohm and Volkhard Wels (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 157.

⁶⁴ See Martianus Capella, *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts*, trans. William Harris Stahl and Richard Johnson with E. L. Burge, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 2: “The Marriage of Philology and Mercury”, V.514.

⁶⁵ On the wide transmission of the *Etymologies* in the early modern period (both in manuscript and in print), see L. D. Reynolds, ed., *Texts and Transmission: A survey of the Latin classics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 194-96.

⁶⁶ Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney, et. al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Lxxxvi.14 (59).

a *Tite-tute-tate*?”⁶⁷ He proceeds to lament that in Nashe’s writing “a fine or neat period, in the dainty and pithy Veyne of Isocrates or Xenophon” is as rare as “a periwig of a Siren”.⁶⁸ Not only does Harvey’s travesty of Nashe imply, as E. K. does, an opposition between alliteration and classical, periodic composition (Isocrates had long been identified as an exemplar of the rounded and refined “middle style”⁶⁹, and Xenophon as the “Bee of Athens”⁷⁰). It also sets up an unfavourable parallel between Nashe’s writing and Ennius’, which Renaissance humanists considered disordered in comparison to Virgil’s high polish.⁷¹ Suffice to say that for Harvey – even more so, perhaps, than the others who mocked contemporary letter-hunters – to deride alliteration was at the same time to promote a compositional method distinguished by balance and boundedness, and so to differentiate one’s style from that of the “rakehellye route” of common writers.

⁶⁷ Harvey, “Pierce’s Supererogation or A New Prayse of the Old Asse”, 276. Cf. Harvey’s comparable attack on those who “hunte the letter” in “From Gabriel Harvey’s Letter Book” which is appended to “Spenser-Harvey Correspondence. 1579-80”, 126.

⁶⁸ Harvey, “Pierce’s Supererogation or A New Prayse of the Old Asse”, 277.

⁶⁹ After Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *On the Style of Demosthenes*, 3; Wilson-Okamura, *Spenser’s International Style*, 86; see also, Debora K. Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric: The Christian Grand Style in the English Renaissance* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 118-153, for a discussion of how the periodic sentences and syntactical symmetries with which Isocrates was associated came to be disparaged by early modern Christian orators for privileging smoothness and sweetness over moral seriousness.

⁷⁰ See *Xenophon’s “Cyropaedia”*, trans. William Barker, ed. Jane Grogan (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2020), 9; Vivienne Gray, “Xenophon’s Language and Expression”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Xenophon*, ed. Michael A. Flower (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 223-240 (227).

⁷¹ On how Renaissance writers perpetuated a “teleological narrative of literary history” which saw Virgil “as the peak of stylistic perfection and Ennius as an inferior but necessary stepping stone to the Aeneid”, see Nora Goldschmidt, “Absent Presence: pater Ennius in Renaissance Europe”, *Classical Reception Journal* 4, no. 1 (2012): 1-19 (4).

II. ‘Rarò et aptè’? Alliteration and the English Verse Line

Even so, Harvey’s ridicule of Nashe’s “*Tite-tute-tate*”-ing, and gentler parody of Spenser’s “Laxatiue Letters”, stands in contrast to a brief, but highly suggestive, comment he makes in the form of an annotation to his copy of James VI’s “The reulis and cavtelis to be observit and eschewit in Scottis *Poesie*” in *The Essayes of a Prentise, in the diuine Art of Poesie* (1584). Where James asks that “all zour verse be *Literall*” such that “the maist pairt of zour lyne, sall rynne vpon a letter”, Harvey adds: “Hunting of a letter, a green affectation ; but when it offereth itself, & floweth naturally. rarò et aptè”.⁷² While Harvey’s first impulse is to qualify James – he supplies the pejorative gloss “Hunting of a letter”, and labels the affectation as “green” (likely meaning that unexperienced or faddish writers tend to take to it) – with the next breath he concedes that there are occasions in which it can work “rarò et aptè [rarely and aptly]”. This concession is worth thinking about, especially as it occurs in a context where Harvey is moved to consider alliteration not in prose but in poetry.

Clearly, James’s endorsement of “*Literall*” verse sounds a different note to the far more cautious, and often entirely critical, appraisals of alliteration that were the norm amongst Harvey and his contemporaries.⁷³ As James sees it, “*Literall*” verse, which he also calls “*Tumbling* verse”, is well-suited to the genre of “flyting, or Inuectiues”. He quotes the contemporary poem, *The Flyting of Montgomerie and Polwart* (1584): “**F**etching fude for to **f**eid it **f**ast **f**urth of the **F**arie”.⁷⁴ This work, written by Alexander Montgomerie, a courtier to James, stages an exchange of abuses between the author and Patrick Hulme, drawing heavily

⁷² James VI, *The Essayes of a Prentise, in the diuine Art of Poesie* (Edinburgh, 1584), Mi^r. Harvey’s copy is in the Old Library of Magdalene College, Cambridge, shelf-mark Lect 26.

⁷³ James’s ‘*Literall*’ may also be the first anglicisation of Pontano’s *alliteratio*.

⁷⁴ James VI, *The Essayes of a Prentise*, Mi^r.

on folk beliefs. A stanza that James later excerpts tells how Hulme was conceived by an elf and an ape during a fairy cavalcade on Halloween.⁷⁵ Possibly, Harvey's more lenient position on alliteration here suggests his recognition that Montgomerie's poem, being concerned with such themes, does not aspire to classical purity in any case. Given his parody of Spenser's "Laxatiue Letters", perhaps Harvey also approves of alliteration as a vector for satire, as James does.

More revealing, however, are the criteria according to which Harvey judges an instance of alliteration to work "rarò et aptè", as when it "offereth itself" and "floweth naturally". Harvey's figurative terms seem to portray alliterative patterns as endemic to the English language. If, as the personification implies, there are occasions where alliteration offers itself and, once accepted, flows naturally, then its existence in language precedes the act of writing. On this reading, to hunt the letter is not to arrange language into something new, but to pursue the patterns of connection that exist in language natively. And there is more to be drawn out of Harvey's phraseology. His admission that alliteration, in some instances, flows naturally picks up on James's use of the same vocabulary in the passage Harvey here glosses. Regarding Montgomerie's metre, James states that "*Tumbling* verse flowis not on that fassoun as vtheris dois", in iambs ("the first fute short the secound lang"), but rather in a loose anapaestic structure ("twa short and ane lang [...] albeit the maist pairt of thame be out of ordour, & keipis na kynde nor reule of *Flowing*").⁷⁶ By incorporating the term with which James discusses metre ("*Flowing*") into his gloss on letter hunting, Harvey hints at a relationship between alliteration and the metric composition of the verse line. Might it be that "Hunting of a Letter [...] floweth naturally" when alliteration coincides with, or in some sense complements, what today we think of as the accentual pattern of English verse? Harvey may be attuned here, too, to the potential

⁷⁵ Ibid., Miiii^r.

⁷⁶ Ibid., Mi^r. Cornelius, *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse*, 132.

allusion inherent in James's use of the word "*Flowing*" in connection with versification: the Greek word for "rhythm" (*rhuthmos*), a quality understood to pertain to the verse line, derives from the verb "to flow" (*rheio*).⁷⁷ Harvey's specification that alliteration should "naturally" cohere with the verse line also suggests that he is associating alliteration with vernacular metre. In his 1579-80 correspondence with Spenser on how English verse might be reformed in accordance with classical, quantitative models, it is to the authority "our COMMON NATURAL PROSODYE" and "*natural* Mother PROSODYE" that he turns.⁷⁸ The idea of the natural was therefore at the heart of Harvey's thinking about prosody; it stressed the primacy of the common and established patterns of speech accent from which, in his view, the rules of versification should follow.⁷⁹

Harvey's comments in James's treatise point towards a tension in late sixteenth-century attitudes towards alliteration: rubbing up against the humanist resistance to letter hunting was, it seems, a naïve appreciation that alliteration not only inheres in the rhythms of the English language, but accords naturally with the accentual patterns of English poetry. While Gascoigne warned against immoderate alliteration, Susanne Woods and Gavin Alexander have observed that in his own poetry he makes plentiful use of alliteration, often deploying it to highlight the

⁷⁷ See the editors' note regarding George Puttenham's explanation of "what this *rithmos* was with the Greeks" as "a certain flowing utterance by slipper words and syllables [...]", in George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 167n7.

