Prothalamion

POEM TEXT

CALM was the day, and through the trembling air
Sweet breathing Zephyrus did softly play,
A gentle spirit, that lightly did delay
Hot Titan's beams, which then did glister fair;
When I whose sullen care,
Through discontent of my long fruitless stay
In prince's court, and expectation vain
Of idle hopes, which still do fly away
Like empty shadows, did afflict my brain,
Walked forth to ease my pain
Along the shore of silver streaming Thames,
Whose rutty bank, the which his river hems,
Was painted all with variable flowers,
And all the meads adorned with dainty gems,
Fit to deck maidens' bowers,
And crown their paramours,
Against the bridal day, which is not long:
    Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

There, in a meadow, by the river's side,
A flock of nymphs I chanced to espy,
All lovely daughters of the flood thereby,
With goodly greenish locks, all loose untied,
As each had been a bride;
And each one had a little wicker basket,
Made of fine twigs, entrailed curiously,
In which they gathered flowers to fill their flasket,
And with fine fingers cropt full featously
The tender stalks on high.
Of every sort, which in that meadow grew,
They gathered some; the violet pallid blue,
The little daisy, that at evening closes,
The virgin lily, and the primrose true,
With store of vermeil roses,
To deck their bridegrooms' posies
Against the bridal day, which was not long:
    Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

With that, I saw two swans of goodly hue
Come softly swimming down along the Lee;
Two fairer birds I yet did never see.
The snow which doth the top of Pindus strew,
Did never whiter shew,
Nor Jove himself, when he a swan would be
For love of Leda, whiter did appear:
Yet Leda was they say as white as he,
Yet not so white as these, nor nothing near.
So purely white they were,
That even the gentle stream, the which them bare,
Seemed foul to them, and bade his billows spare
To wet their silken feathers, lest they might
Soil their fair plumes with water not so fair,
And mar their beauties bright,
That shone as heaven's light,
Against their bridal day, which was not long:
    Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

Eftsoons the nymphs, which now had flowers their fill,
Ran all in haste, to see that silver brood,
As they came floating on the crystal flood.
Whom when they saw, they stood amazed still,
Their wondering eyes to fill.
Them seemed they never saw a sight so fair,
Of fowls so lovely, that they sure did deem
Them heavenly born, or to be that same pair
Which through the sky draw Venus' silver team;
For sure they did not seem
To be begot of any earthly seed,
But rather angels, or of angels' breed:
Yet were they bred of Somers-heat they say,
In sweetest season, when each flower and weed
The earth did fresh array,
So fresh they seemed as day,
Even as their bridal day, which was not long:
    Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

Then forth they all out of their baskets drew
Great store of flowers, the honour of the field,
That to the sense did fragrant odours yield,
All which upon those goodly birds they threw,
And all the waves did strew,
That like old Peneus' waters they did seem,
When down along by pleasant Tempe's shore,
Scattered with flowers, through Thessaly they stream,

That they appear through lilies' plenteous store,
Like a bride's chamber floor.
Two of those nymphs meanwhile, two garlands bound,
Of freshest flowers which in that mead they found,
The which presenting all in trim array,
Their snowy foreheads therewithal they crowned,
Whilst one did sing this lay,
Prepared against that day,
Against their bridal day, which was not long:
    Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

'Ye gentle birds, the world's fair ornament,
And heaven's glory, whom this happy hour
Doth lead unto your lovers' blissful bower,
Joy may you have and gentle heart's content
Of your love's complement:
And let fair Venus, that is queen of love,
With her heart-quelling son upon you smile,
Whose smile, they say, hath virtue to remove
All love's dislike, and friendship's faulty guile
For ever to assoil.
Let endless peace your steadfast hearts accord,
And blessed plenty wait upon your board,
And let your bed with pleasures chaste abound,
That fruitful issue may to you afford,
Which may your foes confound,
And make your joys redound
Upon your bridal day, which is not long:
    Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.'

So ended she; and all the rest around
To her redoubled that her undersong,
Which said their bridal day should not be long.
And gentle echo from the neighbour ground
Their accents did resound.
So forth those joyous birds did pass along,
Adown the Lee, that to them murmured low,
As he would speak, but that he lacked a tongue,
Yet did by signs his glad affection show,
Making his stream run slow.
And all the fowl which in his flood did dwell
Gan flock about these twain, that did excel
The rest so far as Cynthia doth shend
The lesser stars. So they, enranged well,
Did on those two attend,
And their best service lend,
Against their wedding day, which was not long:
    Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

At length they all to merry London came,
To merry London, my most kindly nurse,
That to me gave this life's first native source;
Though from another place I take my name,
An house of ancient fame.
There when they came, whereas those bricky towers,
The which on Thames' broad aged back do ride,
Where now the studious lawyers have their bowers
There whilom wont the Templar Knights to bide,
Till they decayed through pride:
Next whereunto there stands a stately place,
Where oft I gained gifts and goodly grace
Of that great lord, which therein wont to dwell,
Whose want too well now feels my friendless case.
But ah, here fits not well
Old woes but joys to tell
Against the bridal day, which is not long:
    Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

Yet therein now doth lodge a noble peer,
Great England's glory, and the world's wide wonder,
Whose dreadful name late through all Spain did thunder,
And Hercules' two pillars standing near
Did make to quake and fear:
Fair branch of honour, flower of chivalry,
That fillest England with thy triumph's fame,
Joy have thou of thy noble victory,
And endless happiness of thine own name
That promiseth the same:
That through thy prowess and victorious arms,
Thy country may be freed from foreign harms;
And great Elisa's glorious name may ring
Through all the world, filled with thy wide alarms,
Which some brave Muse may sing
To ages following,
Upon the bridal day, which is not long:
    Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

From those high towers this noble lord issuing,
Like radiant Hesper when his golden hair
In th'Ocean billows he hath bathed fair,
Descended to the river's open viewing,
With a great train ensuing.

Above the rest were goodly to be seen
Two gentle knights of lovely face and feature
Beseeming well the bower of any queen,
With gifts of wit and ornaments of nature,
Fit for so goodly stature;
That like the twins of Jove they seemed in sight,
Which deck the baldric of the heavens bright.
They two forth pacing to the river's side,
Received those two fair birds, their love's delight;
Which, at th' appointed tide,
Each one did make his bride
Against their bridal day, which is not long:
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

SUMMARY

It was a calm day with a light breeze in the air, which cooled things down and lessened the heat of the brightly shining sun. I was frustrated with the time I'd wasted at court: my political ambitions had failed, and my hopes turned out to be empty illusions. To make myself feel better, I went for a walk along the banks of the River Thames. The shore and the meadows surrounding the river were covered with flowers—flowers so beautiful that they could be hung up in young women's room, or made into crowns for their fiancés in advance of their wedding day, which is not far away: please be quiet, River Thames, until I finish my poem.

In a meadow by the river, I saw a group of nymphs—the mythological daughters of the river. Their hair was green and hanging down loosely, and they looked like brides. Each of them was carrying a wicker basket woven from twigs and full of flowers that they'd gathered from the meadow. The nymphs quickly and skillfully plucked all kinds of flowers—including blue violets, daisies (which close at night), lilies (which are so white they seem virginal) primroses, and vermeil roses—which they would use to decorate their bridegrooms on their wedding day, which was not far away: please be quiet, river Thames, until I finish my poem.

I saw two beautiful swans swimming down the River Lee. I had never seen such beautiful birds. The snow on top of the famous Pindus mountain range has never been whiter than those swans. Not even the god Zeus, when he transformed himself into a swan in order to seduce the princess Leda, was as white as those swans. And though people say that Leda was as pale as Zeus was, neither Leda nor Zeus came close to being as white as the swans before me in the river. In fact, the swans were so white that even the calm river upon which they swam seemed to make them dirty; as such, the river told his waves not to touch the birds' silky feathers, in order to prevent the waves from dirtying the lovely birds and diminishing their beauty, which was as bright as the sun will be on their wedding day, which was not far away: please be quiet, river Thames, until I finish my poem.

The nymphs, who had by this point collected enough flowers, ran to see those silver swans as they floated down the river. And when they saw them, the nymphs stood in stunned amazement, filling their eyes with the wonderful sight. The nymphs thought that they had never seen such lovely birds, and they assumed that they were angelic, or that they were the mythological swans who drew the goddess Venus's chariot through the sky. The swans were so beautiful it seemed impossible that they were born from any mortal creature; instead, the nymphs thought they were angels or the children of angels. Yet, the truth is that the swans were bred from the heat of the sun in the spring, when the earth was covered in fresh flowers and plants. They seemed as new and fresh as their wedding day, which was not far away: please be quiet, river Thames, until I finish my poem.

Then the nymphs took out of their baskets all the sweet-smelling flowers they'd picked and threw them onto the swans and onto the waves of the river, so that river seemed like the river Peneus in Greece, which flows through the Tempe Valley in Thessaly. Indeed, the river was so covered in lilies that it seemed like the floor of a bridal chamber. Two of the nymphs wove flower crowns from the freshest flowers they could find in the meadow; they presented these to the swans, who wore them on their foreheads. Meanwhile, another nymph sang the following song, which was prepared for the swans' wedding day, which was not far away: please be quiet, river Thames, until I finish my poem.

"You swans, who are the world's beautiful decoration and the glory of the skies: you are being led to your lovers, and I wish you joy and happiness in your marriage. I further pray that Venus, the queen of love, and her son, Cupid, will smile on you, and with their smiles, remove all fights and conflicts from your marriages. I pray that your hearts will be full of peace, your kitchens full of food, and your bedrooms proper and fruitful, so that your children defeat your enemies, and that your joy will overflow on your wedding day, which is not far away: please be quiet, river Thames, until I finish my poem."

That was the end of the nymph's song, and everyone repeated her, announcing that the swans' wedding day wasn't far off—and the ground echoed with this line, which then echoed throughout the meadow. Thus the joyful swans went down the River Lee. Its waters murmured as they passed, almost as though the river would speak to them if he were able to talk. But he did make his affection clear by slowing down his current. And all the birds that lived on the river began to flock around the two swans, who were far more beautiful than those other birds—just as the moon is far more beautiful than the stars around it. In this way, they arranged themselves around the

swans and waited on them, and lent them their best service for their wedding day, which was not far away: please be quiet, river Thames, until I finish my poem.

After a while, they all came to London, which was where I was born and raised, though I am named after a different place, and come from an old, well-known family. They came to a place where there were brick towers on the banks of the Thames, which serve now as housing for law students, though in the past they were the headquarters of the Knights Templar, until that order crumbled due to pride. Next to the brick towers there is a place where I often received favors from the important man who lives there—whose protection I sorely miss now, though it is inappropriate to meditate on such grievances here, and I should limit myself to talking about the joys of the wedding day, which is not far away: please be quiet, river Thames, until I finish my poem.

But in that place there now lives an aristocrat who brings honor to England—and whom the rest of the world admires. On a recent mission, he terrorized the Spanish and made the cliffs on either side of the straits of Gibraltar shake with fear. Man of honor, exceptional knight, the news of your triumphs travels across England. I hope you take joy in your victory and that you remain happy forever—since even your name promises that you will be happy. And I hope that through your skill and your victories in war, other countries won't be able to harm England. And I hope that Queen Elizabeth's name will be celebrated throughout the world, accompanied by your calls to arm, which some poet will preserve in song for the rest of human history on the day of the wedding, which is not far away: please be quiet, river Thames, until I finish my poem.

From the tall battlements of the house, the same aristocrat whom I described above came out like the evening star, Hesperus, who bathes his blond hair in the ocean all day and then rises above the horizon at night. The aristocrat came down to the river with many people following him. Among the crowd, two handsome knights stood out, who would've been a fitting match for any queen. Indeed, they were so intelligent and well-made that they seemed like Zeus's sons, Castor and Pollock, who, in Greek mythology became stars, part of the constellation Gemini. The two knights went down to the river to meet the two swans, whom they loved dearly. At the scheduled time they will get married, and that wedding day is not far away: please be quiet, river Thames, until I finish my poem.

THEMES

THE COMFORT OF NATURE

At the start of the poem, the speaker identifies himself as someone whose political ambitions have been frustrated. These frustrated ambitions form a kind of frame for everything that follows: they're the reason why the speaker goes out onto the bank of the Thames in the first place. As such, although he doesn't dwell on his own ambitions, they nevertheless form an important contrast to and backdrop for the poem's exploration of nature. Walking along the banks of the river eases the speaker's "pain," which suggests that nature is a soothing and restorative force. At the same time, the poem subtly but consistently blurs the distinction between nature and the human world.

In the first stanza, the speaker describes himself as someone who has spent a "long fruitless stay / In prince's court." Because the reader learns little else about the speaker, this introduction suggests that he thinks of himself mostly in relation to power: he bases his identity on his ambition and desire to get ahead in politics. In this regard, however, he has notably failed. His time in "prince's court" has been "idle"—meaning he hasn't really done anything—and his ambitions have revealed themselves to be "empty shadows." He flees from the vain and empty world of politics into the beautiful, soothing world of nature by walking along the Thames.

Nature is thus positioned as a restorative space outside the drama of the courtly world. In contrast to the "empty shadows" of the speaker's political ambition, the natural world is precise and concrete. The speaker spends much of the second stanza, for example, listing *specific* flowers that he—and the nymphs—encounter. Furthermore, as the speaker describes it, the natural world is courteous and responsive to human needs. For instance, he details in stanza three how the river refuses to wet the swans' "silken feathers." As such, when the speaker asks the Thames to "run softly, till I end my song," there is some reason to believe that the river might actually *listen* to him; unlike the world of politics, where his ambitions remain fruitless and useless, in nature the world actually *responds* to the speaker's desires.

As the poem proceeds however, and the swans float down the Thames, the divide between the human and the natural realms loses its distinction. The same river, for instance, that the speaker turns to for solace from political life also runs by brick towers where law students study and by the house where the respected Earl of Essex lives (described as "a noble Peer, / Great England's glory and the world's wide wonder"). More importantly, the swans that the speaker encounters on the banks of the Thames are preparing to return to London—a *city*—for their marriage.

These moments suggest that nature is not absolutely separate from politics. In fact, they suggest that nature in this poem serves as a metaphor for some of the most important moments of people's lives—like the marriages of key political figures. Indeed, the swans specifically serve as metaphors for Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset, daughters of the Earl of Somerset; the poem was initially written in celebration of their weddings.

Thus even though these moments that reference the human, cosmopolitan world seem somewhat out of place—maybe even extraneous—they still shape the way one reads the poem and its description of a beautiful natural world. Overall, they suggest that nature is not purely a space of comfort and retreat, but that it is also intimately linked to human political life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-36
- Lines 127-162

MARRIAGE AND THE NATURAL WORLD

Though the poem describes the natural world as a space of comfort and beauty, the speaker doesn't always enjoy nature for its own sake. Instead, he focuses on the way that the natural world might be used for human ends—for example, for something like marriage. This is fitting for a poem originally written to celebrate two politically important engagements—that of Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset, the daughters of the Earl of Somerset. By focusing on the natural world as he celebrates these betrothals, the speaker suggests that a proper marriage is actually part of nature; such a marriage follows the natural order, the poem argues, and also uses nature for both its celebrations and as a model for how a good partnership should look.

The speaker reflects on the beauty of the natural world as he walks along the river. He notes its many flowers, and imagines a specific use for them: these flowers are pretty enough to decorate young women's rooms, as well as to adorn their soon-to-be-husbands on their wedding day. The speaker doesn't just enjoy nature for its own sake; he wants to *use* it to glorify the ritual of marriage.

Similarly, in the second stanza, the speaker sees a group of nymphs out gathering flowers. The end of the stanza reveals that they are doing so specifically for wedding decorations. The nymphs then use the flowers in stanza 5, throwing their petals onto the river as the two swans (representing the brides-to-be for whom the poem was written) pass and making flower crowns for them. For the speaker, this transforms the natural world into a very human space: the harvested flowers make the river seem like a bridal chamber, thereby directly including nature in this human experience, and also making the human ritual seem all the more natural.

Likewise, the nymph's song in stanza 6 describes the wedding bed as a "blissful bower." The description is traditional in the English Renaissance, but in the context of this particular poem it seems especially significant. Just as the nymphs work to make nature part of the wedding ceremony, so too is the place where the wedding will be consummated compared, metaphorically, to a natural space.

As the nymph's song continues, she outlines what a successful marriage looks like: a union filled with peace, harmony, and fruitfulness. It seems almost as though she is describing the condition of the pastoral world along the banks of the River Thames, with its abundance of flowers and happy nymphs. In this sense, the poem makes an argument about what marriage actually is. A successful marriage, in the speaker's opinion, is one which makes use of the comfort of nature while also directly taking on nature's most beautiful and peaceful characteristics. The distinction between natural abundance and the human institution of marriage is ultimately a false one, and the poem works to show its readers how one serves the other. In other words, a good marriage is entirely natural, and like the natural world, it is filled with beauty, peace, and abundance.

Of course, the marriages-to-be of Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset are importantly different from modern marriages, which stress companionship and compatibility between partners. Marriage in Spencer's time was as much a political alliance as a matter of the heart. For Spencer's readers, then, the intrusion of marriage into the natural world would mark another place where the distinction between politics and nature breaks down. By drawing his readers attention to nature as a *model* for marriage, Spencer attempts to bring the lessons of nature into politics, rather than separating the two.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 19-36
- Lines 73-90
- Lines 91-108

THE FRAGILITY OF PERFECTION

The world of the "Prothalamion" seems utterly perfect—almost unbelievably so. The weather's calm and warm, but not *too* hot. The flowers are all in bloom. The river refuses to wet the swans' "silken feathers," and the grooms are so handsome they look like the sons of a god. If this seems a bit hyperbolic, the speaker gives readers a series of hints that there lingers darker, more violent dynamics under the surface of this perfect beauty. The poem's gorgeous celebration of marriage and political order is actually somewhat equivocal and ambiguous in the end: even as it celebrates nature, it marks the way that nature is marred by decay and violence. The perfection the poem displays is *conditional*, under threat, and possibly a fantasy.

For instance, in the opening lines of the poem, the speaker notes the delicacy and beauty of the weather. Yet he describes this perfection as *temporary*: "Zephyrus" might "delay / Hot Titans beams." It's unclear how long this delay can last, and the word "delay" itself suggests that it definitely *won't* last forever; it can only be forestalled. Eventually, the unpleasant characteristics of nature will return—and so too, will the darker

side of marriage.

Similarly in stanza 3, the speaker compares the two swans to "Jove himself when he a swan would be / For love of Leda." The ostensible purpose of the comparison is to emphasize how pure and white these swans are. But in making the comparison, the speaker introduces some dark and unsettling material. In the myth of Leda and the Swan, Zeus transforms himself into a swan and rapes Leda—an act which, eventually, precipitates the Trojan war.

The presence of this violent and disturbing myth in a poem celebrating marriage suggests that the speaker may have his doubts about the marriages in question—or about marriage in general. Though he presents a vision of a perfect, balanced marriage, he suggests that this balance is under threat, and perhaps unsustainable—just as "Hot Titans beams" can only be delayed, not prevented altogether. That the speaker repeatedly asks the river to be quiet and gentle while he recites his poem also suggests that he knows the roar of the river will return soon enough, and that the marriage day is only a momentary respite from the harsh reality of the world.

There is thus a tension at the heart of the poem: even as it celebrates nature and its beauty, it also recognizes how fragile that beauty is. It marks the way that beauty is under threat—and may actually contain the seeds of violence that will undo the political order (in other words, the marriage) that emerges from it. This might be read as a call to honor this beauty while it lasts, or as a reminder to be wary of potential marital complications that could disturb the peace and harmony marriage is meant to create.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Line 18
- Line 36
- Lines 42-45
- Line 54
- Line 72
- Line 90
- Line 108
- Line 126
- Line 144
- Line 162
- Line 180

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

CALM was the day, and through the trembling air
Sweet breathing Zephyrus did softly play,
A gentle spirit, that lightly did delay
Hot Titan's beams, which then did glister fair;

The first four lines of the "Prothalamion" establish the poem's mood and some of its central concerns. The speaker begins by describing the weather, using a series of adjectives like "calm," "trembling," and "gentle" to suggest that the poem takes place on an unusually beautiful and serene day. As he does so, he invokes a number of gods from Greek myth: Zephyrus and Titan. Zephyrus embodies the west wind—which the Greeks considered to be the gentlest and mildest of winds. He is associated with morning, suggesting that this poem takes place during the early morning. He is also associated with spring—and thus with fertility, pregnancy, and rebirth.