⁷⁸ "Spenser-Harvey Correspondence. 1579-80", 102, 121. My emphasis.

⁷⁹ See also, G. C. Moore Smith, ed., *Gabriel Harvey's Marginalia* (Stratford-upon-Avon: Shakespeare Head Press, 1913), 168, for Harvey's annotation to his copy of Gascoigne's *Certayne Notes* which affirms the precedence of "[t]he natural and ordinary Emphasis of every word". On how this suggests that Harvey "has understood Gascoigne's unusually perceptive remarks about accent", see Derek Attridge, *Well-weighed syllables*, 148n1.

stressed syllables of what we describe today as the accentual-syllabic verse line.⁸⁰ This stratagem is especially apparent in Gascoigne's satirical verses, further attesting to a sixteenth-century association between prominent alliteration and satire. In *The Steele Glas* (1576), for instance, Gascoigne gives us lines such as "when **Daue Diker diggs**, and **dallies** not", where the alliteration is synchronised with the iambic stress of the pentameter.⁸¹ Many of the poems in Gascoigne's *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres* (1573) show alliteration being used to a similar effect. It is to one of these poems that George Puttenham, in *The Art of English Poesy* (1589), refers in a discussion of alliteration that is, at first sight, conventional. In Book III, in a section relating the "vices in speeches and writing", Puttenham cites the following lines, adapted from Gascoigne's miscellany, to illustrate what happens when "our maker takes too much delight to fill his verse with words beginning all with a letter":

The **deadly drops** of **dark disdain**

Do daily drench my **due deserts**.⁸²

Like so many of his contemporaries, Puttenham warns against excessive alliteration.⁸³ Reprising familiar themes, he evokes the idea of authorial intemperance (taking "too much delight") and laments that "[m]any of our English makers use it too much".⁸⁴ But Puttenham's

⁸⁰ Susanne Woods, *Natural Emphasis: English Versification from Chaucer to Dryden* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1984), 106-7; Gavin Alexander, "Grammar, Prosody, and the Place of Accent in Elizabethan Criticism", in *The Places of Early Modern Criticism*, ed. Gavin Alexander, Emma Gilby, and Alexander Marr (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

⁸¹ George Gascoigne, *The Steele Glas A Satyre co[m]piled by George Gascoigne Esquire* (London, 1576), Hiii^v.

⁸² Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, 340.

⁸³ On Puttenham's "mysterious" use of the term "*Tautologia*" (tautology) to describe this fault, see the editors' notes, *ibid.*, 413n16.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 341.

treatise, printed later than those so far discussed, also emphasises the potential for a positive relationship between alliteration and metre. In this same passage, he adds:

yet we confess it doth not ill but prettily becomes the meter, if ye pass not two or three words in one verse, and use it not very much, as he that said by way of epithet:

The smoky sighs, the *trickling* tears.⁸⁵

Puttenham's example of alliteration "prettily becom[ing]" the metre contrasts with the example he gives of vicious alliteration: here the alignment of alliterated syllables with stressed syllables is uniform, with no overspill.⁸⁶ The verse is structured by syntactic parallelism and the repetition of each letter is limited to a single time. Even E. K., one imagines, would have approved of this usage.

Yet Puttenham's account of alliteration is inconsistent. His caution, in Book III, that alliteration should not exceed "two or three words in one verse", contradicts an earlier recommendation. In a section detailing the figures which "serve chiefly to make the meters tunable [...]", Puttenham observes how "Ye do by another figure notably affect the ear when ye make every word of a verse to begin with a like letter".⁸⁷ Where his later account of excessive alliteration advises that an alliterative pattern should not surpass two repetitions, this earlier account encourages the writer to join "every word of a verse" by alliteration. We might say that Puttenham's treatise is less illuminating as a guide to alliteration than it is as a record of the competing, indeed shifting, modes of conceptualising alliteration in the late sixteenth century. His cautionary remarks on the figure's overuse index the suspicion of alliteration that early modernity inherited from classical rhetoric, even as his comments on the mutuality of alliteration and metre assert its advantage as a resource for vernacular poetics. And there is still

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 341.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 341n35.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 257, 258.

another strand of thinking – or, more specifically, of teaching – which subtends Puttenham’s treatment of alliteration. Where Puttenham describes alliteration in approving terms, he labels it “Paroemion”, a classification which derives from the Greek word, *paromoiosis*.⁸⁸ In Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, *paromoiosis* identifies the effect produced when a pair of syntactically proportionate clauses share the same word, syllable or sound at either their beginnings or ends.⁸⁹ As Cornelius relates, Latin grammarians in the third to sixth centuries AD redeployed *paromoiosis* in the form of “parhomoeon” and assigned to the term a more specific meaning: the grouping of words sharing an initial letter. Accordingly, “[t]he word that had served in Greek rhetoric as a generic name for the various types of lexical and phonic assimilation came, in Latin grammar, to name precisely alliteration”.⁹⁰ In several of these early grammatical works the “*Tite, tute,,Tati [...]*” example appears too, but without the censorious framing found in the *Ad Herennium*.⁹¹

Thus underlying Puttenham’s use of the term *paroemion* is a Latin textbook tradition that shaped it to this purpose; his broader consideration of the figure, however, may owe more to later Latin sources. It has been suggested that Susenbrotus’ description of *paroemion* as a

⁸⁸ Ibid., 258.

⁸⁹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1410a.

⁹⁰ Cornelius, *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse*, 30. Cornelius notes that earlier accounts of *parhomoeon*, such as that given by Publius Rutilius Lupus in the first century AD, “retained the generalised meaning of the Greek word” which, in Rutilius Lupus’s case, made “alliteration and rhyme interchangeable”.

⁹¹ See, Donatus, “Ars Grammatica”, in *Grammatici Latini*, ed. Heinrich Keil, 8 vols. (Leipzig: B. G. Teuber, 1857, repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4: 353-402 (398); Charisius, “Artis Grammaticae”, in *ibid.*, 1: 1-296 (282); Priscian, “Institutionum Grammaticarum”, in *ibid.*, 3: 492, where it illustrates a different, grammatical point; cf. Sacerdos, “Artivm Grammaticarvm” in *ibid.*, 6: 415-546 (458-59), which prefers the alternatives: “casus Cassandra canebat”; “Clitipho consilia consequi consimilia”.

disorder in syntax in his early sixteenth-century rhetoric was a likely influence on Puttenham.⁹² But so too, perhaps, were the discussions of *paroemion* offered in the twelfth- and thirteenth-century *artes poetriae*. In these works, definitions of *paroemion* are supplemented by warnings and recommendations as to its use in verse. In the *Ars Versificatoria* (c. 1175), Matthew of Vendôme provides an account of *paroemion* (which he spells “paranomeon”) under the figures of speech. He cites the paradigmatic example from Enneas’ *Annals* and states that the figure must not exceed three consecutive words else “*non erit scema, sed scemati contrarium* [it will not be the figure but contrary of the figure]”.⁹³ Similarly, Geoffrey of Vinsauf in *Poetria Nova* (c. 1208–1213) advises that the repetition be done modestly if it is to remain within the bounds of decency.⁹⁴ On the other hand, Eberhard the German, in the *Laborintus* (c. 1218-1280), describes repetition of a single letter as a fault in style, arguing that it can have a bad effect on metre.⁹⁵ That Puttenham’s discussion of alliteration in *The Art* may have been guided by a reading of the *artes poetriae* is suggested, in part, by the notice he pays to the relationship between *paroemion* and metre, but more apparently by his quantification of how far an alliteration can span (not more than two or three words in a line) before it renders a line defective. He may have inherited this stratagem from Vendome.⁹⁶ In any case, in demarcating a place for alliteration-*qua-paroemion* among the figures, Puttenham builds on a postclassical

⁹² See Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, 258n13. According to Whigham and Rebhorn (eds.), Puttenham “relied extensively” on the *Epitome* (41); Joannes Susenbrotus, *Epitome troporum ac schematum et grammaticum* (Cologne, 1543), 43.

⁹³ Matthieu de Vendôme, “Ars Versificatoria” (III. 10; 16), in Edmond Faral, ed., *Les Arts Poétiques du XIIe et du XIIIe Siècle* (Paris: É. Champion, 1924), 107-93 (169; 171).

⁹⁴ Geoffroi de Vinsauf, “Poetria Nova” (lines 1928-1930) in *ibid.*, 194-262 (256).

⁹⁵ Évrard l’Allemand, “Laborintus” (lines 827-28), in *ibid.*, 336-77 (365).

⁹⁶ Curiously, Vendome attributes this stricture to Isidore of Seville, yet Isidore’s treatment of *paroemion* (spelled “paromoeon”) in the *Etymologies* does not include such a statement. See, Isidore, *The Etymologies*, I.xxxvi.14.

textbook tradition not visible in the mid-sixteenth-century English rhetorics or humanist critiques of letter hunting considered earlier; these discourses have at their source the *Ad Herennium*'s censure of alliteration.

Puttenham is not alone in his use of the term *paroemion*. In *The Garden of Eloquence* (1577), Peacham lists *paroemion* “among the vices of the vngarnyshed order”, a categorisation which bars orators from deploying it but permits poets “when necessitie compelleth”.⁹⁷ Yet Peacham changes tack in a later, revised edition of *The Garden of Eloquence* (1593). In this edition, *paroemion* moves from being a fault to being a figure with a “caution”:

Paroemion is a figure of speech which beginneth diuerse words with one and the same letter, making the sentence more readie for the tongue, and more pleasant to the eare.⁹⁸

It may be that the shift that occurs between the 1577 and 1593 editions reflects a growing appreciation amongst humanist writers that alliteration had become too much a characteristic of vernacular style to be roundly discredited. That said, even in the 1593 text, alliteration doesn't entirely break free of the negative associations with which it had long been coloured. Peacham's “caution” regarding *paroemion* retains the conventional Enneas example and customary warning against “excesse of repetition”.⁹⁹

We have seen that much sixteenth-century conversation about alliteration arises in dialogue with the classical rhetorical tradition, even where classical rhetorical terms (i.e. *paromoiosis*) are redeployed to make visible, or legitimise, a phenomenon that this same tradition disparaged. Nonetheless, it is curious that these discussions make no routine association between the presence of alliteration in English verse and the alliterative poetry of

⁹⁷ Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence* (London, 1577), Gi^v.

⁹⁸ Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence* (London, 1593), 49.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹⁰⁰ We might expect that, just as rhyme was identified by English humanists as a gothic adulteration of ancient metres, alliteration would be narrativised in terms of a verse tradition that developed in an era yet to rediscover the superiority of classical poetics. This expectation would seem especially plausible as William Langland's alliterative verse poem, *Piers Plowman* (c. 1370-86), attracted a significant readership during the period.¹⁰¹ Yet, from my reading, there is only one English rhetoric which unequivocally makes this connection – Abraham Fraunce's *Arcadian Rhetoricke* (1588):

He that made the booke called *Pierce Plowman*, maketh three or foure words in euerie line begin with the same letter, thus.

In a sommer season, when set was the sunne, &c.¹⁰²

Fraunce recaps Robert Crowley's observation, in his 1550 printing of *Piers Plowman*, that "the nature of hys [Langland's] miter is, to haue three wordes at the leaste in euerie verse which begyn with some one letter", and quotes the same passage of verse.¹⁰³ Here, though, Fraunce smuggles the observation under an explication of the classical figure of polyptoton, the meaning of which he expands to include repetition not only of a word root but of a single letter

¹⁰⁰ See Eric Weiskott, *Meter and Modernity in English Verse, 1350-1650* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 109-10, for a discussion of the late sixteenth-century "disjuncture between the theory and practice of English verse" as illustrated by Gascoigne's exploration in his *Steele Glas* of "areas of English prosody and English literature that never arise in *Certayne Notes*: alliterative meter, blank verse, and *Piers Plowman*" (110).

¹⁰¹ On the readership and reception of Langland in the sixteenth century, see Sarah A. Kelen, *Langland's Early Modern Identities* (New York; Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), esp. 3-8, 14.

¹⁰² Abraham Fraunce, *The Arcadian Rhetoric [1588]*, ed. R. C. Alston (Menston: The Scolar Press Ltd., 1969), Eiv^v.

¹⁰³ As noted in Weiskott, *Meter and Modernity*, 110; cited from Robert Crowley, "The printer to the reader", in William Langland, *The Vision of Pierce Plowman* (London, 1550).

or syllable. In comparison to other sixteenth-century accounts of alliteration, Fraunce's neutral register, his consideration of the figure as a subcategory of polyptoton, and his citation of *Piers Plowman* contrive to make this account somewhat anomalous. As such, it is difficult to draw any stronger conclusion from this instant other than that it evidences the author's recognition, and willingness to equitably acknowledge, the distinguishing role played by alliteration in a particular strand of medieval poetics.

There is also Gascoigne's assertion in his *Certayne Notes* that "it is not inough to roll in pleasant woordes, nor yet to thunder in *Rym, Ram, Ruff* by letter (quoth my master *Chaucer*), [...]"¹⁰⁴ Gascoigne alludes to Chaucer's caricature, in *The Canterbury Tales*, of the northern alliterative revival.¹⁰⁵ Possibly, by recalling Chaucer's "rum, ram, ruf" Gascoigne intimates that those contemporary poets who senselessly chase alliterative patterns are the heirs of the alliterative poets that Chaucer mocked in his own time. Still, it is equally plausible that he adduces Chaucer's jibe as a means of denigrating the alliterative habits of contemporary poets only and so doesn't mean to preserve reference to the original object of Chaucer's parody. At the least, Gascoigne's contestation that it is "not inough [...] to thunder in *Rym, Ram, Ruff* by letter" stands apart from other sixteenth-century criticisms of alliteration for the reason that where they invoke the authority of the ancients to ground their arguments, here the more proximate "master Chaucer" provides the precedent.

III. Alliterative Patterns in *The Faerie Queene*

What we have now seen of sixteenth-century attitudes towards alliteration permits me, I think, to say that in the proverbial garden of early modern English poetry alliteration was more grisly

¹⁰⁴ Gascoigne, "Certayne Notes", 47.

¹⁰⁵ "The Parson's Prologue" (lines 42-43). See Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Jill Mann (London: Penguin, 2005), 692.

toadstool than it was rational, classical honeycomb. Not only did classical rhetorical theory regard alliteration with suspicion, but humanist writers were caught between, on the one hand, the feeling that alliteration was too popular, too irrational, and too easily carried to excess, and, on the other hand, the recognition that alliterative patterns – for all that they may be evidence of “the common infection”, as Sidney put it – had nonetheless become rooted in the rhythms of English poetry. While critical positions on alliteration did soften towards the turn of the century, when Spenser began work on *The Faerie Queene* in the early 1580s, the dominant theory amongst his English contemporaries was that if alliteration was to be used at all it must be with the strictest moderation. It was only towards the end of that decade that Puttenham identified alliteration with *paroemion* and not until 1593 (three years after the publication of the first books of *The Faerie Queene*) that Peacham was prepared to grant its use beyond mere exigency. That over the years alliteration was increasingly considered a potential ornament to composition does not so much tell of a reversal in critical opinion than of a gradual, perhaps somewhat grudging, acceptance that it was an inextirpable element of vernacular writing. As Peacham seems to have recognised, given the fact of its prevalence, better to admit alliteration-*qua-paroemion* cautious entrance to the “garden of eloquence” than to strive, in vain, for its eradication.