The presence of Zephyrus early in the poem suggests a few important things about the "Prothalamion." First, the poem is interested in using Greek mythology for its own purposes. Though it was written by an English poet (and set in England), it draws on myths from an ancient and distant culture in its depictions of natural harmony and beauty. Second, the poem is deeply concerned with fertility, reproduction, and the rituals that surround those acts—specifically marriage.

The second Greek figure, Titan, is less specific than Zephyrus: the Titans were a race of Gods, including Gaia (Earth) and Chronos (Time). In this instance, "Titan's beams" refers to the sun, whose beams "glister"—shine with unbroken brilliance—on the day. In the Renaissance, leading Protestant intellectuals often interpreted Biblical images of the sun as metaphors about temptation. In these early lines, there is a sense that the beautiful weather the speaker describes is threatened. In line 3, for instance, the speaker notes that Zephyrus "delay[s]," the unpleasant heat of Titan's beams—and, perhaps, the sin and temptation they symbolize. One wonders how long this delay will last: presumably, not forever. As the speaker paints a picture of a beautiful, unspoiled day, he also suggests that it will inevitably fall into sin and decline.

The meter of these opening lines is strongly iambic; they are rhymed *abba*, like the first quatrain of a Petrarchan sonnet. However, there are disturbances in the meter: for instance, the first line opens with a trochaic substitution:

> CALM was | the day, | and through | the trem | bling air

The trochee in the first foot suggests, again, that the calmness and beauty of the day is something temporary and unusual: just as the line resolves into an iambic rhythm after its first foot, so too the calm of the day will disappear in time.

LINES 5-9

When I whose sullen care,
Through discontent of my long fruitless stay
In prince's court, and expectation vain
Of idle hopes, which still do fly away

Like empty shadows, did afflict my brain,

In lines 5-9, the tone of the poem shifts abruptly. The speaker switches from discussing the beauty of the weather to outlining his anxieties and failures in politics. This shift is marked by an abrupt transformation of the meter. While the first four lines of the poem are in strong iambic pentameter, line 5 is in iambic trimeter, 4 syllables shorter than the previous lines. The line thus feels like a hiccup, an interruption: it disrupts the smooth flow of the poem's rhythm—and signals to the reader that something important has changed in the content of the lines.

When I | whose su | llen care,

Similarly the rhyme scheme shifts: where the first four lines are rhymed *abba*, the next five are rhymed *abcbc*: Spenser not only introduces *new* rhymes, but he switches the *pattern* they're actually organized into. For the reader, these formal shifts signal that there is a sharp difference between the beautiful weather—the natural scene—where the poem opens, and the dark, dismal world of politics to which it quickly turns.

In lines 5-9, the speaker describes himself as someone whose political ambitions have been frustrated. He seems oppressed by anxiety and unhappiness. He has spent a long time at court, attempting to realize some ambition or expectations (he is vague about *what* precisely he hoped to accomplish). But his hopes have proven idle and his expectations were in vain. The speaker's description of these failures contrasts to the language with which he describes the weather in the first four lines. For example, where the mention of Zephyrus suggests calm and fertility, the speaker's "stay" at court has been "fruitless"—that is, infertile.

Similarly, the "empty shadows" of political ambition contrast with the glistering beams of the sun in line 4. The speaker suggests that politics is a game of shadows; that it lacks substance and is sterile and unproductive. By contrast, the natural world is firm, real, and fertile. These implicit oppositions in the poem's opening lines not only prioritize nature over politics; they also suggest that nature is *separate* from politics.

LINES 10-16

Walked forth to ease my pain
Along the shore of silver streaming Thames,
Whose rutty bank, the which his river hems,
Was painted all with variable flowers,
And all the meads adorned with dainty gems,
Fit to deck maidens' bowers,
And crown their paramours,

Seeking relief from his frustrated ambitions at court, the speaker turns to nature in lines 10-16. He leaves the court and walks out onto the banks of the Thames river, where he sees a beautiful natural scene: a meadow full of flowers and a silver river. He describes this encounter with nature as a physical relief: it "ease[s his] pain." The Thames River notably flows through London and through the English countryside around London. It thus passes through the political and cultural heart of England. Even as the speaker retreats from politics, then, he situates himself at the heart of his nation.

Moreover, he presents a highly idealized, even false picture of the river. During the 16th century, when Spenser wrote this poem, the Thames river was already highly polluted with sewage from the human settlements along its banks. In "On the Famous Voyage," a contemporary poem, Ben Jonson describes the river as full of "stench, diseases, and old filth, their mother." The classical references that appear through this stanza (and the poem) help to distance Spenser's readers from the grotesque reality of the river, and to imagine it as a space of peace and natural beauty.

In lines 10-16, the speaker focuses on this (perhaps imaginary) beauty. He describes the banks of the Thames as peaceful, lovely spaces—as meadows, full of flowers so beautiful they look like gemstones. He also focuses on the possible uses for those flowers: they are so beautiful they could be used to decorate the rooms of unmarried women, or they might be used to make flower-crowns for their sweethearts. Even as the speaker positions nature against politics—as something pure and real outside the court—he also thinks about nature in relation to human beings, contemplating the way natural beauty might be used in human life.

Line 10 is another line of iambic trimeter, with only three feet in the line:

Walked forth | to ease | my pain

Just as line 5 marked a break from the peaceful, placid descriptions of lines 1-4, so too line 10 marks a break from the court. Each of these moments marks a transition: a change in both content and in the space where the poem takes place.

Lines 11-14 return to iambic pentameter; lines 15-16 then fall back into iambic trimeter. Unlike the previous instances of trimeter in the stanza, however, these lines do *not* indicate a transition: instead, they *elaborate* on the thought that the speaker had been developing in lines 11-14 about how beautiful the flowers surrounding the river are.

These lines also break the pattern the poem had established up to this point. Previously, the speaker would give us four lines of iambic pentameter followed by a line of iambic trimeter. Here we get two lines of iambic trimeter right next to each other. The rhyme scheme similarly shifts in this part of the stanza, which is rhymed: *cddedee*. Again, the poem both introduces new rhyme sounds *and* a new way of *organizing* those sounds. As a result, the poem feels very melodious and rhythmic—and, at the same time, somewhat disorganized. It has a natural, unforced flow: like the currents of the river it describes, it moves according to

its own logic, and the reader is carried along in that flow.

LINES 17-18

Against the bridal day, which is not long:
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

In lines 17-18, Spenser introduces the poem's refrain: two lines that repeat (with some variations in the first line) at the end of every stanza of the poem. These lines are formally separated from the rest of the poem. In each stanza two lines of iambic trimeter come before the refrain, but the refrain itself breaks that rhythm: both line 17 and 18 are perfect lines of iambic pentameter.

Against | the bri | dal day, | which is | not long
Sweet Thames, | run soft | ly, till | I end | my song.

Further, they rhyme with themselves, using a new rhyme sound that hasn't appeared previously in the stanza. This gives these lines the feel of being separate from the rest of the poem conceptually, though each time he repeats them, Spenser works hard to make them flow naturally from the stanza. In this case, line 17 appears as a continuation of line 16: the maidens might use the flowers along the banks of the Thames to make flower crowns for their fiancés in advance of their wedding days which, Spenser insists, is not far off.

Line 18 is less clearly related to the stanza that precedes it. In the first stanza, the speaker has been telling us a story: about a beautiful day when he went for a walk along the banks of the Thames to assuage his disappointment with his life in politics. He has been addressing the reader directly as he talks about his experience. In line 18, he switches his address. Instead of talking to the *reader*, he speaks to the *river*—asking it to be quiet while he finishes his poem.

This request reveals a lingering anxiety about nature. Though he describes the natural world in highly idealized terms—as a space of perfection and beauty—he acknowledges here that the river can be loud and turbulent, and as such that it might drown out his song. He also acknowledges his limited power to control nature: he can *ask* the river to be quiet, but he can't *force* it to be. And his request is modest: he only wants the river to be quiet until he finishes his poem. The refrain thus suggests that human beings only have a limited capacity to control nature—and that nature is both beautiful *and* violent.

LINES 19-23

There, in a meadow, by the river's side,
A flock of nymphs I chanced to espy,
All lovely daughters of the flood thereby,
With goodly greenish locks, all loose untied,
As each had been a bride;

In lines 19-23, the speaker continues the narrative he began in the poem's first stanza: in a meadow, on the banks of the river, he sees a group of women with green-hair hanging down. Spenser calls these women "nymphs"—another reference to Greek mythology. In Greek myth, nymphs are often associated with bodies of water, such as rivers and ponds. They embody the spirit of these places, its unique character or personality. They're also traditionally very beautiful female figures. As a result, poets often compare beautiful women to nymphs.

In Spenser's case, however, these women are not metaphorically nymphs: they are actually nymphs. They are, he specifies in line 21, the daughters of the rive. And they have green hair, which hangs loosely about their shoulders—in an era before hair dye and spiky punk rock hair cuts. Their hair is green, instead, because they are themselves *part* of nature, closely aligned with the plants of the meadow where they live.

In line 23, Spenser specifies that the nymphs, with their long, untied hair, look like brides. Just like the previous stanza, the speaker's thoughts wander to marriage: everything he sees reminds him of wedding rituals, of brides, and bridal chambers. Even as the nymphs seem intimately related to the beautiful natural meadow where they live, they are therefore also wrapped up in human rituals and customs. The distinctions between nature and human life that the speaker draws in the first stanza become less solid in moments like this: nature may be separate from politics, but it is intimately involved in marriage—which, as the poem makes clear in the following stanzas, is *itself* a political project. The separation between nature and politics is thus at best partial: in fact, it may not even exist at all.

These lines follow the pattern established in stanza one: they rhyme *abbaa*; the first four lines are more or less in iambic pentameter and line 5 switches into iambic trimeter. Line 2 is the most metrically irregular line in the poem so far:

A flock | of nymphs | I chanced |to espy,

Instead of the usual five stresses in a line of iambic pentameter, this line has only four. It ends with an anapest. One might read this metrical disturbance as a register of the speaker's surprise at seeing these beautiful, mythological creatures: their beauty knocks him out of his otherwise polished rhythms.

LINES 24-33

And each one had a little wicker basket,
Made of fine twigs, entrailed curiously,
In which they gathered flowers to fill their flasket,
And with fine fingers cropt full featously
The tender stalks on high.
Of every sort, which in that meadow grew,
They gathered some; the violet pallid blue,
The little daisy, that at evening closes,
The virgin lily, and the primrose true,
With store of vermeil roses,

Having described the way the nymphs look, the speaker moves on in lines 24-33 to describe what they're doing: each has a shallow wicker basket (Spenser uses a technical and rare term for these baskets, calling them "flaskets") in her hands, made of intricately woven twigs. Spenser spends considerable time describing and praising the baskets: the way that they are carefully, skillfully assembled. Indeed, the baskets seem almost bodily: the speaker describes them as "entrailed"—which means that they look like intestines in the way that the twigs are woven together.

The nymphs are out in the meadow, plucking its flowers. The speaker lingers over the act of gathering the flowers, and he praises the skill and beauty with which the nymphs do so. In lines 29-33, the speaker lists the flowers that they gather: violets, daisies, lilies, primroses, and roses. For many readers, these lines will be full of pleasure and delight: the description of the flowers is beautiful and rhythmic. It stands in sharp contrast to the dark world of political disappointment that the speaker describes in the first stanza. In an initial reading, at least, the meadow where these nymphs are at work seems like a place of peace and relaxation.

A closer reading may, however, complicate matters. Scholars are often tempted to find symbolic meaning in the flowers that they pick—but the sheer number of different kinds of flowers makes it hard to establish a definite meaning. Instead, it is more likely that Spenser intends his readers to remember two episodes from classical mythology: Persephone's abduction by Hades, and the abduction of Europa by Zeus. In both episodes, a young woman is out gathering flowers with her friends when a powerful god abducts her. Though the episodes are not directly alluded to in this poem, the echo is pronounced—all the more for Spenser's early readers, who would've been steeped in classical mythology. These allusions cast a shadow over the scene: its idyllic beauty is threatened by dark possibilities.

The lines fall into a similar—but not identical—formal pattern to the pattern established in the first stanza. Its meter, with its pattern of iambic pentameter interrupted (at lines 28 and 33) by lines in iambic trimeter, follows the general scheme of the poem. More interestingly, they rhyme *cbcbcded* (unlike the first stanza, which rhymes *bcbccddede*: the placement of the *c* and *b* rhymes has *reversed* from the equivalent place in the opening stanza). The alteration in the rhyme pattern continues to build a sense that the poem is both organized and loose. Instead of marching in lockstep advance, it flows—much like the river it describes.

LINES 34-36

To deck their bridegrooms' posies
Against the bridal day, which was not long:
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

In the final three lines of the second stanza, lines 34-36, the speaker returns from his long description of the nymphs picking flowers in the meadow. He returns to the major theme of his poem: marriage. He gives a reason for the work the nymphs are doing: they're gathering flowers for their fiancés to wear on their wedding day. He further specifies that their wedding is coming up quickly. He also repeats the line that closed the poem's first stanza, once again asking the river to be quiet until he finishes his song.

The return to marriage at the end of the stanza's long and beautiful list of flowers has the effect of clarifying the stanza, reminding the reader what the poem is about. In this poem, each of the activities that the speaker describes is somehow related to marriage. And each of the figures that appear in the poem—from the river, to the nymphs, to the flowers in the meadow—participates in, or contributes to, that marriage. One might go so far as to say that the speaker is only interested in things that can contribute to marriage: anything ugly or useless, he simply leaves out of the poem. (This is the likely fate of the sewage that poisoned the Thames during Spenser's life, and which he fails to mention in his description of the river).

There is a slight difference between lines 35 and 17: the speaker changes the tense, from "is" to "was." This slight alteration doesn't make much difference to most readers. Instead, most readers will be struck by the repetition: the way each stanza returns to the same thought, the same words. This repetition gives the poem a musical feel: it's like those two lines are the chorus of a song.

LINES 37-41

With that, I saw two swans of goodly hue
Come softly swimming down along the Lee;
Two fairer birds I yet did never see.
The snow which doth the top of Pindus strew,
Did never whiter shew,

At the start of the third stanza, in lines 37-41, the speaker returns to narrating the events of his day on the bank of the Thames. After watching the nymphs gather flowers for their weddings, he sees two swans come swimming down "the Lee." (There is some ambiguity about what Spenser means by "the Lee." In some contexts, the word simply means "meadow" or "riverbank." However, there is also a river in England named the Lea, a tributary for the Thames. If Spenser means the latter, the reader should imagine the swans swimming down this smaller river and joining the main channel of the Thames.)

The swans themselves represent the two brides to-be whom the poem praises: Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset, the daughter of the Earl of Worcester. There is no clear reason why Spenser chose to symbolize the brides with swans. The Thames itself was famous in the period for its many swans, so the bird is a fitting choice for the river. It is possible to that the actual procession of the brides in 1596 took place on barges designed to resemble swans. Finally, the swan often serves as a symbol for the poet in Renaissance literature. (For example, Ben

Jonson called William Shakespeare the "sweet swan of Avon.")

The speaker spends the next several lines of the poem describing the swans in detail, praising their beauty—he has never seen more beautiful birds, he claims in line 39. He does so by comparing them to a series of scenes and characters from Greek mythology. In lines 40 and 41, he compares them to the snow on top of the Pindus mountains, a mountain range in Thessaly, in northern Greece. (Thessaly is the site of a number of the references in the poem, including the Tempe Valley in line 79). The swans, Spenser claims, are whiter than the snow on Mt. Pindus ever was. In a culture that prized paleness as a sign of beauty—so much so that aristocratic women avoided leaving the house, lest they get a tan—this is a high compliment indeed!

Lines 37-41 follow the metrical and rhyme pattern established in the first two stanzas of the poem. Lines 37-40 are in perfectly regular iambic pentameter—the smoothest and most regular stretch in the poem so far. Line 41 is in perfectly regular iambic trimeter. Though the opening stanzas are strongly metrical, they have their fair share of substitutions. Here, by contrast, the poem seems to be falling into line, becoming more sure of itself. The rhyme is similarly smooth and predictable: *abbaa*.

LINES 42-46

Nor Jove himself, when he a swan would be
For love of Leda, whiter did appear:
Yet Leda was they say as white as he,
Yet not so white as these, nor nothing near.
So purely white they were,

In lines 42-46, the speaker continues to praise the beauty of the swans, this time comparing them to a famous swan in mythology. In myth, Jove (or Zeus, as the Greeks called him; Jove is his less common Latin name), transformed himself into a swan and raped a mortal woman named Leda. Jove impregnated Leda and she gave birth to two children, a boy named Polydeuces and a girl named Helen—who became, later in life, the famous Helen of Troy. Helen was the cause of the famous Trojan war; she was abducted by the Trojans and her husband made war on them to win her back. The rape of Leda thus ultimately leads to war; it is the cause of a violent and dark chapter in Greek mythology. This makes it a rather strange myth to invoke in a poem about marriage and its benefits! Indeed, the dark undertones of the myth haunt the poem and its celebration of marriage.

Whether the speaker actively intends to bring these undertones into the poem remains up for debate. What's clear is that he invokes the myth in order to pay another compliment to the brides and the swans that represent them in the poem. Their plumage, he says, is whiter than Jove's plumage when he became a swan—it's whiter, even, than Leda herself was at the time of her rape. The speaker describes the swans as "purely white." The use of the word "purely" suggests why the speaker is so obsessed with the swans' whiteness—beyond catering to Renaissance beauty standards. White is often a symbol of innocence and sexual purity. In harping on this point, he implies that the brides are virgins.

Lines 42-46 preserve the metrical regularity of lines 37-41: like them, they are perfectly iambic, with four lines of pentameter followed by a line of trimeter. The rhyme scheme also returns to the pattern laid out in the first stanza: *bcbcc*. To modern ears, "were" and "near" sound like a slant rhyme, but for Spenser's contemporaries they likely would've been a perfect rhyme. By this point, the complicated and variable form of the poem has settled into the background: while the reader is aware of the poem's meter and rhyme, it is more like a quietly babbling brook than a raging river.

LINES 47-54

That even the gentle stream, the which them bare,
Seemed foul to them, and bade his billows spare
To wet their silken feathers, lest they might
Soil their fair plumes with water not so fair,
And mar their beauties bright,
That shone as heaven's light,
Against their bridal day, which was not long:
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

In the first ten lines of this stanza, the speaker has focused on comparing the swans to famously white things—for instance, the snow on top of a mountain range. In lines 47-54, he switches his focus and examines how the river responds to the swans' beauty. The river carries them; they paddle on and float upon it. But the river is so impressed by their whiteness and beauty that he thinks his water will make their feathers dirty. This is an example of personification: the speaker talks as though the river had a mind and was capable of reflecting on the beauty of the swans. The speaker also talks as though the river has the capacity to control itself. In lines 48-51, he says that the river tells his waves (his "billows") to avoid getting the swans wet—and diminishing their beauty, which he says in line 52, is as bright as the sun.

The speaker reveals why the river is so careful with the swans' feathers in line 53, the first line of the refrain: he doesn't want to ruin their wedding day, which is coming up. Line 54, "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song," sounds different at the end of this stanza than it has at the end of the previous stanzas. There, it seemed like a prayer or a request, directed at the river. In this stanza, however, the reader has some evidence that the river might actually be listening: that it is a careful, considerate body of water, eager to help get the swans to their wedding, and equally eager to avoid messing up their feathers on the way. It seems reasonable, then, for the poet to ask the river for similar consideration—since his song too is an important part of the wedding (at least he hopes it is!).

The meter of these lines is a little bit less regular than the rest

of the stanza—but not significantly so. The rhyme follows the pattern set up by now in the earlier stanzas of the poem: *ddedeeff*. This stanza is thus one of the few in the poem that follows exactly the pattern set out in the second half of the first stanza of the poem.

LINES 55-63

Eftsoons the nymphs, which now had flowers their fill,
Ran all in haste, to see that silver brood,
As they came floating on the crystal flood.
Whom when they saw, they stood amazed still,
Their wondering eyes to fill.
Them seemed they never saw a sight so fair,
Of fowls so lovely, that they sure did deem
Them heavenly born, or to be that same pair
Which through the sky draw Venus' silver team;

Most of the poem's fourth stanza recounts the nymphs' reaction to the sight of the two birds, with the speaker relating how they feel about what they see. Before he does so, though, he narrates what happens when the nymphs first see the two swans: in lines 55-59, he says that the nymphs run down to the riverside to watch them go by. They've picked enough flowers already, he says in line 55, so they're more than happy to abandon the meadows and enjoy the spectacle. In lines 58-59, the speaker begins to describe the nymphs' reaction to the swans: they are delighted and entranced by the beauty of the birds. Indeed, he notes in lines 60-61, the nymphs have never seen two more beautiful birds.

Stanza four thus continues the work of the previous stanza: it is dedicated to complimenting the swans on their physical beauty. It continues that work in another way too: just as the speaker compares the swans to Greek myth to establish their beauty in stanza 3, the nymphs imagine that the swans are characters out of myth. The nymphs think the swans are so beautiful, the reader learns in lines 61-63, that they cannot be mortal creatures, and must instead be divine. The nymphs take a guess as to what divine creatures these swans might be: they think that they are the same pair of swans that Venus uses to draw her carriage through the sky.

The speaker here is referring to a popular myth in the Renaissance that Venus's carriage had swans instead of horses to pull it forward (and that it thus could fly). In this moment, then, the nymphs fall into the broad pattern that has emerged in the poem: they indicate that something is beautiful by comparing to something from classical mythology.

These lines follow, with some variations, the metrical and rhyme schemes laid out in the previous stanzas. The first four lines of the stanza are in iambic pentameter, followed by a line of iambic trimeter; the next four lines fall back into iambic pentameter, with some substitutions here and there. Such substitutions are not unusual in a poem of this length and are not particularly significant for interpreting the poem.

The rhyme scheme in the first 9 lines of the stanza is *abbaacdcd*. It thus resembles the second stanza, not the first. The poem seems to refuse to settle into a single rhyme scheme—and the trouble comes in lines 5-10 in each stanza. This variation keeps the poem feeling loose, like a flowing river.

LINES 64-72

For sure they did not seem
To be begot of any earthly seed,
But rather angels, or of angels' breed:
Yet were they bred of Somers-heat they say,
In sweetest season, when each flower and weed
The earth did fresh array,
So fresh they seemed as day,
Even as their bridal day, which was not long:
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

In the first part of this stanza, the nymphs compare the swans to the mythological swans who draw Venus's carriage—a comparison that compliments the swans' beauty by comparing them to figures from classical mythology. In lines 64-72, the nymphs and the speaker complicate this comparison.

In lines 64-66, the speaker continues to describe the nymphs' reaction to seeing the swans for the first time floating down the river Thames. If they seem to the nymphs like the swans that draw Venus's carriage, that's because it's hard for the nymphs to imagine that anything mortal—anything that lives on Earth—could've given birth to the swans; they're too beautiful for that. Instead, the nymphs think, they must be angels, or at least descended from angels. This is a surprising suggestion.

Until this point, the poem has drawn on Greek mythology exclusively. But there are no angels in Greek mythology. Though it contains Christian themes (and even references to the Christian Bible), the poem does not explicitly draw on Christian theology until this moment. The reference to angels complicates the poem. As much as the poem wants to draw on the classical past, it is also part of the world that Spenser actually lives in—it shares its religion (Christianity) and its geography (the Thames River). The poem also acknowledges the politically powerful and important figures in Spenser's world—indeed, it is dedicated to the daughters of a powerful Earl, the Earl of Worcester.

The speaker acknowledges this in the lines that follow. He jumps in and corrects the nymphs: these swans were actually "bred of Somers-heat." This is, initially, a confusing clarification: one wonders what it means to be descended from the heat of a summer's day. And the next lines don't clarify matters much: the speaker goes on to describe the season when the swans were born, noting the beauty of the weather and the landscape during that summer—as beautiful, he says, as their upcoming wedding day will be.

The key to these lines is an obscure pun. The given name of the Earl of Worcester, father of the two brides, was Edward

Somerset. "Somers-heat" sounds a lot like "Somerset"—especially for Renaissance readers, who would've pronounced *heat* like *het*. The pun subtly acknowledges that Somerset is the father of the brides to be. And it also subtly flatters him: being his child is equal to being descended from angels. Though the poem is not explicit here, it quietly pays tribute to an important figure in Spenser's society.

These lines mostly follow the pattern established in preceding stanzas, with iambic pentameter and iambic trimeter lines alternating at regular intervals. (There are metrical variations throughout but they do not significantly affect the interpretation of the poem). The lines rhyme *deefeffgg* and end with the usual refrain. Line 71 is carefully integrated into the lines that precede it, claiming that the summer when the swans were conceived was as beautiful as their wedding will be, while line 72 stands on its own.

LINES 73-82

Then forth they all out of their baskets drew
Great store of flowers, the honour of the field,
That to the sense did fragrant odours yield,
All which upon those goodly birds they threw,
And all the waves did strew,
That like old Peneus' waters they did seem,
When down along by pleasant Tempe's shore,
Scattered with flowers, through Thessaly they stream,
That they appear through lilies' plenteous store,
Like a bride's chamber floor.

the fourth stanza documents the way the nymphs respond to the sudden appearance of two beautiful swans—symbolizing the soon to-be-married Somerset sisters—floating down the River Thames. But the nymphs' reactions in stanza four are largely internal: they are astonished by the beauty of the birds, and they try to figure out who they are, whether angels or mythological creatures. In the next two stanzas, the fifth and sixth, the nymphs respond physically to the swans, doing things to honor them and their beauty. In lines 73-82, the nymphs take the flowers out of their baskets (flowers that, we learn in lines 34-36, they were saving for their own weddings) and throw them onto the swans and into the river.

With the river covered in flower petals, the speaker notes that it looks like the river Peneus, a river that flows through the Tempe Valley in Thessaly. After the allusions at the end of the fourth stanza to the Somerset family and to angels, the poem returns to Greece—specifically to Thessaly, which the speaker had previously invoked in line 40 (when he referenced the Pindus mountains in Thessaly).

The poem returns again and again to this part of Greece because its beauty was well-known in classical times—and many poets from ancient times, like the Roman poet Catullus, praised that beauty. The speaker is not drawing on any old Grecian landscape in this poem: he's drawing on a famously lovely one.

However beautiful that landscape may be, though, its beauty is secondary to its function: to frame and glorify the Somersets and their engagements. The speaker returns to this point in lines 81-82: after comparing the Thames to the Peneus river, he notes that both rivers look like a bridal chamber with its floor covered in scattered flower petals to welcome the bride and groom after their wedding. It's a subtle moment, but it reminds the reader of the poem's purpose, the reason why it is at pains to emphasize the beauty of the landscape and the brides: there's a wedding coming up, and an important one at that. It matters to the speaker (and the author) of the poem to be in the good graces of the people involved in the wedding.

Formally, the first 10 lines of this stanza echo the previous stanzas: they divide into two groups of 5 lines apiece. The first 4 lines (lines 73-76 and 78-81) of each group are in iambic pentameter. For example, line 76 scans:

And which | upon | those good | ly birds | they threw,

Lines 77 and 82, the fifth line of each group, is in iambic trimeter. For example, line 77 scans:

And all | the waves | did strew,

Despite some variations in the meter, the rhythm of the poem remains strong and unbroken. The lines rhyme *abbaacdcdd*, echoing the rhyme scheme of stanza 2.

LINES 83-90

Two of those nymphs meanwhile, two garlands bound,
Of freshest flowers which in that mead they found,
The which presenting all in trim array,
Their snowy foreheads therewithal they crowned,
Whilst one did sing this lay,
Prepared against that day,
Against their bridal day, which was not long:
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

Up to this point in the poem, the reader encounters the nymphs as a group: none of them stand out or have any distinguishing characteristics. That changes in the second half of the fifth stanza. While the big group of nymphs scatters flower petals on the river, two nymphs emerge from the crowd with two crowns made of flowers; they present these to the swans, placing them on their foreheads. One of the nymphs begins to sing a song—a song which she has prepared for the swans' weddings.

The next stanza, stanza 6, is entirely dedicated to this song, though a reader might hear the final line of stanza 5 as the first line of the nymph's song: "run softly, till I end my song" might be the nymph *herself* asking the river to be quiet as she prepares to sing. In the early editions of the "Prothalamion" there are no quotation marks to separate the nymph's song from the rest of

the poem, so readers would have to decide for themselves where it begins and ends.

This is an intriguing transformation: though we do not learn anything about these two nymphs, why they are special or different, they get a moment in the spotlight at the center of the poem. (Stanza 5 is the halfway point in the poem). The poem is carefully calibrated in terms of its line numbers: it has exactly 180 lines. Some scholars believe that this number refers to the 180 degrees the sun travels as it crosses the sky from morning to night. They are encouraged in this belief by another poem by Spenser, his "Epithalamion" (1595)—which also celebrates marriage. That poem has exactly 24 sections, one for each hour of the day. It thus seems reasonable that Spenser would continue to experiment with ways of making the structure of his poem register the passing of time. If those scholars are right, this stanza takes place at noon on the dot.

Lines 83-90 follow the formal pattern that one finds in the rest of the poem. Lines 83-86 are in perfect iambic pentameter, without noticeable metrical substitutions. Lines 87 and 88 fall into iambic trimeter; the final two lines of the stanza, 89-90, return as one by now expects, to iambic pentameter. The lines are rhymed *eefeffgg*, following the pattern of stanza 2.

LINES 91-100

'Ye gentle birds, the world's fair ornament,
And heaven's glory, whom this happy hour
Doth lead unto your lovers' blissful bower,
Joy may you have and gentle heart's content
Of your love's complement:
And let fair Venus, that is queen of love,
With her heart-quelling son upon you smile,
Whose smile, they say, hath virtue to remove
All love's dislike, and friendship's faulty guile
For ever to assoil.

The sixth stanza of the poem (lines 91-108) is dedicated to the nymph's song. It is the only section of the poem that is not in the speaker's voice—though the nymph and the speaker are strongly aligned in their priorities. Like the speaker, the nymph offers the swans a sophisticated and extended set of compliments on their physical beauty. And, also like the speaker, she focuses on their upcoming engagements and weddings, wishing them happiness and success in marriage. In doing so, she lays out explicitly the poem's values: what it thinks makes for a happy marriage.

In lines 91-100 specifically, the nymph portrays marriage as a space of joy, honesty, and peace. She begins by praising the swans' beauty, calling them "the world's fair ornament / And heaven's glory." These are highly formulaic, even cliched terms in Renaissance poetry. (In Shakespeare's Sonnet 1, for example, he calls his beloved "the world's fair ornament"). She then moves quickly to the engagement and marriage, noting that the swans/brides will be married and with their husbands soon.

The nymph then makes a series of wishes for their marriages: she hopes that they are joyful; that each partner will be satisfied with the match; and that Venus, the goddess of love, will smile on their marriages. Interestingly, the nymph further specifies that Venus's smile has the power to shape their marriages: it can remove "all love's dislike, and friendship's faulty guile." In other words, the nymph hopes that Venus will keep their marriages free from argument and deceit. As she does so, she implicitly outlines some of the challenges that marriages face: disagreements and dishonesty. And she also suggests what an ideal union might entail: peace, contentment, honesty, and mutual satisfaction.

These criteria are surprising for a writer from Spenser's era. The idea that marriage is about companionship is generally believed to emerge in the 100 years following Spenser's death (roughly between 1600 and 1700). In Spenser's time, new ideas about marriage were certainly beginning to circulate—and the nymph voices them here as ideals that marriages should reach for. But many marriages—including the marriages of the Somerset sisters—remained matters of politics, rather than matters of the heart. It is possible that the nymph (and behind her the speaker) genuinely hopes that the Somerset sisters will have the kind of companionship associated with modern marriage. It seems equally likely however that she invokes that ideal as a way of distracting from the less romantic realities of these marriages: that they were part of an elaborate political calculus on the part of the families involved, designed to improve their positions in a competitive and difficult political climate.

Lines 91-100 continue to uphold the formal pattern of the poem up to this point. Lines 91-94 and 96-99 fall into strong iambic pentameter, with occasional minor substitutions. The lines are rhymed *abbaacdcdd*, following the pattern of stanza 2 (rather than stanza 1).

LINES 101-108

Let endless peace your steadfast hearts accord,
And blessed plenty wait upon your board,
And let your bed with pleasures chaste abound,
That fruitful issue may to you afford,
Which may your foes confound,
And make your joys redound
Upon your bridal day, which is not long:
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.'

In the first half of stanza 6, the nymph focuses on how she hopes the swans will feel in their marriages—wishing them happiness, peace, and companionship. In lines 101-108, her emphasis shifts. After wishing in line 101 that the couples will experience "endless peace," she turns to the house and the bedroom. In line 102, she wishes that the couples will always have plenty to eat—a wish that conveys a broader hope: she hopes that they will always be prosperous, able to live free from

hunger and poverty. This wish is less about how the couples feel or relate to each other. It's more about the conditions of their marriage and the material circumstances of their shared lives.

In the rest of the stanza the nymph shifts emphasis again: instead of focusing on the emotional life of the marriages or its material circumstances, she focuses on the role of sex and reproduction in marriage. In line 103, she wishes that the brides' beds will "with chaste pleasures abound." To modern ears, this is a contradiction in terms: if you're chaste, you're not having sex. One might wonder how there can be chaste pleasures in "bed." This paradox occurs often in Spenser's poetry, and in the writings of other Protestant thinkers from the period. For them, it is not a contradiction. For them, chastity is not simply abstinence from sex. Instead, chastity involves refraining from what they consider to be unlawful or immoral forms of sex. (This would include sex before and outside marriage). For example, in 1567, Thomas Palfreyman writes, "The first degree of chastitie, is pure virginitie: ye second faithful matrimony." The nymph's wish is not contradictory. She does not hope that the swans will have sexless marriages. Instead, she hopes that they will have lawful, moral, and ultimately procreative, sex lives.

Indeed, procreation is a key sign of chastity in marriage for Protestant thinkers like Spenser: they hope that sex, when it occurs, will lead directly to children. In lines 104-107, the nymph focuses on this aspect of sex, hoping that the swans will have many children—and that the children will participate in their families' political projects, defeating their enemies and increasing their joys. The nymph draws a strong, if implicit contrast, between her ideal image of marriage and the speaker's own experience of politics, outlined in the first stanza. The nymph hopes that the swans' marriages will be "fruitful"; the speaker's time at court has been "fruitless." Marriage—in the idealized vision presented by the nymph—is thus the opposite of politics, a space of joy and mutuality.

Once again, however, the reader is confronted by the realities of the marriages being described: for all the nymph's idealism, these marriages remain part of an elaborate political game. While the nymph is not insincere in her praise or her ideals, the reality of the marriages she describes is considerably more complicated than she allows for here.

The stanza thus outlines the nymph's ideals for the swans' marriages—and also sets some boundaries and rules for what constitutes a good, lawful marriage. As the nymph outlines these rules, her song becomes highly regulated and strict: lines 101-108 are some of the most metrically regular in the poem. Lines 101-104 and 107-108 are in perfect iambic pentameter; lines 105-106 are in perfect iambic trimeter. The rhyme, which sometimes is a bit soft, verging on slant rhyme, is strong, full, and direct throughout: *eefeffgg*. One has the sense that the form of the poem is straightening its back, reinforcing its posture, as if to assert its own adherence to the rules and expectations the nymph outlines.

LINES 109-126

So ended she; and all the rest around
To her redoubled that her undersong,
Which said their bridal day should not be long.
And gentle echo from the neighbour ground
Their accents did resound.
So forth those joyous birds did pass along,
Adown the Lee, that to them murmured low,
As he would speak, but that he lacked a tongue,
Yet did by signs his glad affection show,
Making his stream run slow.
And all the fowl which in his flood did dwell
Gan flock about these twain, that did excel
The rest so far as Cynthia doth shend
The lesser stars. So they, enranged well,
Did on those two attend,
And their best service lend,
Against their wedding day, which was not long:
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

Stanza 7 (lines 109-126) is a transitional stanza: it wraps up the nymph's song and sees the swans move on, floating down river toward London. At the start of the stanza, in lines 109-111, the other nymphs join in, repeating the last line of the nymph's song: "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song." This line echoes around the meadow. Then, as the sound dies away, the swans float down river.

As if answering the repeated demand to "run softly," the river murmurs to the swans as they float down—as though he wants to speak to them, but doesn't have a tongue to do so. The river finds other ways to make his affection manifest, however: for instance, by running slowly. As the swans travel down the river, all the birds who live along it also flock around them—though they are much less beautiful than the swans. As the speaker notes in lines 120-121, the swans are like the moon and the birds are like the stars—they're that much more beautiful and brilliant than the birds that now surround them.

The speaker describes the birds as "enranged" around the swans, an interesting and unusual word choice. The word literally means "to place in a rank" or "to organize." It thus carries a strong sense of hierarchy. To enrange something means to put it in its place, to rank it in relation to other things. The birds form a kind of hierarchy around the swans, with the most beautiful and best birds closest to them, and lesser birds farther away. But because the swans are so beautiful and extraordinary, all of the other birds offer their service to the swans for their wedding, as we learn in lines 124-126. If the birds are organized in a hierarchy, the swans are at the pinnacle of that hierarchy. In these lines the speaker suggests that the natural world is, like the human world, structured by

hierarchies, in which some creatures (or people) serve other creatures (or people).

The speaker further suggests that these hierarchies are justified: there are some birds that simply deserve honor and service; there are others who deserve to serve. In this moment, the natural world ceases to be separate from human life, with its politics and structures of power. Instead, the natural world both mirrors—and justifies—the hierarchies that characterize the politics of Spenser's era.

Stanza 7 is one of the rare stanzas that precisely replicates the rhyme scheme of stanza 1: *abbaabcbccddedeeff*. Its meter is precise and regular, within the scheme the poem has set out. As the reader now expects, lines 113, 118, 123, and 124 are in iambic trimeter; the rest are in iambic pentameter. There are few metrical substitutions in the stanza and none are particularly noteworthy. The return to the rhyme scheme in stanza 1, however, is potentially important. Since there are so few stanzas that precisely replicate that rhyme scheme, the reader tends to notice when it happens—and tends to compare the stanzas that do repeat each other. In this case, the speaker may be asking us to compare and contrast the visions of nature presented in each stanza.

LINES 127-131

At length they all to merry London came,
To merry London, my most kindly nurse,
That to me gave this life's first native source;
Though from another place I take my name,
An house of ancient fame.

In lines 127-131, the swans and the party of birds accompanying them arrive in London. London is the capital of England. The Thames River runs through the heart of the city, passing some of its most important political and cultural institutions, including the Houses of Parliament—which was in Spenser's time (like our own) the main legislative body for English government. Up to this point in the poem, the speaker has been fairly reserved: he tells us what he sees, but after his initial complaints about his political failures in stanza 1, he doesn't tell us much about himself. The arrival of the swans in London changes that, and at the start of stanza 8, the speaker gives us a little bit of background information about himself.

The reader learns, for instance, that the speaker was born in London and raised there (he calls the city his "nurse"). Here the speaker seems to be Spenser himself: Spenser was born and raised in London. The parallels between the poet and the speaker continue to accumulate in the next few lines. The speaker notes that he takes his name "from another place" (i.e., not London). Spenser's name comes from the Spenser family who lived at Althorp in Northhamptonshire (and who are the forefathers of Princess Diana). In these lines, the speaker thus shows us some important facts about himself: where he was born, and what family he belongs to. Spenser's early readers would've recognized these lines as a direct claim of authorship: Spenser is reminding his readers that *he* wrote this poem, that *he* is its speaker, and that *he* should reap the rewards that come from flattering a powerful family.

The opening lines of this stanza follow the poem's by now familiar pattern: four lines of strong iambic pentameter followed by a line of iambic trimeter, rhymed *abbaa*. Even as the poem shifts in setting and topic, its form remains constant, binding together its otherwise diverse parts.