Something of this sixteenth-century mistrust of alliteration appears to persist today in the form of what Paul J. Hecht has described as “an embarrassed silence” on the part of Spenser scholars regarding the role of alliteration in Spenser’s poetry.¹⁰⁶ Noting that *The Spenser*

¹⁰⁶ Hecht, “Letters for the Dogs”, 263. Since Hecht’s identification of this lacuna in contemporary Spenser scholarship, two monographs have enriched our understanding of Spenser’s poetic style: Scott Wilson-Okamura’s, *Spenser’s International Style* and Richard Danson Brown’s *The Art of The Faerie Queene* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018). Neither of these studies, however, attempt a survey, historicisation or sustained analysis of alliteration in Spenser.

Encyclopedia has no entry on the subject, and that there is a lacuna in contemporary scholarship with respect to the form and function of Spenser's alliteration, Hecht expresses surprise that this should be such "a ubiquitous but little-discussed feature" of the poet's style.¹⁰⁷ Hecht's 2010 article is one of just two recent studies, both centred on *The Shepheardes Calender*, to offer a detailed analysis of Spenser's alliteration.¹⁰⁸ In argument as well as textual focus, his approach differs from that taken here. For, although Hecht's opening observations could support a reading of Spenser's alliteration as grisly toadstool – on his account, alliteration in the *Calender* is "unpredictable", at first sight "primitive", "unsophisticated" and liable to produce "mild repulsion" – ultimately he characterises its effect as "beautiful".¹⁰⁹ Spenser emerges as a musical composer who "plays with phrases and instrumentation", and as a classical poet whose "love of symmetry" has "obvious resonance with symmetries of classical, and particularly, Latin poetry".¹¹⁰ Spenserian alliteration, on Hecht's view,

can form patterns that appeal to our sense of symmetry, syncopation, harmony and disharmony, in short, appeals to the ear and eye that are independent of what the poem is saying at a given point.¹¹¹

Here, I follow Hecht in exploring alliteration in association with consonantal and assonantal patterns, and in considering it to have meaning beyond the elucidation of specific narrative realities.¹¹² But, in contrast to Hecht, my reading of alliterative patterns in *The Faerie Queene*

¹⁰⁷ Hecht, "Letters for the Dogs", 263-64.

¹⁰⁸ The other study is the epilogue to Cornelius, *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse*, 147-54, which explores how certain "guarded stylistic allusions contrived by Edmund Spenser and E. K." in *The Shepheardes Calender* suggest some continuity, however refracted, with the medieval alliterative verse tradition (154).

¹⁰⁹ Hecht, "Letters for the Dogs", 272, 263, 276.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 277.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 266-67.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 266-67, 272.

avoids a critical vocabulary that draws on ideas of symmetry and harmony. I do this for two reasons: first, because such a vocabulary imposes a classical aesthetic on a sound pattern which, as we have seen, Spenser's nearest contemporaries saw more as a corruption of a rational, classical model than as a means of upholding it, and, second, because I am interested in attending to how alliteration in *The Faerie Queene* works athwart the honeycomb logic of proportion and containment, proliferating instead with a fungal agency. In what follows, I draw on early modern ideas of the toadstool as something that despoils and usurps space, as well as on a modern biological understanding of how fungal networks, of which toadstools are the fruiting bodies, branch and expand beneath the soil.

Let us return to the lines from *The Shepheardes Calender* with which this article began, now with ear and eye attuned to alliteration:

Where I was wont to seeke the honey Bee,

Working her formall rowmes in Wexen frame:

The **g**riesslie Todestoole **g**rowne there mought I see

And loathed Paddocks lording on the same.

The alliterative patterns at work in these lines are characteristically Spenserian, and belong to a family of poetic structures that Spenser continued to develop in *The Faerie Queene*. Consider, first, the “f”, “g” and “l” alliterations (in lines two, three and four) which highlight accented syllables and are limited to the scope of a single line. These patterns demonstrate what we might think of as an alliterative relay effect, whereby a new alliterative pattern picks up after the alliteration of the preceding line has finished. The line by line relay, where alliterated syllables often ally with metrically accented syllables, is one of the most consistent features of Spenserian alliteration in both the *Calender* and *The Faerie Queene*.¹¹³ In it, one can also detect

¹¹³ See Thomas Middleton Raysor, ed., *Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), 34.

what Cornelius has called the “spectral afterlife” of medieval alliterative verse recruited to an accentual-syllabic paradigm.¹¹⁴ The well-known portrait of the Redcrosse Knight in *The Faerie Queene* typifies this pattern:

A Gentle Knight was **p**ricking on the **p**laine,
 Ycladd in mightie armes and siluer shielde,
 Wherein old **d**ints of **d**eepe woundes **d**id remaine,
 The cruell markes of many’ a bloody fielde;
 (I. i. 1.1-3)

However, if the line by line relay of accentual alliterative patterns forms one of Spenser’s most usual alliterative techniques, it is also the standard from which he continually deviates and which, it seems to me, he cannot help but make more complex and elaborate. Both “Working her formall rowmes in Wexen frame” and “Wherein old **d**ints of **d**eepe woundes **d**id remaine” exemplify interwoven alliteration; a scheme wherein two different alliterated letters rise and lapse alternately. In each of these examples, repetition of “w” interpenetrates an accentual alliteration – on “f” in the first passage and on “d” in the second – forming a pattern that is registered by the eye (even if, in latter verse, “Wherein”/“woundes” eludes the ear).¹¹⁵ In the case of “Working her formall rowmes in Wexen frame”, the “w” alliteration picks up on “Where

¹¹⁴ Cornelius, *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse*, 152. On Ant Oras’s view, “Spenser’s method, with its emphasis on the beginning of a syllable, may quite possibly be connected with the native alliterative tradition, to which [...] he so patently belongs: a great number of his endings alliterate within the line”. See Oras, “Spenser and Milton”, in *Sound and Poetry: English Institute Essays 1956*, ed. Northrop Frye (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 114–15. Also, Julia Macdonald, “Keeping Time in Spenser and Shakespeare: The Temporality of Spenserian Stanza and Shakespearean Blank Verse”, *Ben Jonson Journal* 22, no. 1 (2015): 83-100 (87).

¹¹⁵ In highlighting groups of syllables which share the same initial letter (but not always the same phoneme), I take my cue from early modern accounts of alliteration which consistently place their emphasis on the grouping of like letters, not of like sounds.

I was wont” in the preceding line, establishing an irregular alliterative rhythm that is neither in the service of metre, nor confined by the unit of the line. In the case of “Wherein old **d**ints of **d**eepe woundes **d**id remaine”, the interweaving of “w” and “d” subsides with the penultimate foot, but the final syllable, “-maine”, inaugurates the “m” alliteration which predominates in the succeeding line: “The cruell markes of many’ a bloody fielde” (I. i. 1.4). This phenomenon, whereby the final, rhyming syllable of a line sets off a new alliterative pattern that develops after the line break is a further means by which Spenser complicates the alliterative relay effect. Rather than constraining the alliterative pattern within the unit of the line, the alliteration grows as if from a memory of where the previous line cuts off.¹¹⁶ Another characteristic of Spenserian alliteration is the joining of alliteration with intra-syllabic consonantal and assonantal patterns, as in the “r” consonance of “**g**rieslie”/ “**g**rowne” and the “o” assonance of “**l**oathed”/“**l**ording”. In the above description of Redcrosse we have the sonic similarities of “**d**ints”/“**d**id” and of “markes”/“many” as well as the “l” that “siluer” shares with “shielde”.

Alliteration that alternates with accent pattern, interwoven alliteration, intra- and extra-lineal alliteration, alliteration joined with consonance and assonance – a reading of any brief sequence in *The Faerie Queene* will show that Spenser persistently plays with these forms of alliterative patterning, revisiting established riffs, extending their possibilities. In Spenser’s verse, alliteration is not, as Gascoigne advised, “modestly used”.¹¹⁷ Nor does it, in Harvey’s Latin, occur *raró*. Only take the poem’s opening:

Lo I the *man*, whose *Muse* whylome did *maske*,
 As *time* her *taught*, in **l**owly Shephards weeds,
 Am now **e**nforst a **f**arre **u**n**f**itter *taske*,

¹¹⁶ Further examples of this from I.i. are: 5.1-2; 6.1-2; 12.4-5; 14.4-5; 21.8-9; 22.4-5; 22.8-9; 24.6-7; 26.7-8; 30.5-6; 32.5-6; 37.3-4; 41.4-5; 43.6-7; 47.5-6; 55.6-7.