LINES 132-144

There when they came, whereas those bricky towers,
The which on Thames' broad aged back do ride,
Where now the studious lawyers have their bowers
There whilom wont the Templar Knights to bide,
Till they decayed through pride:
Next whereunto there stands a stately place,
Where oft I gained gifts and goodly grace
Of that great lord, which therein wont to dwell,
Whose want too well now feels my friendless case.
But ah, here fits not well
Old woes but joys to tell
Against the bridal day, which is not long:
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

In lines 132-144, the speaker describes the important sights along the banks of the Thames as the swans float through London—and tells us how he feels about them. He begins by describing a set of brick towers, located in a neighborhood of London called "the Temple." It is so-named because it was originally the headquarters of the Knights Templar in England. The Knights Templar were a medieval Catholic military order. They were heavily involved in the Crusades and also invented an early form of banking. However, following the loss of the Holy Land in the 13th century, the Knights became the object of suspicion and mistrust across Europe; they were disbanded by the Pope in the early 14th century. Their headquarters and the neighborhood around it had become, by Spenser's day, the living quarters for law students in London. Spenser wrote the "Prothalamion" after England became a Protestant country, so the invocation of the Knights Templar is doubly exotic: it calls to mind a lost medieval and a lost Catholic past. For Spenser, ever the strict Protestant, this past must be suppressed: he is quick to criticize the Knights Templar for their pride.

The next stop on the swans' mini tour of London is Leicester House, the "stately place" the speaker mentions in line 137. Leicester House was first occupied by the Earl of Leicester who died in 1588; in 1596, when Spenser wrote this poem, the Earl of Essex was living there. The speaker doesn't tell us much about the house or its history, but he does note that he received "gifts and goodly grace" from its previous inhabitant. In other words, the Early of Leicester had given Spenser money and political protection while he was alive. Now, in his current

political and personal troubles, he sorely misses those gifts.

This might seem like an inappropriate topic for a poem celebrating and engagement: the speaker acknowledges as much in lines 141-142, noting "But ah, here fits not well / Old woes but joys to tell." Some scholars have treated this stanza and the stanza that follows it as digressions from the main theme of the poem. Certainly, they depart from the theme and tone of the poem up to now. But in these stanzas, the reader receives an important clue about Spenser's purpose in writing the poem: he wants to recover the financial and political protection he lost when the Earl of Leicester died in 1588. The poem, an elaborate compliment for a prominent family—with whom Spenser did not have an intimate relationship—could be read as a means to recover that protection.

The final lines of stanza 8 continue to uphold the formal pattern of the rest of the poem: lines 132-135, 137-140, and 143-144 are in iambic pentameter; lines 136 and 141-142 are in iambic trimeter. The rhymes follow the pattern of stanza 2: *cdcddeefeffgg*. The continuity of the form poses challenges for the reader as the content and the setting of the poem shifts. The reader must decide for themselves how the earlier parts of the poem are related to these later stanzas about London—and why they share the same form.

LINES 145-154

Yet therein now doth lodge a noble peer,
Great England's glory, and the world's wide wonder,
Whose dreadful name late through all Spain did thunder,
And Hercules' two pillars standing near
Did make to quake and fear:
Fair branch of honour, flower of chivalry,
That fillest England with thy triumph's fame,
Joy have thou of thy noble victory,
And endless happiness of thine own name
That promiseth the same:

In lines 145-154, the speaker continues his meditation on Leicester House, turning from the past to the present—and praising the person who lives there currently, the Earl of Essex, Robert Devereux. The speaker identifies Devereux as a "noble peer": in other words, a nobleman, an aristocrat. But he goes on to note that Devereux is famous for more than being into a noble family: he is a credit to his nation and famous throughout the world for his recent military victories in Spain. On August 7th, 1596, immediately before Spenser wrote "Prothalamion," Devereux had returned from a successful expedition to Spain, where he burned the Spanish fleet and captured the city of Cadiz, near the straights of Gibraltar. Devereux's victories so shocked Spain that even the cliffs of Gibraltar—also known as the "Pillars of Hercules"—quaked with fear.

After narrating these accomplishments, the speaker wishes Devereux joy and "endless happiness of thine own name / That promiseth the same" in lines 153-154. The lines are a pun on Devereux's name. The name is French in origin; it sounds a bit like a contraction of the French words "devenir" and "heureux"—meaning "to become happy." These lines recall the nymph's song in stanza 6: there is a similar tone to her well wishes to the brides-to-be and Spenser's praise of the victorious military commander. Nonetheless, there is some question as to why Spenser spends so much time praising Devereux, who was only peripherally involved in the wedding. Perhaps the most plausible explanation is that Spenser sought to win his favor—and with it, his financial support.

This question becomes all the more urgent because the form of the poem remains unchanged as the speaker diverges from his ostensible subject and dwells on Devereux's military victories. The same meter and rhyme that the speaker used to describe the swans and their trip down the Thames serve to describe battles in Spain and to make elaborate puns in foreign languages. Indeed, lines 145-154 fall into the same meters as the rest of the poem: lines 145-148 and 150-153 are in iambic pentameter; lines 149 and 154 are in iambic trimeter. The lines are rhymed *abbaacdcdd*, the pattern first used in stanza 2. It is thus fully continuous with the previous stanzas.

LINES 155-162

That through thy prowess and victorious arms,
Thy country may be freed from foreign harms;
And great Elisa's glorious name may ring
Through all the world, filled with thy wide alarms,
Which some brave Muse may sing
To ages following,
Upon the bridal day, which is not long:
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

In the first half of stanza 9, the speaker praises Robert Devereux's military accomplishments. In the second half, lines 155-162, he expresses his hopes for the future—and sketches out a place for himself in that future. He begins with the nation, praying that through Devereux's skill in battle, England will be free of invasion or injury from foreign countries. And he further hopes that Queen Elizabeth (here called "Elisa," a pastoral pseudonym that Spenser often uses when writing about the Queen) will be celebrated throughout the world.

This is the poem's first mention of Elizabeth, but she haunts the poem, with its complaints about political failure—and its implicit demand for patronage. Elizabeth was the center of English political life during her reign—and often the center of English literary life as well. Courtiers like Sir Walter Raleigh wrote elaborate love poems for the Queen—although she was unmarried throughout her life. These love poems were designed to win the Queen's favor, to heal wounds in the poets' relationships with the Queen, and, often, to obtain money from her. Spenser, for instance, was awarded an annual salary from the Queen after the publication of the first three books of his epic poem *The Faerie Queen* in 1590. To win favor, to rise in

English political life, ultimately involved winning the Queen's favor. The speaker is careful to court her favor here.

Indeed, in the final lines of the stanza, the speaker notes that a poet will probably be necessary to record all of Devereux's triumphs—and to memorialize the glory of the queen. Needless to say, the poet writing this particular poem seems more than happy to fill in. The two stanzas praising Devereux culminate in this suggestion. Though the speaker continues to be cagey and indirect, he comes close here to directly asking Devereux to become his patron: and he offers the preceding stanzas of the poem as evidence for how skillful he is, how valuable his services could be. Indeed, in line 161, "Upon the bridal day, which is not long," he joins the two. The poet should sing his song about Devereux's accomplishments at a wedding: the best epithalamion would be one that does not exclude politics, but absorbs it.

Spenser's skill extends to the form of the poem, which continues to maintain its intricate scheme through these lines: lines 155-158 and 161-162 are in iambic pentameter; lines 159-160 are in iambic trimeter. The lines are rhymed *eefeffgg*, as usual.

LINES 163-167

From those high towers this noble lord issuing,
Like radiant Hesper when his golden hair
In th'Ocean billows he hath bathed fair,
Descended to the river's open viewing,
With a great train ensuing.

In lines 163-167, the speaker concludes his long praise of Robert Devereux. He depicts Devereux emerging from his house and descending to the river Thames with a throng of followers to meet the swans. Before he fully returns to the narrative of the poem, though, the speaker can't resist giving Devereux one last compliment. As Devereux leaves his house and heads toward the river bank, his hair looks incredible. The speaker compares it to Hesperus, the Evening Star, which rises in twilight. The reader is invited to imagine Devereux's hair as lustrous and golden, like the light of the star. The reader is also invited to imagine it as clean—in an era when people did not regularly wash their hair. Since Hesperus is the evening star, it rises in the West. In England, the Atlantic Ocean is to the West. It thus seems like, as the speaker notes, that Hesperus spends all day bathing in the ocean, and then rises at night, newly clean.

The remaining lines of the poem return to the marriages that the poem is—supposedly—celebrating. But before moving onto those lines, it's worth noting the unusual organization of this stanza. Throughout the poem, Spenser is careful to organize each stanza around a single idea or action. When the stanza ends, the next stanza starts a new idea or action. The stanzas thus feel relatively independent from each other. There is no enjambment between stanzas anywhere in the poem. This final compliment to Devereux is the only place in the poem where a thought spills across stanzas. As a result, stanza 10 is itself internally divided: half of it is about Devereux and his hair; the other half is about the grooms-to-be.

Despite this internal division, the poem holds to its usual form. The first five lines of stanza 10 are rhymed *abbaa*; lines 163-166 are in iambic pentameter while line 167 is in iambic trimeter. The persistent form links this stanza to the previous stanzas and calls on the reader to articulate the relationship between them.

LINES 168-180

Above the rest were goodly to be seen
Two gentle knights of lovely face and feature
Beseeming well the bower of any queen,
With gifts of wit and ornaments of nature,
Fit for so goodly stature;
That like the twins of Jove they seemed in sight,
Which deck the baldric of the heavens bright.
They two forth pacing to the river's side,
Received those two fair birds, their love's delight;
Which, at th' appointed tide,
Each one did make his bride
Against their bridal day, which is not long:
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

Having given Devereux one final compliment, the speaker singles out two people in the crowd following him who, he notes in line 168, are better looking than anyone else in the throng. He spends the next six lines praising their physical appearance. They are so handsome that they'd make an appropriate match for any queen; they are smart; they look like Jove's (or Zeus's) sons, Castor and Pollux (the "twins of Jove"). Castor and Pollux were not actually twins—though they are always referred to as twins. Instead, they share a mother: Leda, the same woman who was raped by Zeus in the form of a swan. Pollux's name in Greek is Polydeuces: he is Helen's brother, born from Zeus's rape. His brother Castor had a mortal father. In the myth, Pollux/Polydeuces asked Zeus to give immortality to his brother, Castor. (He already was immortal, being the son of a god). Zeus granted their wish and made them into the constellation Gemini, part of the Zodiac—or "Baldric," as Spenser calls it here. The return of the myth of Leda at this point in the poem is surprising: once again, the poem's joyful celebration of marriage fulls under the shadow of the violence of the myth.

The grooms-to-be then receive their brides-to-be. One can presume that a betrothal ceremony then takes place—since this is a *prothalamion* not *epithalamion*. It celebrates an engagement (in this case, two engagements, since both sisters are getting engaged at the same time). The poem ends with an assurance that the wedding did actually take place, as scheduled—in case the reader was worried about whether the grooms kept their engagements or not.

The final lines of the poem continue its broad formal characteristics. Lines 168-180 are rhymed *cdcddeefeffgg*, following the pattern established in stanza 2. Lines 168-171, 173-176, 179-180 are all in iambic pentameter; lines 172, 178, and 179, are in iambic trimeter. Here, as the poem turns back to the wedding it celebrates, the form acts as a reinforcement, reminding us where the reader where they've been as they traveled through this ambitious, sprawling poem.

SYMBOLS

ZEPHYRUS

Zephyrus is the Greek name for the west wind. In Greek mythology, the west wind is the softest and mildest wind; as such, it often symbolizes springtime, rebirth, and fertility. By mentioning Zephyrus, Spenser starts this poem about marriage by invoking a symbol of the benefits of marriage, at least as he understands them. In other words, he links marriage and reproduction from the outset. He also connects this mention of Zephyrus to a breeze that makes the heat of the brightly shining sun more bearable, at least for a while; it delays "Hot Titan's beams" rather than stops them altogether. This very subtly hints at a darker side of life that the happy union of marriage forestalls, presenting marriage—like nature itself—as offering a momentary balm from the trials of the world.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Zephyrus"

FLOWERS

The early stanzas of "Prothalamion" describe the "shore of silver streaming Thames" as "painted all with variable flowers." Spenser describes these flowers at length, listing them in lines 30-33. Scholars have often debated whether these flowers hold any symbolic meaning. For instance, the lily is (as Spenser himself notes) a symbol of virginity; likewise, the daisy can symbolize purity. Violets symbolize thoughts of love; the primrose symbolizes protection and safety; the rose is often associated with love and romance. These symbolic meanings are not particularly revealing: in sum, they show us that the poem is concerned with love, innocence, and marriage—which the reader already knows.

Though the flowers are symbolic, their symbolic character is not the most important thing about them. More important are the myths that the act of plucking flowers subtly calls to mind—like the myth of Persephone, in which a young maiden was abducted by Hades while picking flowers with her friends. Underlying the flowers' bland promises of protection and innocence are darker undercurrents. This echoes the undercurrents in the symbol of Zephyrus, another image of fruitful marriage in the poem, whose gentle breeze can only "delay," rather than stop, the intense heat of the day.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-16:** "Was painted all with variable flowers, / And all the meads adorned with dainty gems, / Fit to deck maidens' bowers, / And crown their paramours,"
- **Lines 26-34:** "In which they gathered flowers to fill their flasket, / And with fine fingers cropt full featously / The tender stalks on high. / Of every sort, which in that meadow grew, / They gathered some; the violet pallid blue, / The little daisy, that at evening closes, / The virgin lily, and the primrose true, / With store of vermeil roses, / To deck their bridegrooms' posies"

SWANS

The speaker chooses not to speak directly about the two women, Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset, whose engagement the poem celebrates. Instead, he represents them with two swans, who appear in the poem's third stanza. Spenser may have chosen swans as a symbol for the brides-to-be for a number of reasons. First, swans were closely associated with the Thames—indeed, the river was famous for its swans. Second, some scholars have suggested that there was a procession down the river in barges shaped like swans for the two brides-to-be. These kinds of processions weren't unusual in Elizabethan England. Finally, swans and poets were often associated with each other in the period. (Ben Jonson called Shakespeare the "sweet swan of Avon.") This connection dates to classical poetry—a body of writing that Spenser draws on throughout the poem to strengthen his celebration of the Somersets and their impending marriage. Most likely, all of these considerations are active at once, making the swans simultaneously symbols of a place (the Thames), an event (a bridal procession), and a profession (the poet).

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 37-52:** "two swans of goodly hue / Come softly swimming down along the Lee; / Two fairer birds I yet did never see. / The snow which doth the top of Pindus strew, / Did never whiter shew, / Nor Jove himself, when he a swan would be / For love of Leda, whiter did appear: / Yet Leda was they say as white as he, / Yet not so white as these, nor nothing near. / So purely white they were, / That even the gentle stream, the which them bare, / Seemed foul to them, and bade his billows spare / To wet their silken feathers, lest they might / Soil their fair plumes with water not so fair, / And mar their

beauties bright, / That shone as heaven's light,"
- **Line 56:** "that silver brood"
- **Lines 60-70:** "Them seemed they never saw a sight so fair, / Of fowls so lovely, that they sure did deem / Them heavenly born, or to be that same pair / Which through the sky draw Venus' silver team; / For sure they did not seem / To be begot of any earthly seed, / But rather angels, or of angels' breed: / Yet were they bred of Somers-heat they say, / In sweetest season, when each flower and weed / The earth did fresh array, / So fresh they seemed as day,"
- **Line 86:** "Their snowy foreheads therewithal they crowned, "
- **Lines 91-92:** "gentle birds, the world's fair ornament, / And heaven's glory"
- **Lines 114-124:** "those joyous birds did pass along, / Adown the Lee, that to them murmured low, / As he would speak, but that he lacked a tongue, / Yet did by signs his glad affection show, / Making his stream run slow. / And all the fowl which in his flood did dwell / Gan flock about these twain, that did excel / The rest so far as Cynthia doth shend / The lesser stars. So they, enranged well, / Did on those two attend, / And their best service lend, "
- **Lines 176-178:** "those two fair birds, their love's delight; / Which, at th' appointed tide, / Each one did make his bride "

CYNTHIA

In line 121, the speaker compares the swans to Cynthia, the Roman goddess of the moon. The comparison serves to indicate that the swans are much more beautiful than the birds around them, who are like dull, distant stars compared to the glorious moony beauty of the swans. But it also suggests a second, symbolic meaning. Cynthia (Artemis in Greek mythology) was famous for her chastity: the comparison implicitly suggests that the Somerset girls are virgins. It thus contributes to a range of symbols and allusions throughout the poem that emphasize their purity and virginity.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 121:** "Cynthia"

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

Spenser describes nature in great detail, loving reporting on the weather, naming flowers, and interpreting the currents of the Thames. As he does so, he often gives these inanimate objects human characteristics, making it seem like they have desires, fears, and the capacity to act. For instance, in stanza 3, he personifies the river by suggesting it is afraid to get the swans' feathers dirty:

> [...] even the gentle stream, the which them bare,
> Seemed foul to them, and bade his billows spare
> To wet their silken feathers, lest they might
> Soil their fair plumes with water not so fair,
> And mar their beauties bright,
> That shone as heaven's light,

In this passage, the river is sophisticated, perceptive, and respectful. The swans fear that the water will make their feathers dirty; the river seems to perceive their fear and responds to it, controlling his body, keeping his water from touching their feathers. The river is not simply an inanimate object on which the swans float. He is, instead, an active participant in the drama of the poem—its glorification of the swans and their upcoming wedding.

This alerts the reader to a general pattern in the "Prothalamion." When nature is personified in this poem, it usually acts to reinforce the rituals—and the hierarchies—of human life. For example, in stanza 7, the birds that live along the Thames "enrange" themselves around the swans as they travel down river. The word "enrange" suggests that the birds not only follow the swans, they also arrange themselves in a hierarchy around them, offering "their best service." (The speaker does not tell us what the basis of this hierarchy might be: whether some birds are more beautiful than others or somehow more noble, or whether some other criteria is in play). The birds are granted the capacity to perceive social difference; with that capacity, they recreate, spontaneously, the hierarchical, highly stratified structure of Spenser's own society. In this instance, personification reinforces the structure of human society: suggesting that structure is itself natural and inevitable.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "Sweet breathing Zephyrus did softly play, / A gentle spirit, that lightly did delay / Hot Titan's beams, which then did glister fair;"
- **Line 18:** "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song."
- **Line 36:** "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song."
- **Lines 47-49:** "the gentle stream, the which them bare, / Seemed foul to them, and bade his billows spare / To wet their silken feathers"
- **Line 54:** "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song."
- **Lines 115-118:** " the Lee, that to them murmured low, / As he would speak, but that he lacked a tongue, / Yet did by signs his glad affection show, / Making his stream run slow."
- **Lines 119-124:** "And all the fowl which in his flood did

dwell / Gan flock about these twain, that did excel / The rest so far as Cynthia doth shend / The lesser stars. So they, enranged well, / Did on those two attend, / And their best service lend,"

- **Lines 148-149:** "Hercules' two pillars standing near / Did make to quake and fear"

ANALOGY

In the "Prothalamion," Spenser uses analogy to increase the authority and credibility of his poem, drawing on examples from classical mythology and poetry. For example, at the start of stanza 5 (lines 73-77), the nymphs throw flowers onto the river, in celebration of the swans and their upcoming marriages. The speaker lingers briefly on the sensual pleasure of the scene, noting how fragrant the flowers make the river. But then he quickly moves on: instead of dwelling on the river, he compares it to other things.

First, he compares it to the Peneus River, which flows through the Tempe Valley in Thessaly, a region in northern Greece. The comparison relies on the reader's knowledge of and associations with the Peneus river. Spenser's early readers, who were steeped in classical poetry and myth, would have had powerful associations with this river and the region of Greece where it runs: it is proverbial in ancient poetry for its beauty.

For example in the Roman poet Catullus's poem 64, "The Wedding of Peleus and Thetis," the speaker describes the region and the river bringing elaborate and beautiful gifts to honor a newly married couple, in terms that closely parallel Spenser's poem. In Catullus's poem, the god Chiron brings "Whatever blossoms the fields bear, / or that the face of Thessaly creates in its great mountains, / or that the west wind's fruitful breeze makes grow / along the waves of a stream, these he brought, woven in mixed garlands." The analogy in "Prothalamion" emphasizes the echo between the two poems: indeed, it shows the reader that Spenser has borrowed many of the details for his poem directly from Catullus.

Furthermore, the analogy effectively authorizes Spenser's writing. Spenser wrote at a time when English poets were still trying to establish a canon, to secure the legitimacy of their own writing. By invoking classical models through analogy, Spenser suggests to the reader that his poem is as important—and as ambitious—as ancient poems that are acknowledged masterpieces.

Likewise, the analogy suggests that the family (and the marriages) that the poem celebrates deserve a masterpiece: they are *that* important, *that* beautiful, *that* magnificent. Though the analogy does not give us new information about what the Thames looks likes (it compares one beautiful river covered with flowers to another beautiful river covered with flowers), the analogy does suggest what is at stake politically and poetically in Spenser's poem. Throughout the "Prothalamion," the reader finds similar examples in which Spenser compares people and landscapes in his poems to things from classical myth and poetry, using the authority and prestige of the analogy to license his own political and poetic project.

Where Analogy appears in the poem:

- **Lines 78-80:** "like old Peneus' waters they did seem, / When down along by pleasant Tempe's shore, / Scattered with flowers, through Thessaly they stream"
- **Lines 119-122:** "And all the fowl which in his flood did dwell / Gan flock about these twain, that did excel / The rest so far as Cynthia doth shend / The lesser stars. "
- **Lines 163-165:** "From those high towers this noble lord issuing, / Like radiant Hesper when his golden hair / In th'Ocean billows he hath bathed fair, "

ALLITERATION

"Prothalamion" is a sonically rich poem. Its natural scenes are described in dense and pleasurable language—language that recalls the density of nature itself and the wild, fertile grass and flowers of a healthy meadow. Spenser often uses alliteration as a way to create this sense of overflowing abundance. For example, in lines 25-27, he repeats an initial /f/ sound:

> Made of fine twigs, entrailed curiously,
> In which they gathered flowers to fill their flasket,
> And with fine fingers cropt full featously

As the lines progress, the *f* sounds multiply, becoming more and more dense until, in line 27, a majority of the words in the line alliterate. The accumulation of sound mimics the accumulation of flowers in the nymphs' basket: as they pick more and more flowers, the line becomes weighed down with them.

In this sense, alliteration helps Spenser communicate the abundance of nature—and it also helps him register the actions of the nymphs, the way they transform nature as they prepare for the arrival of the swans. "Prothalamion" is full of moments like this: where Spenser uses the sonic qualities of his verse to mimic the natural world he is describing.

For example, the repetition of /g/ and /l/ sounds used to describe the nymphs in line 22—with their "goodly greenish locks, all loose untied" (there is also additional consonance with the /l/ sounds in "all")—suggests the freely flowing, carefree attitude of the creatures as they gather flowers. This, in turn, further cements the natural world as a place of restorative peace.

The same can be said of the alliteration of /s/, /w/, and /l/ sounds in lines 37-38:

> With that, I saw two swans of goodly hue

Come softly swimming down along the Lee;

These sounds themselves are soft and gentle, mimicking the movement of the birds as they travel gracefully down the river.

The alliteration of /n/ sounds in line 45, by contrast, adds a clear sense of emphatic assurance to the speaker's insistence that capital N *nothing* comes close to the beauty of the aforementioned swans:

Yet not so white as these, nor nothing near.

There is of course also important alliteration happening the poem's refrain (more specifically, this is sibilance):

Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

As with the description of the swimming swans, the /s/ sounds here make the line itself quieter, reflecting its gentle plea for the river to be quiet in respect of the poem.

All throughout the poem, the speaker employs alliteration both to reflect the thematic content being discussed, and to create a sonically rich and pleasing experience for whoever is listening.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "S," "s"
- **Line 3:** "s," "d," "d"
- **Line 11:** "s," "st," "T"
- **Line 12:** "h," "h"
- **Line 14:** "A," "a," "a"
- **Line 18:** "S," "s," "s"
- **Line 22:** "g," "g," "l," "l"
- **Line 23:** "b," "b"
- **Line 25:** "f"
- **Line 26:** "fl," "f," "fl"
- **Line 27:** "f," "f," "f," "f"
- **Line 36:** "S," "s," "s"
- **Line 37:** "W," "s," "sw"
- **Line 38:** "s," "sw," "l," "L"
- **Line 43:** "l," "L"
- **Line 44:** "L"
- **Line 45:** "n," "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 46:** "w," "w"
- **Line 48:** "b," "b"
- **Line 50:** "w," "w"
- **Line 51:** "b," "b"
- **Line 54:** "S," "s," "s"
- **Line 55:** "n," "n," "f," "f"
- **Line 56:** "s," "s"
- **Line 58:** "s," "st," "st"
- **Line 60:** "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 61:** "s," "th," "th," "d," "d"
- **Line 65:** "b," "b"
- **Line 66:** "B," "o," "o," "b"
- **Line 67:** "b," "S," "s"
- **Line 68:** "s," "w," "s," "w," "f," "w"
- **Line 69:** "f"
- **Line 70:** "f"
- **Line 72:** "S," "s," "s"
- **Line 73:** "Th," "f," "th," "th"
- **Line 74:** "f," "f"
- **Line 76:** "th," "th"
- **Line 77:** "A," "a"
- **Line 80:** "Th," "th"
- **Line 81:** "Th," "th," "th"
- **Line 84:** "f," "f," "f"
- **Line 86:** "Th," "th," "th"
- **Line 90:** "S," "s," "s"
- **Line 92:** "wh," "h"
- **Line 93:** "b," "b"
- **Line 94:** "c"
- **Line 95:** "c"
- **Line 96:** "qu"
- **Line 97:** "qu," "s," "s"
- **Line 98:** "s," "s"
- **Line 99:** "f," "f"
- **Line 100:** "F"
- **Line 102:** "b"
- **Line 103:** "b," "b"
- **Line 108:** "S," "s," "s"
- **Line 109:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 114:** "a"
- **Line 115:** "A," "L," "th," "th," "l"
- **Line 118:** "s," "s"
- **Line 119:** "A," "a," "f," "fl," "d," "d"
- **Line 120:** "fl"
- **Line 121:** "s," "C"
- **Line 122:** "s," "S"
- **Line 126:** "S," "s," "s"
- **Line 128:** "m," "m," "m"
- **Line 132:** "Th," "th," "th," "b"
- **Line 133:** "Th," "Th," "b," "b"
- **Line 134:** "b"
- **Line 135:** "b"
- **Line 137:** "st," "st"
- **Line 138:** "g," "g," "g," "g"
- **Line 139:** "g," "w," "dw"
- **Line 140:** "w," "we," "f," "f"
- **Line 141:** "f," "w"
- **Line 142:** "w"
- **Line 144:** "S," "s," "s"
- **Line 145:** "n," "n"
- **Line 146:** "G," "g," "w," "w," "w"
- **Line 147:** "th," "th"
- **Line 150:** "F," "f"
- **Line 151:** "f," "f"

- **Line 152:** “th,” “th”
- **Line 155:** “Th,” “th,” “th”
- **Line 156:** “Th,” “fr,” “fr,” “f”
- **Line 157:** “g,” “g”
- **Line 159:** “M,” “m”
- **Line 162:** “S,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 163:** “h”
- **Line 164:** “H,” “h”
- **Line 165:** “b,” “h,” “h,” “b”
- **Line 169:** “f,” “f”
- **Line 170:** “B,” “b”
- **Line 171:** “W,” “w”
- **Line 174:** “b,” “b”
- **Line 175:** “r”
- **Line 176:** “R”
- **Line 180:** “S,” “s,” “s”

ALLUSION

Like many of Spenser's poems—indeed, like many Renaissance poems—"Prothalamion" is full of allusions. Indeed, it sometimes feels like a reader needs both a comprehensive knowledge of Greek myth, classical poetry, and Elizabethan politics in order to make sense of the poem!

Sometimes these allusions appear in the midst of analogies, where Spenser explicitly compares some person or landscape from England to a figure or landscape from the classical past. Often, however, the allusions are less direct; the poem is so dense with them they might even slide by unnoticed. For example, toward the end of the poem, the speaker expresses a hope that the "noble peer" will enjoy "endless happiness of thine own name / That promiseth the same." The lines are a subtle allusion to the identity of the "noble peer," Robert Devereux. In French, Devereux's name sounds like a contraction of two separate words, "devenir" and "heureux": to become happy. The allusion is complex and multilingual—and Spenser doesn't exactly slow down to spell it out to his reader. That's precisely the point: this is almost an inside joke. He wants to acknowledge and flatter this powerful, important man: but he wants to do it without being too obvious about it.

In this case, the allusion supports the broader ambition of Spenser's poem: his desire to win patronage and favors—basically, to improve his political position. One might add that many of the more explicit allusions function in a similar manner—even when those allusions invoke obscure classical myths. In the poem's final stanza, for instance, the speaker compares the two grooms to Castor and Pollux (also called Polydeuces), two brothers (often referred to as twins), who became the constellation Gemini. The ostensible point of the allusion to the myth is to emphasize how beautiful and noble the two grooms are—so much so that they might plausibly be legendary figures.

But the complexity of the classical mythology often haunts the speaker and complicates his attempts to issue unequivocal compliments. Pollux was the son of Leda, a mortal woman, and Zeus (also called Jove), the king of gods: Zeus impregnated Leda by turning himself into a swan and raping her. Pollux's sister was Helen of Troy—the woman who became the cause of the ten-year long Trojan war. Though the allusion is meant simply to praise the grooms, to emphasize how handsome and noble they are, it ends by throwing the end of the poem into shadow: its celebration of marriage tinged by the violence and violation the myth contains. In the "Prothalamion," it often pays to investigate Spenser's allusions, to think about the full complexity of the myths and antecedents he invokes: intentionally or not, they often cast doubt on the poem's project.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “Zephyrus”
- **Line 42:** “Jove”
- **Line 43:** “Leda”
- **Line 63:** “Venus”
- **Line 67:** “Somers-heat”
- **Line 78:** “Peneus”
- **Line 79:** “Tempe's”
- **Line 80:** “Thessaly”
- **Line 96:** “Venus”
- **Line 121:** “Cynthia”
- **Line 132:** “those bricky towers”
- **Line 135:** “Templar Knights”
- **Lines 137-139:** “a stately place, / Where oft I gained gifts and goodly grace / Of that great lord, which therein wont to dwell”
- **Lines 145-149:** “a noble peer, / Great England's glory, and the world's wide wonder, / Whose dreadful name late through all Spain did thunder, / And Hercules' two pillars standing near / Did make to quake and fear:”
- **Lines 151-154:** “ thy triumph's fame, / Joy have thou of thy noble victory, / And endless happiness of thine own name / That promiseth the same”
- **Lines 157-158:** “great Elisa's glorious name may ring / Through all the world,”
- **Lines 163-164:** “this noble lord issuing, / Like radiant Hesper”
- **Line 173:** “the twins of Jove”

ASSONANCE

"Prothalamion" is, in part, a poem about beauty. Spenser spends much of the poem praising beautiful things and persons: the meadows along the banks of the River Thames, the swans, Robert Devereux, the grooms. Spenser strives to make his language as beautiful as the things he describes, filling his lines with dense patterns of assonance. These plays of sound make the lines melodious and smooth: a sonic echo of the beauty

they describe.

For example, in lines 64-67, the speaker reveals the swans' true parentage, punning subtly only their family name (Somerset):

> For sure they did not seem
> To be begot of any earthly seed,
> But rather angels, or of angels' breed:
> Yet were they bred of Somers-heat they say,
> In sweetest season, when each flower and
> weed

In lines 64-66, the reader encounters an /ee/ sound at the end of the lines, where it forms part of the rhymes: *seed* and *breed* rhyming with each other, *seem* and *seed/breed* being half rhymes. (*Seem* belongs to a previous rhyme sound, but overlaps in half rhyme with the subsequent rhyme sounds). In the subsequent lines, the /ee/ sound migrates inside the lines: the reader finds it in *heat*, *sweetest*, *season*, *each*, and *weed*. (Though *earth* has a different sound, the recurrence of the vowels *ea* at the start of the word forms a kind of slant assonance.) The shorter /e/ sounds of *were*, *bred*, and *Somers* are also closely related, if not exactly the same; they likely would have been pronounced more similarly in Spenser's time than our own.

The /ee/ (or /ea/) sound amplifies over the course of the passage, focusing the reader's attention on lines 65-68, where the speaker reveals where the swans really came from. The amplifying sonic beauty of the lines further emphasizes the *swans'* beauty, and the importance and the preeminence of the family they come from.

In this sense—and in other examples like this throughout the poem—Spenser uses assonance as a way of underlining, or emphasizing, his points. The musical beauty of his poetry serves a purpose: it mimics and reinforces the beauty of the things it actually describes. In so doing, it emphasizes their importance and their worthiness.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “ee,” “ea”
- **Line 4:** “ea,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 12:** “i,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 13:** “ai,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 14:** “ai”
- **Line 15:** “ai”
- **Line 17:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 18:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 20:** “I,” “y”
- **Line 22:** “oo,” “ee,” “oo”
- **Line 23:** “ea,” “ee”
- **Line 24:** “eac”
- **Line 35:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 36:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 37:** “aw,” “a,” “oo,” “ue ”
- **Line 44:** “e”
- **Line 45:** “e,” “ea”
- **Line 49:** “ea,” “e”
- **Line 50:** “ei,” “ai,” “ai”
- **Line 53:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 54:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 55:** “ow,” “ow”
- **Line 56:** “oo”
- **Line 57:** “oo”
- **Line 58:** “oo”
- **Line 63:** “ea”
- **Line 64:** “ee”
- **Line 65:** “e,” “e,” “ee”
- **Line 66:** “ee”
- **Line 67:** “e,” “e,” “e,” “ea”
- **Line 68:** “ee,” “ea,” “ ea,” “ee”
- **Line 70:** “ee”
- **Line 71:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 72:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 76:** “oo,” “ew”
- **Line 79:** “ea,” “e”
- **Line 87:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 89:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 90:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 94:** “e,” “e”
- **Line 95:** “e”
- **Line 98:** “ue,” “o,” “o”
- **Line 101:** “e,” “e,” “e,” “ea,” “ea”
- **Line 102:** “e,” “e,” “e”
- **Line 103:** “e,” “e,” “ea”
- **Line 104:** “ui,” “ue,” “o,” “ou”
- **Line 107:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 108:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 110:** “ou,” “u,” “o”
- **Line 111:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 117:** “a,” “a”
- **Line 125:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 126:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 129:** “a,” “a”
- **Line 130:** “a,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 131:** “a,” “a”
- **Line 132:** “a”
- **Line 136:** “ey,” “ay”
- **Line 137:** “a,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 138:** “a”
- **Line 139:** “ea,” “e”
- **Line 140:** “e”
- **Line 143:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 144:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 145:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 147:** “a,” “ai”
- **Line 149:** “a,” “a”

- **Line 158:** "y," "i"
- **Line 159:** "a," "a"
- **Line 160:** "a"
- **Line 161:** "o," "o"
- **Line 162:** "o," "o"
- **Line 163:** "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 171:** "i," "i"
- **Line 172:** "i"
- **Line 179:** "o," "o"
- **Line 180:** "o," "o"

CONSONANCE

Spenser uses alliteration and assonance throughout the poem in similar ways and for similar reasons: to imitate, through plays of sound, the beauty of things and people he describes—and to reinforce their beauty and worthiness. He does much the same with his use of consonance, which is overflowing throughout the poem.

In the opening stanza of the poem, for instance, Spenser uses an abundance of repeated /m/, /t/, /h/, and /s/ sounds to emphasize the intricate beauty of the river Thames: "Along the shore of silver streaming Thames, / Whose rutty bank, the which his river hems." The repeated sounds, woven through the line, mimic the flow of the river itself, modeling in sound its silver streaming.

The intensity of the consonance throughout the poem makes it feel cohesive, at times reflecting its emphasis on the interconnectedness of the natural and human world. The seamlessness of its language mimics the way in which the poet dissolves the boundary between these two worlds—reflected, for instance, in the poem's refrain, which is filled with repetitive /d/, /s/, /l/, and /t/ sounds.

In lines 109-113, the use of consonance is especially apt; these lines are talking about how the nymph's speech echos throughout the meadow, and are fittingly filled with echoing /d/ and /n/ sounds. The repetition of /b/ sounds in these lines further links them thematically to the forthcoming bridal day and to the refrain of the poem, adding to its sense of cohesion and the idea that the natural world is an essential part of the forthcoming wedding:

> So ended she; and all the rest around
> To her redoubled that her undersong,
> Which said their bridal day should not be long.
> And gentle echo from the neighbour ground
> Their accents did resound.

Yet consonance is not only used in the poem to underscore harmony and beauty. Spenser also uses consonance to emphasize the depth of his own personal suffering. Early in the first stanza, for instance, he recounts his political frustrations: "through discontent of my long fruitless stay / In prince's court, and expectation vain" (6-7). Apart from the very subtle repetition of /l/ sounds in *long* and *fruitless*, the consonance of these lines is defined by harsh, percussive sounds that create a moment of cacophony. Here the repeated sounds feel less like a softly flowing river: they are almost grating, irritating, underscoring the speaker's irritation.

Spenser's use of consonance in the poem is thus ultimately ambiguous and context dependent: in places it suggests the beauty of the natural world; in others, it calls to mind frustration and irritation. In both cases, however, Spenser deploys consonance carefully to reflect and reproduce the emotional dynamics of his lines.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "S," "s," "s," "l," "p," "l"
- **Line 3:** "l," "s," "p," "l," "l," "d," "d," "l"
- **Line 4:** "t," "T," "t"
- **Line 5:** "s," "s"
- **Line 6:** "s," "c," "n," "t," "n," "t," "l," "t," "l," "ss," "s," "t"
- **Line 7:** "n," "c," "s," "c," "t," "n," "x," "ct," "n," "n"
- **Line 8:** "ll," "l"
- **Line 9:** "L," "d," "d," "d"
- **Line 11:** "s," "s," "t," "m," "T," "m," "s"
- **Line 12:** "s," "tt," "h," "s," "h," "m," "s"
- **Line 13:** "W," "s," "w," "w"
- **Line 14:** "d," "d," "d," "d"
- **Line 15:** "d," "d"
- **Line 17:** "d," "d," "t"
- **Line 18:** "S," "t," "T," "s," "s," "tl," "t," "ll," "s"
- **Line 21:** "ll," "l," "l," "l"
- **Line 22:** "g," "l," "g," "l," "ll," "l"
- **Line 23:** "b," "b"
- **Line 26:** "fl," "f," "ll," "f," "l"
- **Line 27:** "f," "f," "t," "f," "ll," "f," "t," "l"
- **Line 28:** "t," "t"
- **Line 30:** "Th," "th," "l," "ll," "l"
- **Line 31:** "l," "l"
- **Line 34:** "d," "b," "d"
- **Line 35:** "b," "d," "d," "w," "w," "t"
- **Line 36:** "S," "w," "t," "T," "s," "s," "tl," "t," "ll," "s"
- **Line 37:** "W," "s," "sw," "s ," "dl"
- **Line 38:** "s," "l," "sw," "d," "l," "L"
- **Line 39:** "d," "d," "d "
- **Line 40:** "p," "P"
- **Line 41:** "w"
- **Line 42:** "w," "w," "w"
- **Line 43:** "l," "L," "w"
- **Line 44:** "L," "w," "w"
- **Line 45:** "n," "w," "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 46:** "w," "w"
- **Line 48:** "b," "b"