¹¹⁷ Gascoigne, “Certayne Notes”, 52.

For *Trumpets sterne* to chaunge mine Oaten reeds:

(I. Proem, 1.1-4)

And (why not?) these lines from its 1596 ending:

Ne **m**ay this *homely* verse, of **m**any **m**eanest,

Hope to escape *his* venomous despite,

More then **m**y *former* writs, all were they clearest

From **b**lamefull **b**lot, and free from all that wite,

(VI. xii. 41.1-4)

“**L**o I the *man*, whose *Muse* whylome did *maske*” sets off with interwoven alliteration, combining “l” alliteration with “o” assonance and, less consistently, “m” alliteration with “a” assonance. One of the effects of interwoven alliteration is the suggestion that alliterative patterns recede and re-emerge; if a consonant doesn’t recur with the next word, one suspects that it may still be lying dormant, waiting for the next opportunity to surface. Indeed, towards the end of the following line, “**l**o” returns, and the “w” of “whose”/“whylome” reappears in the closing syllable, “weeds”. A denser structure emerges over the next two lines with the interwoven “f” and “t” alliteration of “enforst a **f**arre **u**n**f**itter *taske*, / **F**or *Trumpets sterne*”. Tumbling straight over the line break, the sonic effect is compounded by the “st”/“t”/“s”/“ts” consonance which runs into “sterne”, and perhaps as far as “Oaten reeds”. The “t” alliteration picks up on the earlier “As *time* her *taught*”, adding to the sense that alliterative patterns are as likely to regroup in the following lines as they are to die away. At the same instant, the relative petering out of marked consonantal patterns towards the end of this line offers momentary relief – fitting in the context of a reorientation towards the epic – against the ground of vernacular noise. The next passage, the opening to the final stanza of Book VI, also sees alliteration proliferate across line endings. Alliteration on “m” marks the first three lines: in the first two it accords with the accent pattern, before falling out of sync in the third. Interweaving with “h”

and “v” in lines 1-2, it cedes to extra-lineal “w” alliteration, and intra-lineal “b” and “f” alliteration, in lines 3-4.

I have used the word *interwoven* to describe such patterns but *entangled* may be better. While *interwoven* suggests order and concord, *entangled* hints at how these alliterative patterns track variant paths through the verse, span different lengths, and come together in knots that later split apart. I do not mean *entangled*, then, in Puttenham’s sense of “intertangled” as a designation for cross-rhyme, where the term suggests an analogy with the intricate order of the Elizabethan knot garden, but rather in the sense intended by modern fungal biologist, Merlin Sheldrake.¹¹⁸ In his recent study of fungal “tangling, detangling and retangling”, Sheldrake describes the irregular networks of hyphae formed by fungi as “fine tubular structures that branch, fuse and tangle into the anarchic filigree of mycelium”.¹¹⁹ Often buried beneath the ground, “mycelium” is the vegetative part of a fungus from which mushrooms or toadstools perennially arise. In the biologist’s idiom, it is “the most common of fungal habits, better thought of not as a thing, but as a process – an exploratory, irregular tendency”.¹²⁰

Concerning the entangled alliterations of *The Faerie Queene*, I suggest that they are analogously not a fixed thing but a variable, irregular process. Consider again the line: “From **blame**full **bl**ot, and free from all that wite”. A closer reading shows that the letter “f”, which first appears in “From”, meets “b” in the word “**blame**full”, after which the two diverge: “b” moves into “blot”, and “f”, re-joining with “r” consonance, into “free from”. Note that this

¹¹⁸ Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, 176-77. “Entangled” is also an important term for Teskey, *Spenserian Moments*, 292-97, as a descriptor for the web of shared significances that spans different, even ostensibly antonymic, episodes in *The Faerie Queene*, and which extends beyond the poem, too.

¹¹⁹ Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds and Shape Our Futures* (London: Penguin Random House, 2020), 190, 7.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

“f”/“b” pattern is not symmetrical: where “bl” reaches the end of its length, “f” continues. Something comparable happens with “enforst a farre unfitter taske, / For Trumpets sterne”. As part of an asymmetrical entanglement with “f”, “t” breaks away after “unfitter” giving us the accentual “t” alliteration of “taske, / For Trumpets”. In spatial terms, we can imagine this as a kind of hyphal bifurcation. It happens within the space of a syllable in the sixth line of this same stanza: “Whose praises hauing slept in silence long” (I. Proem, 1.6). The phrase “slept in silence long” tracks the progress of “l” as it splits from “slept” into “silence” and then “long”. As another example of this bifurcating effect, take the following line from early in Book I: “Seemd in their song to scorne the cruell sky. / Much can [...]” (I. i. 8.4). Here, the “c” of “scorne” modifies the sibilance established by the first two feet of the line before it finds a life outside of its parent word in “cruell”, the hard ‘c’ sound of which reverberates in “sky” where it returns to contact with “s”. The “c” consonance then comes back alone in the first accented syllable of the next line (“can”). The mergings and splittings in such alliterative structures reveal alliteration not as a static form that orders and contains, but as a process by which Spenser’s verse, and the world it governs, grows.

This is not to deny however, the moments in *The Faerie Queene* where Spenser’s alliterative patterns do seem to present with a certain semblance of symmetry. Overwhelmingly, these are the moments that draw notice from Spenser critics, as when David Scott Wilson-Okamura, in his analysis of the destruction of Acrasia’s Bower at II. xii. 83, suggests how intralineal alliterative pairs “reinforc[e]” parallelism and “underlin[e]” antithesis. The resulting “rhetorical balance”, he advances, may imply “a hidden harmony of burning knight and beckoning Bower”.¹²¹ Julia Macdonald likewise finds alliteration deployed for the purposes of harmonious unification: referring to III. iv. 17.1-6, which describes Britomart’s defeat of Marinell, Macdonald proposes that Spenser uses alliteration to “bind” the half-lines

¹²¹ Wilson-Okamura, *Spenser’s International Style*, 105-6.

across the caesura, thereby “unify[ing] the line melodically” and contributing to the stanza’s “musical harmony”.¹²² With such an approach, one might extricate elements of the stanzas from books I and VI, quoted above, as examples of how alliteration can serve the principles of balance or unity. For instance, in the Book I line, “**Lo** I the *man*, whose *Muse* whylome did *maske*”, the “m” and “w” alliterations, taken alone, form a pattern that is symmetrical (*m w m w m*). Regarding the passage from Book VI, the finite, plosive alliteration of “**blamefull blot**” could be praised for its sonic unification of two words which, in this period, were normatively associated.

What the concept of *entangling* brings to our attention, however, is that neither of these configurations is sealed off from the wider web of alliterations in which they are situated. In the line “**Lo** I the *man*, whose *Muse* whylome did *maske*”, the symmetry of the pattern formed by the “m” and “w” alliteration is compromised when considered in the context of the interpenetrating “lo” repetition, and its apparent boundedness is undermined by the outlying “w” of “weed” at the next line’s end. That “**blamefull blot**” participates in a larger pattern of alliterative merging and splitting we have already seen. The alliterative patterns distinguished by Wilson-Okamura and Macdonald are similarly entangled. The “p” and “b” alliterations which, for Wilson-Okamura, secure the intralineal parallelism of “**But** all those *pleasant bowres* and *Pallace braue*” nevertheless spread over into the next line, “*Guyon* **broke** downe, with rigour *pittlesse*”, disrupting what was initially a symmetrical interweaving (**b p b p b / b p**) as Guyon proceeds to wreak destruction on the Bower (II. xii. 83.1-2). Equally, the “g” and “f” alliterations which, according to Macdonald, reinforce the unit of the line are not, in fact, bound within those lines: in the stanza’s final four lines, both “g” and “f” alliterative patterns regroup and simultaneously tumble, as Marinell’s forces fail, into a tangle with “d” and “p” patterns (III. iv. 17.6-9). Thus, in these cases, too, the apparent boundedness, or balance, of the

¹²² Macdonald, “Keeping Time in Spenser and Shakespeare”, 88-89.

cited alliterative patterns is belied by their entanglement in a greater, and expanding, network of alliterations.