- **Line 49:** “s,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 50:** “S,” “s,” “w,” “w,” “s”
- **Line 51:** “b,” “b”
- **Line 53:** “d,” “d,” “w,” “w”
- **Line 54:** “Sw,” “t,” “T,” “s,” “s,” “tl,” “t,” “ll,” “s”
- **Line 55:** “s,” “n,” “s,” “n,” “s,” “n,” “fl,” “f,” “ll”
- **Line 56:** “s,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 57:** “fl,” “l,” “fl”
- **Line 58:** “Wh,” “wh,” “s,” “st,” “st”
- **Line 60:** “s,” “s,” “s,” “s,” “f”
- **Line 61:** “f,” “l,” “s,” “s,” “l,” “l,” “th,” “th,” “d,” “d,” “m”
- **Line 62:** “Th,” “m,” “b,” “b,” “s”
- **Line 63:** “s,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 64:** “s”
- **Line 65:** “b,” “b,” “s”
- **Line 66:** “B,” “b,” “d”
- **Line 67:** “b,” “d,” “S,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 68:** “sw,” “s,” “s,” “w,” “w,” “w”
- **Line 71:** “d,” “d,” “w,” “w”
- **Line 72:** “Sw,” “t,” “T,” “s,” “s,” “tl,” “t,” “ll,” “s”
- **Line 74:** “f,” “f”
- **Line 75:** “f”
- **Line 76:** “d,” “d,” “th,” “th,” “w”
- **Line 77:** “w,” “w”
- **Line 78:** “w,” “d,” “d”
- **Line 79:** “W,” “d,” “p,” “p”
- **Line 80:** “S,” “th,” “s,” “th,” “Th,” “ss,” “th,” “s”
- **Line 81:** “Th,” “th,” “th,” “l,” “l,” “l”
- **Line 82:** “L,” “l”
- **Line 83:** “n,” “m,” “m,” “n,” “nd,” “n,” “d”
- **Line 84:** “f,” “fl,” “f,” “nd”
- **Line 86:** “Th,” “th,” “th,” “th”
- **Line 89:** “d,” “d,” “w,” “w”
- **Line 90:** “Sw,” “t,” “T,” “s,” “s,” “tl,” “t,” “ll,” “s”
- **Line 91:** “d,” “d”
- **Line 92:** “h,” “wh,” “h”
- **Line 93:** “l,” “l,” “bl,” “b”
- **Line 94:** “h,” “h”
- **Line 95:** “c”
- **Line 97:** “h,” “h,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 99:** “ll,” “l,” “l,” “f,” “f,” “l,” “l”
- **Line 100:** “l”
- **Line 101:** “L,” “l,” “ss,” “c,” “st,” “st,” “ts”
- **Line 102:** “b,” “l,” “se,” “p,” “l,” “b”
- **Line 103:** “l,” “b,” “pl,” “b”
- **Line 104:** “f,” “ff”
- **Line 105:** “f,” “f,” “d”
- **Line 106:** “d,” “d”
- **Line 107:** “d,” “d”
- **Line 108:** “S,” “t,” “T,” “s,” “s,” “tl,” “t,” “ll ,” “s”
- **Line 109:** “d,” “d,” “n,” “d,” “r,” “r,” “n,” “d ”
- **Line 110:** “d,” “b,” “d,” “nd”
- **Line 111:** “d ,” “b,” “d,” “d,” “d,” “n,” “b”
- **Line 112:** “n,” “n,” “b,” “nd”
- **Line 113:** “d,” “d,” “nd”
- **Line 114:** “s ,” “s,” “ss,” “l”
- **Line 115:** “L,” “m,” “m,” “m,” “l”
- **Line 116:** “l”
- **Line 118:** “s,” “s,” “s,” “l”
- **Line 119:** “ll,” “f,” “l,” “fl,” “d,” “d,” “d,” “d,” “ll ”
- **Line 120:** “fl,” “l”
- **Line 121:** “s,” “s,” “C”
- **Line 122:** “ss,” “s,” “s,” “S”
- **Line 125:** “w,” “dd,” “d,” “wh,” “w”
- **Line 126:** “Sw,” “t,” “Th,” “s,” “tl,” “t,” “ll,” “s”
- **Line 127:** “l,” “ll,” “m,” “L,” “n,” “n,” “m”
- **Line 128:** “m,” “L,” “n,” “n,” “m,” “m,” “n,” “l,” “n”
- **Line 129:** “f,” “f”
- **Line 132:** “w,” “w,” “br,” “w”
- **Line 133:** “w,” “br,” “b,” “d,” “d”
- **Line 134:** “b,” “w”
- **Line 135:** “w,” “w,” “T,” “t,” “t,” “b”
- **Line 136:** “T,” “d,” “d,” “d”
- **Line 137:** “st,” “st,” “t,” “l,” “l,” “c”
- **Line 138:** “g,” “g,” “g,” “g”
- **Line 139:** “g,” “w,” “w,” “w”
- **Line 140:** “w,” “w,” “f,” “ls,” “f,” “l,” “ss,” “s”
- **Line 141:** “f”
- **Line 143:** “d,” “d”
- **Line 144:** “S,” “t,” “T,” “s,” “s,” “tl,” “t,” “ll,” “s”
- **Line 146:** “G,” “gl,” “g,” “l,” “w,” “d,” “w,” “d,” “w,” “d”
- **Line 147:** “d,” “d,” “d,” “d,” “d”
- **Line 149:** “f”
- **Line 150:** “F,” “f”
- **Line 151:** “f,” “ph,” “f”
- **Line 152:** “th,” “th”
- **Line 153:** “n,” “n,” “n”
- **Line 154:** “Th,” “th,” “th”
- **Line 155:** “Th,” “th,” “th”
- **Line 156:** “Th,” “f,” “r,” “fr,” “f”
- **Line 157:** “g,” “g,” “m,” “m”
- **Line 158:** “w,” “d,” “d,” “w,” “w,” “d”
- **Line 159:** “Wh,” “m,” “M,” “ma”
- **Line 161:** “d,” “d”
- **Line 162:** “S,” “t,” “T,” “s,” “s,” “tl,” “ll,” “s”
- **Line 164:** “H,” “h,” “h”
- **Line 165:** “b,” “h,” “h,” “th,” “th”
- **Line 169:** “f,” “f”
- **Line 170:** “B,” “w,” “b,” “w”
- **Line 171:** “W,” “w,” “n,” “n,” “n,” “n”
- **Line 172:** “F,” “f”
- **Line 173:** “s,” “s”
- **Line 174:** “d,” “d”
- **Line 175:** “r,” “r”
- **Line 176:** “R,” “r ,” “rd,” “d”
- **Line 177:** “d”

- **Line 178:** “d,” “d ,” “d”
- **Line 179:** “d,” “d”
- **Line 180:** “S,” “t,” “T,” “s,” “s,” “tl,” “t,” “ll,” “s”

CAESURA

In a metrical poem as long and complex as the "Prothalamion," the use of caesura is almost inevitable. Spenser is careful throughout to make sure that his caesuras answer to the content of the poem. For example in lines 47-49, Spenser uses a caesura in three consecutive lines:

> That even the gentle stream, the which them bare,
> Seemed foul to them, and bade his billows spare
> To wet their silken feathers, lest they might

Here the caesuras mimic the character of the stream itself—flowing, uneven, refusing boundaries. They help Spenser give the reader a sense of what the stream looks like and sounds like, how its billows move as the swans float down it. They are thus a subtle and effective device for amplifying the poem's content.

In addition to caesuras like these, which appear throughout the poem, there is an interesting caesura in one of the lines that forms the poem's refrain: "Against the bridal day, which is not long." This caesura is important for understanding how time works in the poem. The poem celebrates an engagement—not a marriage. It's the first poem of its kind in the history of English poetry; indeed Spenser coined a special word to describe it, calling it a *prothalamion*, meaning a song before the wedding.

This creates a bit of awkwardness. The reader might wonder when, exactly, the wedding will happen—and might worry that something might break the engagement in the meantime. The caesuras in the middle of this repeated line echo that awkwardness; they imitate the gap between engagement and wedding. The words that follow seem designed to assuage any concern the reader might have: the wedding will happen soon.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “,”
- **Line 3:** “,”
- **Line 4:** “,”
- **Line 7:** “,”
- **Line 8:** “,”
- **Line 9:** “,”
- **Line 12:** “,”
- **Line 17:** “,”
- **Line 18:** “,” “,”
- **Line 19:** “,” “,”
- **Line 22:** “,”
- **Line 25:** “,”
- **Line 29:** “,”
- **Line 30:** “;”
- **Line 31:** “,”
- **Line 32:** “,”
- **Line 35:** “,”
- **Line 36:** “,” “,”
- **Line 37:** “,”
- **Line 42:** “,”
- **Line 43:** “,”
- **Line 45:** “,”
- **Line 47:** “,”
- **Line 48:** “,”
- **Line 49:** “,”
- **Line 53:** “,”
- **Line 54:** “,” “,”
- **Line 55:** “,”
- **Line 56:** “,”
- **Line 58:** “,”
- **Line 61:** “,”
- **Line 62:** “,”
- **Line 66:** “,”
- **Line 68:** “,”
- **Line 71:** “,”
- **Line 72:** “,” “,”
- **Line 74:** “,”
- **Line 80:** “,”
- **Line 83:** “,”
- **Line 89:** “,”
- **Line 90:** “,” “,”
- **Line 91:** “,”
- **Line 92:** “,”
- **Line 96:** “,”
- **Line 98:** “,” “,”
- **Line 99:** “,”
- **Line 107:** “,”
- **Line 108:** “,” “,”
- **Line 109:** “;”
- **Line 115:** “,”
- **Line 116:** “,”
- **Line 120:** “,”
- **Line 122:** “,” “,”
- **Line 125:** “,”
- **Line 126:** “,” “,”
- **Line 128:** “,”
- **Line 132:** “,”
- **Line 139:** “,”
- **Line 141:** “,”
- **Line 143:** “,”
- **Line 144:** “,” “,”
- **Line 146:** “,”
- **Line 150:** “,”
- **Line 158:** “,”
- **Line 161:** “,”

- **Line 162:** “,” “,”
- **Line 176:** “,”
- **Line 177:** “,”
- **Line 179:** “,”
- **Line 180:** “,” “,”

ENJAMBMENT

"Prothalamion" is a heavily enjambed poem. Indeed, at points in the poem Spenser seems to be showing off, trying to see how far he can go without an end-stop. When he does use end-stop, they are frequently very weak: so weak that a reader might plausibly treat them instead as enjambments. For instance, the first stanza of the poem is one long sentence. Though lines 2, 4, 5, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18 are perhaps *technically* end-stops, most readers will not experience them as such, as the sentence seems to pull one through the lines; the speaker is presenting one long, continuous thought whose full meaning spans multiple lines. Since enjambment is often ambiguous, an expression of the reader's *experience* of the poem rather than strictly limited to instances where a line of poetry ends without punctuation, it would, in fact, arguably be more accurate to that experience to describe the stanza as enjambed the whole way through, until line 17. The poem cascades down the page, as if pulled by gravity, moving fluidly and breathlessly. It is a virtuosic performance from a poet who often invents complicated formal challenges for himself as a way of displaying his easy mastery of literary form.

Subsequent stanzas do not sustain enjambment for quite the duration Spenser manages in stanza one, but almost every stanza contains numerous enjambed lines—and most of the poem's end-stops are so weak that they do not meaningfully function as end-stops. Though the poem's long stanzas are highly structured, divided into smaller metrical and rhyme units, these units are almost imperceptible, and decidedly hard to parse: in other words, the poem's thoughts spill over from one line to the next even if there are slight grammatical pauses between then, and any divisions between "sections" of the poem within each stanza are very subtle indeed. The force of the poem's enjambment seems to pull readers down the page, so that they keep flowing forward through the poem, rather than pausing to examine its individual units. In this sense, the enjambments mimic the motion and energy of the river, flowing restlessly forward.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “ air ”
- **Line 3:** “delay ”
- **Line 6:** “stay ”
- **Line 7:** “vain ”
- **Line 8:** “away ”
- **Line 10:** “pain ”
- **Line 27:** “featously”
- **Line 34:** “posies ”
- **Line 37:** “hue ”
- **Line 42:** “be ”
- **Line 46:** “were, ”
- **Line 48:** “spare”
- **Line 49:** “might ”
- **Line 61:** “deem ”
- **Line 62:** “pair ”
- **Line 64:** “seem ”
- **Line 68:** “weed ”
- **Line 73:** “drew ”
- **Line 92:** “hour”
- **Line 94:** “content ”
- **Line 98:** “remove ”
- **Line 99:** “guile ”
- **Line 106:** “redound ”
- **Line 109:** “around ”
- **Line 112:** “ground ”
- **Line 119:** “dwell ”
- **Line 120:** “excel ”
- **Line 121:** “shend ”
- **Line 134:** “bowers ”
- **Line 138:** “grace ”
- **Line 141:** “well ”
- **Line 142:** “tell ”
- **Line 148:** “near ”
- **Line 153:** “name ”
- **Line 157:** “ring ”
- **Line 159:** “sing ”
- **Line 164:** “hair”
- **Line 168:** “seen ”
- **Line 169:** “feature ”
- **Line 178:** “bride ”

END-STOPPED LINE

In a heavily enjambed poem like "Prothalamion," most instances of end-stop weak: so weak that, though they are *technically* end-stops—in that they include some sort of punctuation at the end of the line—they don't fully feel that way to the reader, whose eye tends to rush past them down the page, following the gravity and velocity of Spenser's sentences. Meaningful end-stops in the poem—end-stops that the reader actually feels as end-stops—are rare, and for that reason highly interesting.

Such end-stops often occur at strategic places in the stanza, dividing up units of thought. For instance, in stanza 3, Spenser uses an end-stop in line 41 to divide his reference to the Pindus mountain range from his reference to the myth of Leda and the Swan. The end-stop subtly guides the reader to understand how to divide this large and ambitious poem into manageable chunks, to recognize its parts.

Most importantly, though, each stanza is very clearly and definitively end-stopped. That means there is no enjambment between stanzas in "Prothalamion." This creates a moment of pause, of rest, between stanzas. For many readers, that rest will be welcome: since each stanza is so heavily enjambed internally, it helps to have a break before moving to the next set of enjambed lines. Moreover, since the enjambments mimic the river, the pause at the end of each stanza makes it feel like the river is listening to and responding to the poem, running softly for a moment after being asked to do just that. In this sense, the use of end-stop may be said to subtly personify the river—much as the poem itself personifies the river. End-stop not only shows the reader how to listen to the poem, it also shows the river itself how to listen to it.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "play,"
- **Line 4:** "fair; "
- **Line 5:** "care, "
- **Line 9:** "brain, "
- **Line 11:** "Thames, "
- **Line 12:** "hems, "
- **Line 13:** "flowers, "
- **Line 14:** "gems, "
- **Line 15:** "bowers, "
- **Line 16:** "paramours, "
- **Line 17:** "long: "
- **Line 18:** "song. "
- **Line 19:** "side, "
- **Line 20:** "espy, "
- **Line 21:** "thereby, "
- **Line 22:** "untied, "
- **Line 23:** "bride; "
- **Line 24:** "basket, "
- **Line 25:** "curiously, "
- **Line 26:** "flasket, "
- **Line 28:** "high. "
- **Line 29:** "grew, "
- **Line 30:** "blue, "
- **Line 31:** "closes, "
- **Line 32:** "true, "
- **Line 33:** "roses, "
- **Line 35:** "long: "
- **Line 36:** "song. "
- **Line 38:** "Lee; "
- **Line 39:** "see. "
- **Line 40:** "strew, "
- **Line 41:** "shew, "
- **Line 43:** "appear:"
- **Line 44:** "he, "
- **Line 45:** "near. "
- **Line 46:** "were, "
- **Line 47:** "bare, "
- **Line 50:** "fair, "
- **Line 51:** "bright, "
- **Line 52:** "light, "
- **Line 53:** "long: "
- **Line 54:** "song. "
- **Line 55:** "fill, "
- **Line 56:** "brood, "
- **Line 57:** "flood. "
- **Line 58:** "still, "
- **Line 59:** "fill. "
- **Line 60:** "fair, "
- **Line 63:** "team; "
- **Line 65:** "seed, "
- **Line 66:** "breed: "
- **Line 67:** "say, "
- **Line 69:** "array, "
- **Line 70:** "day, "
- **Line 71:** "long: "
- **Line 72:** "song. "
- **Line 74:** "field, "
- **Line 75:** "yield, "
- **Line 76:** "threw, "
- **Line 77:** "strew, "
- **Line 78:** "seem, "
- **Line 79:** "shore, "
- **Line 80:** "stream, "
- **Line 81:** "store, "
- **Line 82:** "floor. "
- **Line 83:** "bound, "
- **Line 84:** "found, "
- **Line 85:** "array, "
- **Line 86:** "crowned, "
- **Line 87:** "lay, "
- **Line 88:** "day, "
- **Line 89:** "long: "
- **Line 90:** "song. "
- **Line 91:** "ornament, "
- **Line 93:** "bower, "
- **Line 95:** "complement: "
- **Line 96:** "love, "
- **Line 97:** "smile, "
- **Line 100:** "assoil. "
- **Line 101:** "accord, "
- **Line 102:** "board, "
- **Line 103:** "abound, "
- **Line 104:** "afford, "
- **Line 105:** "confound, "
- **Line 107:** "long: "
- **Line 108:** "song.' "
- **Line 110:** "undersong, "
- **Line 111:** "long. "
- **Line 113:** "resound. "
- **Line 114:** "along, "

- **Line 115:** “low, ”
- **Line 116:** “tongue, ”
- **Line 117:** “show, ”
- **Line 118:** “slow. ”
- **Line 122:** “well, ”
- **Line 123:** “attend, ”
- **Line 124:** “lend, ”
- **Line 125:** “long: ”
- **Line 126:** “song. ”
- **Line 127:** “came, ”
- **Line 128:** “nurse, ”
- **Line 129:** “source; ”
- **Line 130:** “name, ”
- **Line 131:** “fame. ”
- **Line 132:** “towers, ”
- **Line 133:** “ride, ”
- **Line 135:** “bide, ”
- **Line 136:** “pride: ”
- **Line 137:** “place, ”
- **Line 139:** “dwell, ”
- **Line 140:** “case. ”
- **Line 143:** “long: ”
- **Line 144:** “song. ”
- **Line 145:** “peer, ”
- **Line 146:** “wonder, ”
- **Line 147:** “thunder, ”
- **Line 149:** “fear: ”
- **Line 150:** “chivalry, ”
- **Line 151:** “fame, ”
- **Line 152:** “victory, ”
- **Line 154:** “same: ”
- **Line 155:** “arms, ”
- **Line 156:** “harms; ”
- **Line 158:** “alarms, ”
- **Line 160:** “following, ”
- **Line 161:** “long: ”
- **Line 162:** “song. ”
- **Line 163:** “issuing, ”
- **Line 165:** “fair, ”
- **Line 166:** “viewing, ”
- **Line 167:** “ensuing. ”
- **Line 170:** “queen, ”
- **Line 171:** “nature, ”
- **Line 172:** “stature; ”
- **Line 173:** “sight, ”
- **Line 174:** “bright. ”
- **Line 175:** “side, ”
- **Line 176:** “delight; ”
- **Line 177:** “tide, ”
- **Line 179:** “long: ”
- **Line 180:** “song.”

METAPHOR

Alongside the grand analogies that appear throughout the poem—comparing its characters and landscape to figures from classical myth—"Prothalamion" frequently uses metaphors. These metaphors are often quieter and more microscopic: indeed, some of them may not even register as metaphors on an initial reading of the poem. For instance, in line 13, the speaker notes that the bank of the River Thames "was painted all with variable flowers." The word "painted" implicitly compares the river bank to a canvas, and the scene to a painting. In other words, it suggests that this beautiful, natural scene is an art object. In that way, it subtly cuts against the stanza's broader suggestion—that nature is separate from human life, that it offers a relief from the trials of politics.

"Prothalamion" is full of small moments of metaphor like this one, which demand careful local reading: each functions differently, and interacts with the poem's overall project differently. For example, later in the poem the speaker describes the nymphs putting flower crowns on the swans' foreheads: "Their snowy foreheads therewithal they crowned." Describing the swans' foreheads as snowy indicates their color (white): it also recalls the moment in stanza two where the speaker compares the swans to the snows on top of the Pindus mountains—and finds the swans to be whiter even than those snows. Here the metaphor, though subtle, tightens the poem, reinforcing its references and claims.

Metaphor is thus a subtle and pliable tool in the poem: it sometimes reinforces the poem; at other times, it suggests underlying problems and complications which the poem does not explicitly acknowledge.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** “Whose rutty bank, the which his river hems, / Was painted all with variable flowers,”
- **Line 14:** “dainty gems”
- **Line 86:** “Their snowy foreheads therewithal they crowned,”
- **Line 91:** “'Ye gentle birds, the world's fair ornament”
- **Line 128:** “merry London, my most kindly nurse”

APOSTROPHE

Apostrophe occurs at the end of each stanza of "Prothalamion" when the speaker directly addresses the Thames, saying "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song." Unlike the first line of the refrain, this line does not change: it is repeated exactly, at the end of each stanza. The reason why the speaker continuously addresses the river is not immediately clear. Throughout the poem, the speaker describes the river as a beautiful, calm, and even considerate body of water—it even tries to avoid getting the swans dirty as they float down it.

The speaker's repeated request might be interpreted as an

expression of anxiety. While the river might not be unusually loud or disruptive at this moment in time, he knows it has the capacity to become loud, to turn into a torrent. He does not imagine that he can permanently prevent the river from doing so, only that he can delay the river for a little bit—at least long enough for him to complete his song. The refrain—and the apostrophe it contains—expresses an implicit sense that nature is not simply relaxing and beautiful: it is also potentially, and eventually, destructive and violent.

Apostrophe also occurs in lines 150-156 when the speaker addresses the "noble peer" whose house the swans pass as they swim down the river. The "noble peer" is a reference to the Earl of Essex, Robert Devereux. In the lines immediately before this direct address, the speaker mentions Devereux's recent triumphs in Spain, where he burned the Spanish fleet and captured the city of Cadiz, near the straights of Gibraltar. Having effusively praised Devereux's military victories, the speaker now decides to talk to this aristocrat directly to wish him joy and happiness.

Devereux wasn't a particularly important part of the wedding that the poem is about, so this might seem a bit weird. It's possible that Spenser spends so much time praising Devereux in order to get into the aristocrat's good graces—and maybe earn his financial support.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 18:** "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song. "
- **Line 36:** " Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song. "
- **Line 54:** "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song. "
- **Line 72:** " Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song. "
- **Line 90:** "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song. "
- **Line 91:** "'Ye gentle birds"
- **Line 108:** " Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.' "
- **Line 126:** "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song. "
- **Line 144:** "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song. "
- **Lines 150-156:** "Fair branch of honour, flower of chivalry, / That fillest England with thy triumph's fame, / Joy have thou of thy noble victory, / And endless happiness of thine own name / That promiseth the same: / That through thy prowess and victorious arms, / Thy country may be freed from foreign harms; "
- **Line 180:** "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song."

ANAPHORA

As the speaker of the "Prothalamion" develops his elaborate compliments and works in references to classical texts and myths, he often uses anaphora to guide his reader through the dense thicket of his text. For example, in lines 44-45, he employs an anaphoric repetition of the word "Yet":

> Yet Leda was they say as white as he,
> Yet not so white as these, nor nothing near.

The word "Yet" emphasizes a series of small, but significant distinctions. The speaker wants to emphasize just how white the swans are. He notes first that they are whiter than the god Zeus was when, in Greek mythology, he took the form of a swan. Then he notes that Leda herself, the woman whom Zeus raped when he took the form of a swan, was as white as *that* swan (i.e. as Zeus in the form of a swan). But the swans on the Thames are whiter than *both* of these examples. For a poet like Spenser this is a high compliment, since his culture emphasized paleness as the height of female beauty. The pattern of anaphora guides the reader through this complicated series of comparisons, producing a sense that the intensity and significance of the compliment is gradually building over the course of the lines.

The speaker uses anaphora to similar effect in stanza 6, the nymph's song. The nymph wishes a series of blessings on the swan, introduce by the repetition of the word "and." As these blessings pile up, the word "and" underscores their sheer plenty—that is, just how many of these blessings there are: "And blessed plenty wait upon your board, / And let your bed with pleasures chaste abound." There are so many blessings that the nymph finds herself simply introducing them one after another, not bothering to bind them together conceptually. The use of anaphora thus underlines the nymph's—and the speaker's—hopes: that the young couples will be overwhelmed with good fortune in their marriages.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 44:** "Yet"
- **Line 45:** "Yet"
- **Line 92:** "And"
- **Line 96:** "And"
- **Line 102:** "And"
- **Line 103:** "And"
- **Line 106:** "And"
- **Line 112:** "And"
- **Line 119:** "And"
- **Line 124:** "And"
- **Line 148:** "And"
- **Line 153:** "And"

SIMILE

Spenser's speaker uses simile to complicate—or even erase—the distinction between the human and the natural world. For example, in lines 81-82, after comparing the Thames to the Peneus River (a comparison best classified as an analogy rather than a simile), he introduces another comparison: likening the river, covered in flower petals, to "a bride's chamber floor." The river is both like a river in Greece *and* like the room where the bride and groom go after the wedding to consummate their marriage. The natural space of the river is thus compared to a human space, a space intimately linked to

the rituals of marriage, sexuality, and reproduction in Spenser's culture. The simile here paints a picture of marriage itself as both lovely and natural (rather than exclusively manmade and political).

Though the poem begins by suggesting that nature is separate from politics—and more broadly, distinct from the trials and tribulations of human life itself—this moment of simile might be said to enlist the river in the project of marriage: natural spaces become part of the highly political realm of marriage in Spenser's culture. In other words, nature and society perhaps aren't as distinct as they appear to be in the beginning of the poem, when the speaker walks along the river banks to escape the trials and tribulations of courtly life.

Lines 163-164 could also be argued as containing a simile in the comparison of the noble lord to Hesper, but as with the reference to the Peneus river, is perhaps better classified as analogy (for reasons we discuss in the entry on that device).

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 82:** "Like a bride's chamber floor. "
- **Line 164:** "Like radiant Hesper when his golden hair "

DIACOPE

As the speaker of the "Prothalamion" develops his elaborate compliments and works in references to classical texts and myths, he often uses diacope (in coordination with his use of anaphora) to intensify the effects of his rhetoric. This can be seen in lines 41-46:

> Nor Jove himself, when he a swan would be
> For love of Leda, whiter did appear:
> Yet Leda was they say as white as he,
> Yet not so white as these, nor nothing near.
> So purely white they were,

The passage contains two separate instances of diacope: the repetition of the word "Leda" and the word "white" (and "whiter"). Individually, each repeated word increases the intensity of the comparison. For example, repeating the word "white" calls our attention to whiteness itself and its various shades. It focuses the mind of the reader on this particular aspect of the comparison, hammering home just how much whiter these two swans are than everything else—even the exceedingly fair Leda.

The two instances of diacope combined with the anaphoric repetition of the word "yet" in these lines gives this passage a special rhetorical intensity. When readers come to this section's final line, "so purely white they were," they feel almost a sense of relief. In this way, the density of the language, created through its repetitions, helps the reader focus on the final, key movement in the complex allusion: the unparalleled whiteness of the swans. Given that these swans are representations of the noble young brides who inspired the poem, Spenser's use of diacope is another means to flatter the aristocracy—signaling that these two ladies are even lovelier than mythically lovely beings.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 41:** "whiter"
- **Line 43:** "Leda," "whiter"
- **Line 44:** "Leda," "white "
- **Line 45:** "white "
- **Line 46:** "white "

VOCABULARY

Zephyrus (Line 2) - In Greek mythology, Zephyrus is the God of the west wind, which the ancient Greeks considered to be the gentlest and mildest. They also treated it as a symbol of spring, the renewal of life, and the fertility of the earth. Invoking Zephyrus early in the poem, Spenser signals to his readers that the weather during his walk is very pleasant and mild—and that his poem is concerned with the rituals through which human life is renewed: engagement, marriage, and reproduction.

Titan (Line 4) - The Titans were a race of gods in ancient Greek mythology. They included Gods like Gaia (the personification of the Earth), and were eventually overthrown by their children, including Zeus, who became king of the Gods. Here "Titan's Beams" refers to the the rays of the sun. In Spenser's treatment, the sun is bright, hot, and unpleasant; its force needs to be delayed for the speaker to fully enjoy the weather during his walk. In the protestant literature of the Renaissance, the sun often represented the unpleasant parts of reality: Martin Luther and John Calvin both interpreted biblical images of the sun as metaphors for temptation and misery.

Glister (Line 4) - An obsolete word, which was once widely used to refer to a bright or brilliant light. It is closely related to the word "glittering"—but a glistering light is direct, unbroken, and, in the case of its use here, hot.

Sullen (Line 5) - Today, people generally use the word to refer to teenagers—that is, they use to describe other people, to describe their feelings and the way they present themselves. Spenser uses the word in a slightly different way: here, he applies it to "care." He employs the word in an obsolete sense. Here it doesn't mean that his cares are gloomy or moody. Instead, he means that they are obstinate and unyielding: he can't get rid of them.

Rutty (Line 12) - Full of ruts: in other words, marked by divots and ditches. The word is often used to refer to muddy roads, where the wheels of wagons or cars have carved paths through the mire. The use of the word here thus raises interesting

questions about who created these ruts that surround the river. They might be the consequence of human activity, or they might be the result of the river overflowing its banks.

Variable (Line 13) - The word means "various" here. Though the word "variable" suggests that the flowers are changing or transforming, Spenser means something less magical: simply that there are many different kinds of flowers on the river bank.

Bower (Line 15, Line 93, Line 134, Line 170) - Depending on the sense in which the word is used, a "bower" can be either a natural space or a part of a house—or both. Sometimes, the word refers to an arbor: a place in a forest where the trees arch overhead to form a natural ceiling, a welcoming enclosure. Sometimes, it refers to a private room in an apartment or house. In this sense, it is often gendered female: the bower is a lady's private room; sometimes it can even be a boudoir. Spenser uses the word in both senses here: the "maiden's bower" is a natural space which also serves as a private, feminine retreat.The word is particularly resonant in Spenser's poetry because of a famous incident in his epic poem *The Faerie Queen*. At the end of book 2, Guyon, the Knight of Temperance, travels to a beautiful place called the "Bower of Bliss." However, the Bower is full of temptation, which threatens to drag him from the path of Christian righteousness; as such, in a fit of rage, Guyon destroys the bower.Thus even though the word "bower" generally conveys a sense of pleasure, intimacy, and proximity to nature, the word is not unequivocally positive in Spenser's writing. It can also suggest temptation. Here that sense is largely excluded, but it nonetheless haunts this celebration of marriage.

Long (Line 17, Line 35, Line 53, Line 71, Line 89, Line 107, Line 125, Line 143, Line 161, Line 179) - Though it sounds like Spenser is saying that the wedding day won't last a long time, he means something different: here "not long" means "not far away." Or, more simply, "soon." He's saying, in other words, that the marriage he's describing will happen soon.

Nymphs (Line 20, Line 55, Line 83) - Nymphs are divine female spirits in Greek mythology. Often associated with rivers or ponds, they are often figured as beautiful young women who embody the spirit of a place. They are thus frequently invoked by poets who want to praise a woman's beauty, or to associate her with a particular body of water.

Espy (Line 20) - To see or watch. The word is an archaic form of the verb "to spy." The word is used in a fairly neutral sense here: Spenser's speaker is not spying on the nymphs; he just happens to see them as he takes his walk.

Flood (Line 21) - When we use the word "flood," we're generally talking about a river or body of water that has risen above its banks, damaging the property nearby. Spenser uses the word in almost the opposite sense: for Spenser, a "flood" is simply another word for "river." In other words, he is saying here that the nymphs are the daughters of the river Thames itself.

Locks (Line 22) - A curl or strand of hair. The fact that the nymphs have green hair suggests their close proximity to nature.; they seem almost plant-like with their cascades of green hair.

Entrailed (Line 25) - "Entrails" are intestines: the tangled mess of tubes that follow the stomach in the digestive track. Spenser takes the way the intestine looks and applies it to the nymphs' baskets. Like the entrails, their baskets are visually tangled: made of entwined or interlaced twigs that come together to form a vessel.

Curiously (Line 25) - Cleverly, skillfully. The word doesn't mean that the basket itself is curious—rather, it means that it provokes curiosity. It's so well made and intricate that one can't help looking at it with admiration and wonder for the skill that went into making it.

Flasket (Line 26) - A "flasket" is a long, narrow basket. The word is obsolete now, but in its uses in the Renaissance it almost always describes a basket made of wood or twigs—as is the case here.

Featously (Line 27) - "Featously" is an obsolete word (last used around the end of the 16th century). It describes something beautiful or handsome, well-put together. Combining with the word "full"—which serves here simply to intensify the word—Spenser is saying that the nymphs do a beautiful job plucking the flowers.

Pallid (Line 30) - "Pallid" usually describes colors: it indicates that the colors are not particularly strong or intense. It can also be used in the same sense to describe someone's face: a pale person might be described as "pallid." Here it indicates that the violet is a faint, weak blue.

Vermeil (Line 33) - "Vermeil" is a word which is basically only used in poetry. It's an adjective, derived from the word "vermilion." It describes something red or crimson in color: in other words, Spenser is using this fancy, poetic word to tell us that the roses the nymphs are gathering are red.

Lee (Line 38) - There are two possibilities for what the word "Lee" means here. It can mean "meadow" or "river-bank," in which case, the swans are simply swimming down along the river. Alternately, it can refer to the River Lea, one of the tributaries to the Thames: in which case, the swans are swimming down the Lea and then join the Thames. Both readings are possible: indeed, they do not exclude each other, and it is entirely possible that Spenser intends both at once!

Pindus (Line 40) - The Pindus are a mountain range in Northern Greece, near Thessaly. Spenser is building a set of references, both mythological and geographical that locate this poem in the landscape of Greek myth. This theme is continued below in lines 79-80, when he references the Tempe Valley in

Thessaly.

Strew (Line 40, Line 77) - To scatter or to spread loosely. The Pindus are only partially covered by snow, in Spenser's description: one can still see the mountain beneath, with its rocky outcroppings. The same verb is used below in line 77 to describe the way the nymphs throw flowers on the water in celebration of the swans and their upcoming marriage.

Shew (Line 41) - To display or be seen. In this sense, the word is simply an old spelling of the verb "to show." Spenser is discussing how white the snows on the Pindus mountains appear—and how white they appear in comparison to the white feathers of the two swans.

Jove (Line 42, Line 173) - A poetic name for Jupiter, the chief god in the pantheon of Roman mythology. Spenser uses the Roman name here, even though he is recounting a *Greek* myth, in which the Greek god Zeus takes the form of a swan and rapes the human woman Leda. Despite the confusion between the Greek and Roman names, the overall shape of the myth is clear and the reader can assume that Spenser is referring to Zeus.

Leda (Line 43, Line 44) - A mortal woman in Greek mythology, who was raped by the God Zeus (referred to by his Latin/Roman name, Jove, in the poem). Zeus took the form of a swan to do so, and impregnated her. As a result, Leda subsequently gave birth to several key figures in Greek mythology, including Helen of Troy—whose abduction prompted the ten-year long Trojan war. Leda and the Swan is the subject of many poems and paintings.

Eftsoons (Line 55) - An obsolete word, which means "once more" or "again." Having filled their baskets with flowers, the nymphs are eager to have another look at the swans as they swim down the river.

Venus (Line 63, Line 96) - "Venus" is both the name of a planet and the name of the goddess of love in Roman mythology. As the goddess of love, she was also responsible for things like marriage and fertility. In the Renaissance, she was often depicted riding in a carriage drawn by two swans.

Team (Line 63) - In the Renaissance, the word "team" was often used to refer to a group of horses or oxen, yoked together to draw a cart or carriage. Here Spenser imagines that the swans are drawing Venus's carriage, much as horses might draw a human woman's carriage. The surreal, strange image of swans drawing a carriage emphasizes how different Venus is from mortals—and how different the swans are.

Begot (Line 65) - To be born or descended from. In other words, Spenser is saying that the swans floating down the Thames seem divine, as though they do not have mortal parents—just like the swans the pull Venus's carriage. The word "begot" is often used in translations of the Bible, where it describes the genealogies of families in the Old Testament. Spenser plays on that sense here. When we hear the word "begot" we expect a detailed list of ancestors. Spenser refuses to give us that list because the swans are so pure and heavenly that they transcend earth.

Somers-heat (Line 67) - Literally, the phrase means "summer's heat." Spenser's speaker is arguing that the swans' parents weren't angels, but rather they were generated by the heat of a summer's day. It's an odd idea, but its oddness is partially explained by a secondary meaning of the phrase "Somers-heat": it's a pun on the family name of the two brides-to-be: Somerset. (In Elizabethan England, "heat" would've been pronounced *het*). So even as Spenser says that the swans were bred from the summer's heat, he also acknowledges their actual family heritage.

Peneus (Line 78) - Peneus (also spelled Pineios) is a major river in Thessaly, a region of Greece (and the same where region where the Pindus Mountains are located). The river flows through the Tempe valley. In classical poetry, its beauty was proverbial; it was often praised by poets like Catullus.

Thessaly (Line 79) - Thessaly is a region in northern Greece. It is the site of many of the geographical references in the poem, including the Pindus Mountains, the Peneus River, and the Tempe Valley. It is proverbial in classical poetry for its great beauty and charm; even poets like Catullus who did not live in Greece invoked it as an especially beautiful locale. By continually referring to this distant part of Greece, Spenser accomplishes two things at once: he emphasizes the beauty of the brides-to-be, describing them as more beautiful than a traditionally very beautiful place. He also compares England to these classically beautiful spaces—and finds that England is at least as beautiful. This suggests that England is a place worth praising, and a place from which great poetry might emerge.

Tempe (Line 79) - A valley in Thessaly, a region of Greece, where the Peneus River flows. The valley and the river were frequently praised for their beauty in classical poetry, including by Catullus.

Mead (Line 84) - "Mead" is an obsolete word for "meadow." Even in Spenser's time it was largely used only in poetry, with more practical words used by people who actually worked in or cultivated meadows. The word helps to underscore the highly poetic character of Spenser's writing: this is not a poem that pretends to represent everyday speech, but instead emphasizes its own literary quality.

Complement (Line 95) - A "complement" is something that fulfills something else, that completes it. In this case, it implies that before marriage the swans are incomplete: only with marriage do they become fully themselves.

Heart-quelling son (Line 97) - This is a reference to Cupid: in Roman mythology, he is Venus's son. He has the power to "quell" hearts in that, with his famous bow and arrows, he can make people fall in love: one hit from his arrow, and you fall madly in love. In this sense, he defeats or "quells" hearts: he

deprives them of their independence, their capacity to choose whom to fall in love with.

Guile (Line 99) - "Guile" is a form of cunning and treachery. A person with guile is actively deceiving other people, pretending to be their friends, or even lovers, while secretly plotting against them. To be free of "friendship's faulty guile" is thus to have a full, rich friendship in which neither party seeks to deceive the other or to use the friendship for their own selfish advantage.

Assoil (Line 100) - The word "assoil" is most often used in a religious context, where it means "to remove sin" or "to absolve." It does, however, have a less religious sense: sometimes it simply means "to remove." That's the most prominent sense here: Spenser is simply saying that Venus's smile has the power to remove "friendship's faulty guile" forever. But the religious sense remains in play: "friendship's faulty guile" comes to seem, by implication, like a sin that Venus removes.

Chastity (Line 103) - In line 103, the nymph expresses a wish that may sound contradictory to modern ears: she wishes that the brides' beds will "with chaste pleasures abound." Modern speakers use the word "chaste" to refer to people who refrain from having sex altogether. But there is an earlier sense, which occurs often in Spenser, and in other Protestant thinkers from the period. For them, chastity involves refraining from what they consider to be unlawful or immoral forms of sex, including sex before and outside of marriage. For example, in 1567, Thomas Palfreyman writes, "The first degree of chastitie, is pure virginitie: ye second faithful matrimony." The nymph's wish is thus not contradictory: instead of hoping that the swans will have sexless marriages, she hopes that they will have lawful, moral, and ultimately procreative sex.

Issue (Line 104) - When contemporary speakers of English use the word "issue" as a noun, we generally mean a "problem" or "topic for debate." Spenser uses the word in a different sense here: for him, the word "issue" means "children." In other words, the nymph is praying in her song that the two swans will have many children with their husbands-to-be.

Undersong (Line 110) - An "undersong" is a refrain: a series of words (or a musical melody) that repeats at regular intervals through a poem or piece of music, sometimes with minor variations. In "Prothalamion" the refrain is (with some slight variations): "Against the bridal day, which is not long / Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song." As a reader, one should imagine a chorus of nymphs singing the final two lines of stanza 6 (lines 107-108) together, in harmony with each other.

Adown (Line 115) - "Adown" describes a downward motion: for instance, drifting, sinking, or kneeling. "Drifting" is the most appropriate sense of the word here: Spenser is describing the leisurely progress of the birds as they float downriver. Like many words in the poem, this word is chiefly used in poetic contexts: it is self-consciously literary, and emphasizes the artificial, polished quality of the poem.

Twain (Line 120) - "Twain" is an old-fashioned word for "two": it means simply that all the birds have begun to flock around the two swans as they make their journey down river. Though the word feels fancy and stuffy to speakers of modern English, it was widely used and unremarkable in the Renaissance.

Cynthia (Line 121) - Cynthia is a name for the goddess of the moon in Greek and Roman mythology. In other words, Spenser is saying that the two swans are like the moon and the birds around them are like the stars. The stars may be beautiful, but the moon is much brighter, more brilliant, and more impressive. Cynthia is also often associated with chastity and virginity.