Of Spenser's alliteration, Coleridge observed: "You cannot read a page of the Faery Queene, if you read for that purpose, without perceiving the intentional alliterativeness of the words"; yet "it never strikes any unwarned ear as artificial or other than the result of the necessary movement of the verse".¹²³ Coleridge's notion that alliteration in *The Faerie Queene* results from the *necessary movement* of the verse speaks to an understanding of Spenser's alliteration as intrinsic to a poetics animated by an organic momentum. However "intentional" the style, it is the verse that moves, and alliteration that manifests that development. He suggests that Spenser's alliteration acts as a dynamic force in the unfolding of the Faerie universe; and, further, that it does so without being systematically connected to narrative action. Indeed, in no passage from *The Faerie Queene* so far considered does alliteration contribute directly to the meaning of the narrative, with perhaps the exception of "Wherein old **dints** of **deepe** woundes **did** remaine", where the alliteration on "d" may suggest onomatopoeically the blows that have dented the armour. That this is the case coheres with the idea that the alliterative patterns endemic to Spenser's verse have meaning in surplus of the narrative instant, yet does not foreclose possible occasions in which these patterns are corralled into specific narrative work. Consider Duessa's warning to Redcrosse in Book I:

O But I feare the fickle freakes (quoth shee)

Of fortune false, and oddes of armes in field

(I. iv. 50.1-2)

In his 2007 edition of *The Faerie Queene*, A. C. Hamilton accompanies these lines with the note: "Excessive alliteration declares Duessa's duplicity". Hamilton shows us a Spenser who

¹²³ Thomas Middleton Raysor, ed., *Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), 34.

takes his contemporaries' suspicion of alliteration and puts it to narrative use: Duesa's "excessive" "f" alliteration, on Hamilton's reading, confirms her not only as a crude rhetorician, but shows her falsity. That Redcrosse's answer in the next stanza contains lines as heavily alliterated as "But faire **F**idessa, sithens **f**ortunes guile", and "And with Sansfoyes **d**ead **d**owry you **e**ndew", does not cause him to adjust or elaborate his view (I. iv. 51.1-5). In fact, it is precisely where an alliterative pattern lends itself, quite uncomplicatedly, to a thematic reading that Hamilton tends to intervene. These lines tell of the riches that are torn from sailors by Proteus, and stored at the bottom of the sea:

And **w**reckes of many **w**retches **w**hich did **w**eepe,
 And often **w**ayle their **w**ealth, **w**hich he from them did keepe.

(III. iv. 22.8-9)

Hamilton adds: "The excessive alliteration mocks their grief over lost wealth". If Hecht detects a "defensive tenor" to Hamilton's comments on Spenser's alliteration elsewhere, here is the flipside of the same critical position, expressed as an affirmation that the sound pattern is grounded firmly in Spenser's didactic theme.¹²⁴ Or, put differently: on Hamilton's view, it is the weeping "wretches", not Spenser, who are here getting carried away.

Hamilton applies a similar logic to another markedly alliterated couplet, this time the dialogue of "the Boaster", Braggadocchio (III. x. 33.5):

But **m**inds of **m**ortal **m**en are **m**uchell **m**ard,
 And **m**ou'd **a**missee with **m**assy **m**ucks **v**n**m**eet regard.

(III. x. 31.8-9)

Perhaps of all the extracts we have so far seen, the alliteration in these lines most clearly invites interpretation in relation to the poem's narrative reality: Braggadocchio's boastful and intemperate character is expressed in his flagrantly indecorous use of alliteration. Hamilton

¹²⁴ Hecht, "Letters for the Dogs", 264-65.

comments: “the excessive alliteration mocks [Braggadocchio’s] vain boasting”. Braggadocchio’s comic couplet may indeed be the closest Spenser comes to making his own critical statement on the infelicities of letter hunting. With this instance of “excessive alliteration”, amplified by the clunking concurrence of “m” with metrically accented syllables, Spenser seems to flag his awareness of the classical humanist resistance to the scheme. Seen in dialogue with this debate, the lines serve as the poet’s version of the paradigmatic “*O Tite, tute, Tati, tibi tanta, tyranne, tulisti*”.

It is gently paradoxical that the lines in which Spenser’s alliterative patterns are most conspicuously “excessive” tend also to be those in which he is most clearly in control of his alliterative poetics. In Braggadocchio’s speech, Spenser yokes alliteration, which he recruits as a vector for satire, firmly to the metre as well as to the moral argument of the poem. Now compare Braggadocchio’s couplet to the following words spoken by Calidore, the Knight of Courtesy:

In vaine he seeketh others to suppress,
 Who hath not learnd himself first to subdew
 All flesh is fraile and full of ficklenesse
 Subject to fortunes *chance*, still *chaunging new*
 What haps to day to **me**, to **morrow may** to you.

(VI. i. 41. 7-9)

We might hope that Calidore’s statement on human frailty wouldn’t be marked by the same rhetorical tendencies as Braggadocchio’s self-aggrandizing statement on the same. We may even find it discomfiting that a sound pattern that Spenser so clearly ridicules in Braggadocchio’s case should here characterise the Knight of Courtesy’s speech. True, Calidore’s “f” alliteration – even at its climax, “All **f**lesh is **f**raile and **f**ull of **f**icklenesse” – is not as sustained as Braggadocchio’s:

But **m**inds of **m**ortal **m**en are **m**uchell **m**ard,

And **m**ou'd **a**missee with **m**assy **m**ucks vn**m**eet regard.

Nonetheless, in Calidore's lines, alliteration proliferates – as it does throughout the poem – at the threshold of excess. Sibilance interweaves with accent-synched “f” alliteration, which in turn gives way to “ch” sounds, ending with “t” and “m” alliteration in the alexandrine. This final line, “What haps *to day to me, to morrow may to you*”, renders the Latin proverb *hodie mihi, cras tibi* [mine today, yours tomorrow] into English apparently in such a way as to accommodate as much alliteration as possible. Similarly, “All flesh is fraile and full of ficklenesse” extends upon the proverbial pairing of “flesh” with “frail” with the additional alliterative sounds of “full” and “ficklenesse”.¹²⁵ Said aloud, these patterns intervene on Calidore's meaning, demanding recognition in a manner that supersedes the rationale of his speech. Indeed, read against the humanist anxiety that alliteration can undermine measured composition, the line “All flesh is fraile and full of ficklenesse” at once points to a potential failing in Calidore's sense of decorum, and serves as an unwittingly self-reflexive illustration of Spenser's own “ficklenesse” in the face of the temptation to alliterate. Several stanzas on, the young Tristram is introduced in lines quite overwhelmed by “h” alliteration:

And on **h**is **h**ead an **h**ood with aglets sprad,

And by **h**is side **h**is **h**unters **h**orne **h**e **h**anging **h**ad.

(VI. ii. 5.8-9)

One would be forgiven for surmising that here it is no more than the combination of the possessive pronoun with Tristram's hunting costume that has supplied fertile ground, and so cause enough, for the proliferation of the pattern.

¹²⁵ See Charles G. Smith, *Spenser's Proverb Lore: With Special Reference to His Use of the Sententiae of Leonard Culman and Publilius Syrus* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1970), 108.

The pejorative uses to which early modern writers put the words “mushroom” and “toadstool” attest to how, to a sixteenth-century eye, fungal growth appeared overabundant, and liable to spread beyond decorous boundaries. As noted earlier, the rapidity with which fungi were seen to materialise, and increase, made for their association with the figure of the upstart, hence one herbalist’s denouncement of those “Dark Doctores [...] which soddenly lyke todestolles stert vp Physicionnes”.¹²⁶ In different terms, Spenser’s near eye-rhyme between the honeycomb’s “formall *rowmes*” and the “grieslie Todestoole *growne*” registers this unease. While the honeycomb is allied with the noun, its inanimate rooms delimiting and defining, the toadstool is allied with the verb: here is an organism capable of improvisation and expansion, and which acts according to its own inscrutable agenda. To speak of alliteration as a part of Spenser’s toadstool poetics is thus to recognise it as a form which, once allowed to establish itself, wants to grow further, and will seek to spawn itself through a text even at the expense of other kinds of compositional code. On at least two occasions in *The Faerie Queene*, alliteration incites Spenser to depart from his sources. In the catalogue of the “Briton kings”, in Book II, Brutus’s wife, Inogene, is said to be from Italy. However, as Carrie Anna Harper notes, Inogene is traditionally the daughter of Pandrasus, a Greek king.¹²⁷ The departure occurs in a passage rich in alliterative patterning. Of Brutus, we read:

Lou’d of his *f*reends, and of his *f*oes eschewd,
 He left three *s*onnes, his *f*amous progeny,
 Borne of *f*ayre *I*nogene of *I*taly;
 Mongst whom he parted his imperiall state,
 And *L*ocrine left chiefe *L*ord of Britany.

¹²⁶ Turner, “Preface”.

¹²⁷ Carrie Anna Harper, *The Sources of the British Chronicle History in Spenser’s ‘Faerie Queene’* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Company, 1910; repr. New York, 1964), 53.

At last ripe age bad him surrender late
 His life, and long good fortune vnto final fate.

(II. x. 13.3-9)

Harper proposes that Spenser alters Inogene's birthplace to extend the "I" alliteration that characterises other lines in this stanza ("And *Locrine* left chiefe Lord of Britany") as well as to secure the rhyme.¹²⁸ Another consideration is that "*Italy*" duplicates the "I" and cadence of "*Inogene*". Taken together, these effects suggest that in his portrayal of an Italian Inogene, Spenser has privileged continuity of sound – that is, the consolidation of alliteration and rhyme – over conformity with historical tradition. Something comparable happens in Book I, where Una tells Arthur that her parents, "a King and Queene", at a happier time

Did spred their rule through all the territories,
 Which **Phison** and **Euphrates** floweth by,
 And Gehons golden waues doe wash continually.

(I. vii. 43. 7-9)

John Upton, an early editor of *The Faerie Queene*, points out that in *Genesis* 2.11-2 it is the Phison, not the Gehon that is connected with gold, and therefore that Spenser has interchanged these rivers for the sake of the alliterated "Gehons golden".¹²⁹ At this point, Hamilton loses patience. He comments: "S. prefers alliteration to fact". Here, against the delimiting power of the source text, the alliterative energies of *The Faerie Queene* win out.

If the authority of the source text represents one form of limit which alliteration overrides, another is the bounds of the stanza. Witness the following examples (I have indicated the stanza break with an "—"):

From her in flight, he fownd, that did him sore apall.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 53.

¹²⁹ See John Upton, ed., *Spenser's Faerie Queene*, 2 vols. (London: J. and R. Tonson, 1758), 2: 389.

—
 Full of sad feare, and doubtfull agony,
 Fiercely he flew vpon that wicked feend.

(III. vii. 31.9-32.2)

And let him liue vnlo'u'd, or loue him selfe alone.

—
 But if that life ye vnto me decree,
 Then let mee liue, as louers ought to do,
 And of my lifes deare loue beloued be:

(IV. xii. 9.9-10.3)

Now will ye sleepe? ah wake, and rather weepe,
 To thinke of your nights want, that should yee waking keepe

—
 Thus did she watch, and weare the weary night
 In wayfull plaints, that none was to appease:

(V. vi. 25.8-26.2)

Spenser's "consistent use of alliteration as a stanza-linking device" was first noted by R. J. Schoeck in his 1949 article on the subject.¹³⁰ In addition to the six just quoted, Schoeck cites a further sixty-six stanzas in *The Faerie Queene* that are "linked" in this way, though he emphasises that his is not a complete count, and that he omits from his study those instances "where alliteration may be accidental or the result of another intention (such as repetition)".¹³¹

¹³⁰ Schoeck, "Alliteration as a Means of Stanza Connection in The Faerie Queene", 92.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 92n5.

That Spenserian alliteration on so many occasions exceeds the bounds of the stanza further attests to its unresolvedly generative and appropriative character. So, too, does it present a dynamic instantiation of the tension between the bee's formal rooms and the grisly toadstool because the cellular structure of stanzaic verse – overrun by alliteration in the above cases – bears analogy with the honeycomb's prisms. Indeed, as we saw earlier, the identification of the stanza with a room has an etymological basis; it also fits more broadly with the critical understanding of the Spenserian stanza as, in Thomas M. Greene's words, "a separate, self-contained thing".¹³² For Wilson-Okamura, Spenser's typically end-stopped stanza functions as "a hermetic box for syntax", reflecting the Tudor distaste for "leaking stanzas".¹³³ On his analysis, it is in part through the stanzaic design of *The Faerie Queene* that Spenser expresses his honeybee commitment to classical form: "stanzas were capable of reproducing the most important effect of classical prosody, [...] proportion", and by their proportion "the rich sense of mathematical order and intricacy" that humanist writers so admired in ancient metres.¹³⁴ Spenser's stanzas may very rarely "leak" syntactically, then, but they do, quite habitually, "leak" alliteratively. Or rather, in the terms of this article, where the formal rooms of stanzaic construction contain, alliteration, in toadstool mode, grows.

Let us notice, now, another linguistic scheme at work in the stanzas just cited, one which both foments Spenser's alliterative patterns and plays a determining role in the evolutive tendency of his poetics. The three examples, given above, of alliteration spanning stanza divisions also show alliteration working in concert with polyptoton; the rhetorical figure in

¹³² Thomas M. Greene, *The Descent from Heaven: A Study in Epic Continuity* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963), 327.

¹³³ Wilson-Okamura, *Spenser's International Style*, 29-30.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 44, 41.

which a word root is repeated in varying cases or inflections.¹³⁵ Polyptoton is a consistent feature of Spenser's alliterative poetics in *The Faerie Queene* and, as an expression of the mutability and generativity of linguistic forms, contributes powerfully to the organic character of the verse.¹³⁶ In the stanzas above, we find: “flight”/“flew”; “full”/“doubtfull”; “liue”/“life”/“lifes”; “vnlou’d”/“loue”/“louers”/“loue”/“beloued”; “wake”/“waking”; “nights”/“night”; “weare”/“weary”. In these instances, where alliteration is conjoined to polyptoton, words swell and diminish almost as organic bodies do, either mushrooming into a larger form (“full” to “doubtfull”) or dwindling to an unelaborated root (“vnlou’d” to “loue”).¹³⁷ Set in the context of their stanzas, these polyptotonic iterations connect with other, etymologically distinct, words through networks of alliteration: in III. vii. 31.9-32.2, “flight”/“flew” and “full”/“doubtfull” are related via a filigree of “f” alliteration; in IV. xii. 9.9-10.3, the “l” alliteration realised by “liue”/“life”/“lifes” and “vnlou’d”/“loue”/“louers”/“loue”/“beloued” extends into “let” and, with assonance, “alone”; the final passage, V. vi. 25.8-26.2, is profuse with “w” sounds not limited to the polyptotonic terms, and the “n” alliterative pattern incipient in “nights”/“night” increases its span through “Now” and “none”. Considered, then, as an extension of Spenser's toadstool poetics, polyptoton forms protean nodes out of which greater alliterative networks grow. Moreover, from a structural perspective, Spenser's frequent use of polyptoton as a bridge between stanza

¹³⁵ That alliteration is very often a function of polyptoton was noted by Abraham Fraunce, as we saw earlier.

¹³⁶ Thinking along similar lines, Christopher Burlinson writes of how polyptoton “draws our attention to a kind of material decay” in Spenser's portrayal of the Castle of Alma, see *Allegory, Space and the Material World in the Writings of Edmund Spenser* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), 111.

¹³⁷ Indeed, without wishing to make too much of it, the word “polyptoton” itself contains a hint of the organic and excrescent: in sixteenth-century English, the classical Latin etymon, “polyp”, denoted a tumorous nasal growth, as well as a tentacled organism such as an octopus or cuttlefish. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “polyp, n.”, accessed December 1, 2020.

divisions associates the figure with moments of multiplication and expansion – a word root “growne” beyond the closing couplet. Some further examples:

And at the point two stinges in fixed arre,
Both *deadly* sharp, that sharpest steele *exceeden* farr.

—

But stinges and sharpest steele *did* far exceed
The sharpnesse of his cruel rending clawes;
(I. xi. 11.6-9-12.1-2)

What booteth then the **g**ood and *righteous* deed,
If **g**oodnesse find no **g**race, nor *righteousnes* no need?

—

If good find **g**race, and *righteousnes* reward,
Why then is Amoret in caytiue band,
(III. xi. 10.8-9-11.1-2)

Nought feared *they*, what he could do, or say,
But *th'* onely feare *that* was before *their* vew,
From which like mazed deare, dismayfully *they* flew.

—

Fast did *they* fly, as *them* *their* feete could beare,
High ouer hilles, and lowly ouer dales,
As *they* were follow'd of *their* former feare.
(V. viii. 38.7-9-39.1)

In each of these passages, alliterative patterns can be seen to stem from, or compound around, the polyptotic repetitions, as if branching from these bases into other terms. Additionally, each passage is marked by multiple, mostly extralineal, alliterative patterns which either connect with, or circumvent, the repeated root words. For example, in the last passage, which tells of how the Souldan's horses bolt for fear of Prince Arthur's shield, the "th" and "d" as well as "f" alliterations appear to become caught, with the careering horses, in the surge beyond the thirty-eighth stanza.

The more one attends to the workings of alliteration in *The Faerie Queene*, the more apparent it becomes that boundaries are something that Spenser's alliteration troubles. These can be structural boundaries, as when an alliteration spills over line or stanza, or conceptual ones, as when an alliteration becomes tricky to separate from other forms of phonic repetition (consonance, assonance, polyptoton). But boundaries also present something of a critical difficulty when selecting examples of alliteration in *The Faerie Queene* owing to the necessity of imposing boundaries on alliterative entanglements which may extend well beyond the portion of text ultimately cited. For instance, the line quoted above comparing the Souldan's horses to deer, "From which like mazed deare, dismayfully they flew", offers a polyptotic (via "dismay") and gently alliterative (via "d", "th", "m" sounds) elaboration of the second line of the same stanza not already quoted: "So did the sight thereof their sense dismay". In turn, this strongly sibilant line, "So did the sight thereof their sense dismay", prepares the ground for the sibilance of the fifth, "Ne could the Souldan them from flying stay", which also sees the first iteration of the verb "flying" that becomes "flew" and then "fly" over the succeeding lines. The passage, as quoted above, begins at the seventh line of the thirty-eighth stanza and so is excised from these further entanglements. The result is that some of the alliterative patterns internal to it are afforded a finitude that in the context of the surrounding verse they do not possess. My point is that a standard, economical approach to quotation – which, however

exigent, itself holds faith with the honeycomb logic of the metonymic unit – can have the effect of making Spenser’s alliterative patterns look more discrete than they are. The following lines were cited earlier as an example of alliteration, with polyptoton, spanning a stanza division:

From her in **f**light, he **f**ownd, that did him sore apall.

—

Full of sad **f**eare, and doubtfull agony,

Fiercely he **f**lew vpon that wicked **f**eend.

(III. vii. 31.9-32.2)

While these three lines sufficed as an illustration of the phenomenon, they show neither the beginning nor the end of this particular pattern. Rather, the “f” alliteration appears, spore-like, well before its fuller fruition around the stanza break. The narrative context for this passage is Satyrane’s discovery of a hyena preying upon Florimell’s palfrey:

There well perceiud he, that it was the horse,

Whereon faire **F**lorimell was wont to ride,

That of that **f**eend was rent without remorse:

Much **f**eared he, least ought did ill betide

To that faire Maide, the **f**lower of wemens pride;

For her he dearely loued, and in all

His famous conquests highly magnifide:

Besides her golden girdle, which did fall

From her in **f**light, he **f**ownd, that did him sore apall.

Full of sad **f**eare, and doubtfull agony,

Fiercely he **f**lew vpon that wicked **f**eend.

And with huge strokes, and cruell battery

Him forst to leaue his pray, for to attend

Him selfe from deadly daunger to defend:

(III. vii. 31-32.5)

The expanded excerpt makes visible the hyphal networks that stretch out before and after the most densely alliterated segment. With this new framing, Florimell's name and characteristic epithet, "faire", even seem to provide the conditions of possibility, the fertile ground, for the proliferation of "f" sounding syllables. The pattern then revives in the thirty-third stanza when Satyrane's show of force against the hyena precipitates an epic simile in which he is compared to a man trying to forestall a flood:

As he that striues to stop a flood,

And in strong bancks his violence enclose,

Forceth it swell above his wonted mood,

And largely ouerflow the fruitfull plaine,

That all the country seemes to be a Maine,

And the rich furrowes flote, all quite fordonne:

The wofull husbandman doth lowd complaine.

(III.vii.34.1-7)

Hamilton observes that the flood simile may have been suggested by the name, Florimell, the meaning of which ties thematically with the idea of the "fruitfull plaine".¹³⁸ But one might also wonder if the lexical field made available by the flood simile, which permits a revival of the "f" alliterative pattern originating with "faire Florimell" three stanzas before, could likewise have pulled Spenser in the direction he takes here. As a final example of how economical

¹³⁸ From the Latin *flos* for "flower" and *mel* for "honey", see Thomas P. Roche, "Florimell" in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. Hamilton et al., 309-310.

quotation can excise the profusion of Spenser's alliterative patterns, recall the lines, cited earlier:

Now will ye sleepe? ah wake, and rather weepe,
 To thinke of your *nights want*, that should yee waking keepe

—

Thus did she watch, and weare the weary *night*
 In wayfull plaints, that *none was* to appease:

(V. vi. 25.8-26.2)

Here they are set back in the context of the further flung networks of “w” alliteration that begin to gain ground lines in advance of the stanza division:

[...] for which a little whyle
 Ye will not watch? false watches, wellaway,
 I wote when ye did watch both night and day
 Vnto your losse: and now needs will ye sleepe?
 Now ye haue made my heart to wake alway,
 Now will ye sleepe? Ah wake, and rather weepe,
 To thinke of your *nights want*, that should yee waking keepe.

As with the “f” alliteration that proliferates around Florimell, her fairness and her flight, here the “w” alliteration seems to grow outward from the scene’s central descriptors, namely, Britomart’s watchfulness and wakefulness.

In exploring alliteration as an element of the toadstool poetics of *The Faerie Queene*, I have sought to hold at a critical distance those approaches that would see Spenser’s alliteration as, principally, a euphonious ornamentation of the accentual-syllabic verse line, or as a device deployed chiefly to refocus and refract the poem’s narrative realities. In doing so, my aim has not been to suggest that the alliterative patterns at work in *The Faerie Queene* never serve the

agenda of metre or narrative argument. They do. Rather, it has been to show that these alliterative patterns proliferate far in excess – and at times obscure the clearcutness – of both these objects. Spenser’s alliterative patterns, I have argued, in many ways run counter to the poem’s organising logics: they expand and tangle, encourage diversions, trouble boundaries. In this, they give play to many of the forms of excess that Spenser’s contemporaries associated with the dangers of letter hunting. Not only does Spenser not alliterate in moderation (cue: “And on **his head** an **hood** with aglets sprad, / And by **his side his hunters horne he hanging had.**”), but his alliterations, on divers occasions, seem to have a determining effect on his composition – even risk distracting the reader from the rationale of a specific line or scene. Together, Spenser’s alliterations strain against the limits of the poem’s honeycomb units, secreting within its “formall rowmes” a mycelium of letters and syllables that is less the undoing of Spenserian form than a vital manifestation of its unruly materiality.