Shend (Line 121) - "Shend" is often a very forceful word: it can mean "to disgrace" or "to ruin." In this context, it is probably less forceful: readers might interpret it to mean something like "put to shame." In any case, the implication is clear: Cynthia puts the stars to shame, just as the swans are much more beautiful than the birds around them.

Enranged (Line 122) - "Enranged" is an obsolete word: it means "to put things in order or in a rank." In other words, the birds not only surround the swans: they are also arranged in some kind of hierarchy around them, with some (presumably nobler or more beautiful birds) closer to the swans, and other more humble birds farther away. In this poem, nature spontaneously organizes itself into hierarchical patterns. In this way, it resembles the arrangements of human society.

Bricky (Line 132) - A "bricky" thing is full of bricks. The towers Spenser is describing here are made of bricks. The word seems to be Spenser's coinage: no one before him is recorded using it and very few people have used it since.

Whilom (Line 135) - "Whilom" is a now obsolete word: it means "once upon a time" or "at times." It indicates that something happened in the past—and is no longer occurring. In other words, Spenser is saying that at one time in the past the Knights Templar used these buildings, but that time is over.

Wont (Line 135, Line 139) - "Wont" is an adjective essentially meaning to be used to or accustomed to doing something; it is usually used with the verb "to be," i.e., "I am wont" or "he was wont." Spenser cuts the verb for metrical reasons, but it remains implicit here. "Wont" indicates that something is a habit or a pattern: Spenser is saying that the Knights Templar tended to use these buildings or often used these buildings in the past.

Templar Knights (Line 135) - The Knights Templar—or the "Templar Knights" as Spenser calls them—were a Catholic military order in the middle ages. Heavily involved in the Crusades, they also participated in charitable activities and were prominent in the finances of the church, developing an early form of banking. After the Holy Land was lost in the 13th century, suspicion against the Knights Templar grew across

Europe; the order was finally disbanded by the Pope in the early 14th century. By the time Spenser wrote his poem, England had become a Protestant country. Spenser's reference to this disbanded Catholic order thus calls up a lost medieval Catholic England.

Whereunto (Line 137) - "Whereunto" is a rare word. It means, effectively, "to which." In this case, one can rewrite Spenser's line as "Next to which there stands a stately place." In other words, Spenser is establishing the spatial relation between the "bricky towers" of line 132 and the "stately place" of 137, stressing their proximity to one another.

Hercules (Line 148) - Hercules is a famous hero from Greek mythology, known for completing twelve heroic labors or challenges. The pillars of Hercules—the cliffs that rise on either side of the Straits of Gibraltar—were the farthest west he traveled during his labors. He came to Gibraltar as part of the tenth labor, in which he was tasked with stealing cattle from the monster Geryon.

Prowess (Line 155) - "Prowess" refers to two related things. At times, it can refer to skill or capacity. At others, it refers to bravery or valiance. Both senses are possible here: Spenser might be referring to Essex's skill in battle or his bravery. Indeed, the two senses blur together: in battle, skill and bravery are often related, if not indistinguishable.

Arms (Line 155) - Here, Spenser is not referring to Essex's physical arms, but rather the things he carries on those arms into battle: his weapons. This is an example of metonymy: obviously, Essex's weapons don't win the battle, but rather the man who wields them does. Nonetheless, those weapons represent the man and his actions in battle.

Elisa (Line 157) - The name "Elisa" is here used as a contraction of Elizabeth. It refers to Elizabeth I, the powerful Queen of England during Spenser's life. Spenser favors this name for her and uses it throughout his career to refer to her in poetry—from the "April" aeglogue in *The Shepheardes Calendar* (1579) to the *Amoretti*, published one year before this poem in 1596. Spenser uses this shortened form of the name partially for metrical reasons, and partially because it was traditional to give powerful people nicknames in pastoral poems like "Prothalamion."

Alarms (Line 158) - An "alarm" in this instance is a "call to arms": a traditional song or trumpet melody, played to get soldiers ready for battle. Spenser is hoping that Elizabeth will make war throughout the world—and be victorious in doing so. And he imagines, in the next line, that a poet will be needed to praise her victories and commemorate them in song—a role that Spenser himself, no doubt, would be happy to fill.

Issuing (Line 163) - To "issue," in the sense that Spenser uses the word here, is to "come out of." In other words, Spenser is describing the way that "this noble lord" emerges from the high towers of his castle onto the banks of the rivers to greet the two swans.

Hesper (Line 164) - "Hesper" is a contraction of "Hesperus," the Evening Star. In Greek mythology, Hesperus is the son of the dawn goddess Eos and is the half-brother of Phosphorous, the morning star. Like Phosphorous, his rise signals a change from night to day: when the Evening Star rises, it signals the beginning of night.

Beseeming (Line 170) - To be "beseeming," in the sense Spenser uses the word here, is to be "fitting" or "appropriate." In other words, the two knights—the fiancés of the Somerset sisters, who appear here as swans—are handsome enough that they would be appropriate in any queen's bedroom.

Baldric (Line 174) - A "baldric" is a belt or strap. The word is often used in astrology to describe the zodiac, with its celestial signs (i.e. Taurus and Gemini). The use of the word is particularly appropriate here because the "twins of Jove" referenced in line 173, Castor and Pollux, became in Greek mythology the constellation Gemini—part of the zodiac.

Tide (Line 177) - Though contemporary speakers of English generally use the word to refer to the *tides*, the movement of the sea in and out of a coast. Spenser uses the word in an older sense here: it simply refers to time itself. In other words, he's saying that, at the agreed upon time, the wedding this poem anticipates did, in fact, happen.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

There is no precedent for a poem celebrating a betrothal—though there is a long tradition of *epithalamia*, poems celebrating weddings. Spenser thus needed to develop a new form for his new kind of poem.

The "Prothalamion" is indeed written in an unusual form. Each of its 10 stanzas are 18 lines long; the final two lines of each stanza are a refrain, which repeats with slight variations in its first line. (The second line of the refrain does not change throughout the poem).

There are no clear precedents for this form. Indeed, the longest regular stanza in English poetry is the octave—a full 10 lines shorter than Spenser's stanzas here! In some poems with long stanzas, the reader can divide up the stanza into smaller units, almost as though the stanza were composed of a series of quatrains or tercets that someone had squashed together. One can do that with the "Prothalamion" as well. Here, the units are, roughly, of five lines. These units are marked with the poem's rhyme and its meter. Let's take a closer look at the poem's first stanza to see this pattern in action.

The first five lines of the poem are rhymed *abbaa*. The first four lines are roughly in iambic pentameter (with a few substitutions here and there). Line 5, however, is only six syllables long, a line

of iambic trimeter. In the next five lines we find a similar pattern. The lines rhyme *bcbcc*; line 10 is in iambic trimeter while the rest are in pentameter.

This an unusual pattern for a poem in English. Generally, English poets avoid using five line stanzas because they are awkward and hard to rhyme. Indeed, the units here are more like quatrains with an awkward extra limb appended to them: because the fifth line of each unit is only six syllables long, it feels like a hiccup or stutter.

In lines 11-16, Spencer repeats this five line pattern and adds an *extra* trimeter line. Instead of a unit of five lines, one finds a unit of six: a quatrain rhymed *dded* and a couplet rhymed *ee* attached to it. Finally the refrain—a couplet of two lines in iambic pentameter— closes the stanza.

The following stanzas also follow this intricate, unusual pattern. It is not a pattern that feels natural or easy to parse: it takes considerable work on the part of the reader to uncover the principles that structure this poem. This has some advantages for Spenser. Instead of feeling like a highly mannered, courtly poem, the poem feels natural. It flows sweetly and softly, much like the river it describes.

Further, the poem has a total of 180 lines. Like Spenser's "Epithalamion," which has 24 sections, each representing an hour of a wedding day, the 180 lines here suggest the movement of the sun, the 180 degrees of the sun's daytime movement from dawn to dusk. Even as Spenser inaugurates a new kind of poem here, he carefully links it to the rhythms of the natural world: the flow of rivers, the movement of the sun.

METER

Each stanza of the "Prothalamion" is 18 lines long. Within these long stanzas, Spenser employs two separate meters, switching between them at regular intervals.

The most common meter in the poem is iambic pentameter. For example, in the first stanza of the poem, lines 1-4, 5-9, 11-14, and 17-18 are in iambic pentameter. See line 4:

> Hot Ti- | tan's beams, | which then | did glist- | er fair;

Lines 5, 10, 15, and 16 are in iambic trimeter. See line 5:

> When I | whose sull- | en care,

Iambic trimeter has the same rhythm as iambic pentameter, but it is two feet shorter. As a result, a line of iambic trimeter inserted between several lines of iambic pentameter can feel, at times, like an abbreviated line—almost a hiccup in the meter.

Spenser often uses this disruption to his advantage. For example, in the first five lines he withholds mentioning himself—or his unhappiness until line 5, the line of iambic trimeter. His entrance into the poem thus feels abrupt, an interruption of the beautiful weather he has so far been describing:

> CALM was the day, and through the trembling air
> Sweet breathing Zephyrus did softly play,
> A gentle spirit, that lightly did delay
> Hot Titan's beams, which then did glister fair;
> When I whose sullen care,

Elsewhere in the poem, the lines in iambic trimeter are less disruptive, continuing or completing a thought begun in the lines in iambic pentameter. (Indeed lines 15-16 in stanza 1 flow naturally from the pentameter lines above them.)

Each stanza may thus be divided into a series of smaller units: two units of 5 lines each, which contain four lines of iambic pentameter and one line of iambic trimeter; a unit of six lines, which contains four lines of iambic pentameter and two lines of iambic trimeter; and finally a couplet consisting of two lines of iambic pentameter. These metrical units correspond to the units of the rhyme scheme.

In a poem as long as the "Prothalamion," metrical variations and substitutions are inevitable—and often not particularly notable. For example, line 3 contains a spondee in its third foot. In a shorter poem, one might puzzle over the meaning of this particular substitution; in a poem this long, the reader can generally assume that these substitutions are simply necessary for the poet to sustain a complex and difficult metrical scheme over 180 lines. For example, in stanza 10, Spenser uses a series of 11 syllable lines, as can be seen in line 169:

> Two gentle knights of lovely face and feature

While it may be tempting to read the line's final foot as an amphibrach—an exotic and notable foot—it is more plausibly scanned as a line of iambic pentameter with a feminine ending (that is, an unstressed syllable at the end). The extra syllable is necessary for the rhyme, but the stress is put in the proper place for an iambic line. Here Spenser is widening the pentameter line slightly to give himself more rhyme sounds—interesting as a technical matter, but not particularly significant for interpreting the poem.

There are exceptions, of course: for instance, the trochaic substitution in the first foot of line 1 suggests that the "CALM" the poem describes is an interruption, something unusual and notable—rather than being something ordinary. But, paradoxically, the meter of the poem becomes most interesting when it is at its most strict, when it has the fewest possible variations. Since the poem is so long, we can treat the sections without metrical variation as sites of special intensity, where the poet has been stricter with himself, presumably for good reason. One finds a section like this in the nymph's song in lines

103-106 of stanza 6:

> And let your bed with pleasures chaste
> abound,
> That fruitful issue may to you afford,
> Which may your foes confound,
> And make your joys redound

These lines are uncannily regular. Scanning meter is not a precise science and there often border cases and ambiguous moments. In these lines there are no such ambiguous cases: indeed it is hard to imagine more perfectly iambic lines written in English. This studied perfection emerges at an important and telling moment in the poem: when the speaker is outlining his rules for the proper forms of sexuality in marriage. Just when he lays out rules, his verse becomes itself scrupulous about following the rules: as if modeling for the brides to be what chaste pleasures feel like.

Similarly, the metrical regularity of the later stanzas of the poem—often considered to be thematic digressions—challenge the reader to think about the relation between those stanzas and the previous: in those later stanzas, Spenser seems to be at pains to show that he is continuing to uphold the scheme he set out for himself earlier in the poem.

In sum, for a poem as complex and variable as the "Prothalamion" the most interesting moments in its meter are not when it *breaks* the rules, but when it *follows* them.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of "Prothalamion" is complicated and highly unusual. Each stanza is 18 lines long. Though each stanza itself is carefully rhymed, the rhyme scheme is not standard *between* the stanzas.

This first stanza can be divided into a series of smaller rhyme units, of five and six lines apiece. The organization of the rhyme constantly changes, however. For example, the first five lines form one unit, which looks *almost* like a quatrain in a Petrarchan sonnet (which is rhymed *abba*):

abbaa

The next five lines form another unit, but this time it looks more like a quatrain in a *Shakespearean* sonnet (which is rhymed *abab*):

bcbcc

The next unit of rhyme expands to six lines, with a pattern almost without precedent. (There are some Petrarchan sonnets which exhibit similar rhyme patterns in their sestets):

ddedee

And the stanza closes with a rhyming couplet:

ff

If this all were not disorienting enough, the next stanza introduces subtle alterations into the rhyme pattern that the first stanza establishes. Stanza two is rhymed:

abbaacbcbbddedeeff

The stanzas are quite similar, but note how the *order* of the rhymes in the second group of five lines has been reversed:

bcbcc

vs.

cbcbb

This particular unit is consistently a site of innovation and disruption in the poem's rhyme scheme.

In stanza 3, it alters yet again, now rhymed as it was in the first stanza:

bcbcc

In stanza 4, however, it's entirely different:

cdcdd

Where previous stanzas had bound together the first and second groups of five lines, using the *b* rhyme in both groups, this stanza forgoes any such connection between the two, introducing two new rhyme sounds for this group of five lines. Similar moments of disruption can be found in stanzas 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10. Only stanzas 3 and 7 follows the original pattern established in stanza 1 (bcbcc).

The poem thus establishes a complex, original rhyme scheme—and then introduces continuous variations into that scheme. The result is a poem that feels intensely musical without feeling overly organized: its rhymes fall in a natural, unforced rhythm. Indeed, one might see Spenser working to give his poem the sonic character of the river: like the river, this poem flows down the page, babbling and murmuring, with the looseness and freshness of water itself.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the "Prothalamion" is an English man, raised in London. He has spent time at the queen's court, looking to improve his political and social position. His ambitions have largely been frustrated, however. In the first stanza, he describes his expectations as "vain" and his hopes as "idle." Later, in stanza 8, he notes that he has lost his patron, an unnamed nobleman who gave him "gifts" and "goodly grace." The speaker thus retreats from the court into nature, wandering on the banks of the Thames River, which runs through London.

Despite his frustrations in politics, the speaker remains a committed English patriot. For example, in stanza 9, he celebrates Robert Devereux's recent victories in Spain and hopes that Queen's Elizabeth's "glorious name may ring / Through all the world." Whatever the speaker's frustrations with politics, he remains engaged in the pressing issues of his

day.

In addition to these allusions to contemporary politics, the poem contains a number of other references to historical events. Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset, whose engagements the poem celebrates, were real people, who really did get engaged in 1596. Further, Spencer himself struggled throughout his career to obtain patronage from the Queen and to maintain his position at Court. For this reason, many scholars read the poem as autobiographical: the speaker voices Spencer's own complaints with his political fortunes.

On the other hand, such expressions of political frustration are commonplace in Renaissance poetry. See, for example, Sir Thomas Wyatt's "Mine Own John Poynz," where the speaker transforms his political failures into a testament to his Christian virtue. The speaker of "Prothalamion" is thus an ambiguous figure. At times, he seems to be a real person, with a specific history. At other times, he seems to be a generic figure: a place-holder, who allows Spencer to unfold his highly mannered compliment to powerful and influential people.

SETTING

"Prothalamion" is, initially, set on the banks of the River Thames outside of London. The river is one of the most important waterways in England, running from west of Oxford through London, before emptying into the sea on the eastern coast of the country. The river runs through the intellectual and cultural heart of the country. It is thus often symbolic of the English nation itself, representing the forces that bind the nation into a common culture.

Spenser depicts the river as an idealized space: beautiful, pure, and unpolluted. The meadows along its banks are dense with flowers; its waters are clean (though not clean enough for the swans that ride on it). In fact, during Spenser's lifetime, the river was already highly polluted with run-off from the cities and villages on its banks. In a contemporary poem, "On the Famous Voyage," Ben Jonson describes the river as a site of "stench, disease, and old filth." Spenser's description of the river should not be understood as a literal report on its condition in the late sixteenth century. Instead, it should be understood as an idealized portrayal of a key place in England, a place important to the country and its image of itself. Describing the river as an unspoiled paradise, Spenser implies that England itself is beautiful, pure, and flowering.

In the latter half of the poem, the setting shifts down-river to London itself. The speaker describes a number of important buildings on the banks of the Thames, including a set of buildings—usually called the "Temple"—which served as lodgings for law students in the 1590s. (The name comes from the prior residents of the buildings, the Knights Templar, a medieval charity and order of knights who participated in the crusades—but were suppressed by the Pope in the late 14th century).

The speaker also describes "a stately place," Leicester House—where the betrothal actually takes place. First occupied by the Earl of Leicester, the Earl of Essex lived there in 1596. A powerful figure and favorite of the Queen, Essex's presence in the poem signals Spenser's continued interest in aligning himself with the centers of political power in England at the time. Though many critics have taken these sections as extraneous to the poem, Spenser's return to London—and the centers of political power in England—mark some of the poem's deepest priorities. Though it begins with the speaker fleeing from politics into a natural paradise, the poem remains concerned throughout with acquiring and maintaining political favor for its author.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

At the time of its writing, "Prothalamion" was a unique and innovative poem. Dating to the ancient Greeks, there was a long tradition of *epithalamium*, poems celebrating weddings, with famous examples by poets like Anacreon, Pindar, and Catullus. The genre enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in the Renaissance, with examples written in French and Italian in the 14th and 15th centuries. Spenser himself is the author of a celebrated *epithalamion*, first published in 1595 with his sonnet sequence *Amoretti*; Spenser's "Epithalamion" celebrates his own wedding to Elizabeth Boyle in 1594. As one might expect, the genre typically praises the beauty of the bride and predicts happiness for the couple, often relying on natural imagery that makes the marriage itself feel like part of nature.

In his "Prothalamion," Spenser faced a unique challenge in the history of wedding poetry. He set out to celebrate the engagement of two English aristocrats, Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset, to Henry Guildford and William Petre. Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset were the daughters of the powerful Earl of Worcester. Since his poem takes place before the Somersets' weddings, Spenser refrains from labeling his poem an epithalamion. Instead he coins a new word and inaugurates a new genre: the *prothalamion*. Using the Greek prefix *pro-*, which means "before," and the Greek noun *thalamos*, which means "bridal chamber," Spenser's title locates his poem in time. It is a poem which happens before the bride enters the bridal chamber as a married woman.

The "Prothalamion" draws on a number of traditional tropes of the *pastoral*, a classical genre celebrating the beauty of nature. The pastoral often features a speaker who has withdrawn from political life in search of something more honest and real. Further, the pastoral typically presents nature as an idealized, pure space. Spenser opened his career with a book of pastoral

poems, *The Shepheardes Calendar* (1579). "Prothalamion" marks a return to the pastoral at the end of his career.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Spenser spent the entirety of his career as a poet living under the rule of Queen Elizabeth. In Elizabeth's court, poetry was often used to flatter the queen, to insult rivals, and to gain influence. Spenser spent much of his career in this environment, jockeying unsuccessfully for position and power. Born to common parents, he rose to prominence in English society thanks to his education at Cambridge University and his talent as a poet. He sought—and received—a yearly gift from Queen Elizabeth for his poems, but he was given minor positions in Elizabeth's government, serving mostly in Ireland—almost an exile for ambitious young men in Elizabeth's government. Spenser tried to use his poetry to improve his position, dedicating his most famous work *The Faerie Queen* to Queen Elizabeth and befriending the influential nobleman Sir Walter Raleigh.

"Prothalamion" is best understood in the context of this jockeying for position in Elizabeth's court. Spenser was not personally close with the brides, the grooms, or the families. The poem is not like a contemporary wedding toast, where someone close to the bride or groom praises them and their match. Instead, it is a public document, an attempt on the part of the poet to gain influence with important people in Elizabethan England. Among these are the brides' father, the Earl of Worcester, a knight and nobleman in Elizabeth's court, and Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex (whose exploits are detailed in stanza 9). Essex, in particular, was one of Elizabeth's favorite subjects, and a powerful figure at court in 1596.

The Elizabethan Court was a cutthroat and unstable place. In 1601, two years after Spenser's death, Essex attempted to stage a coup d'état against Elizabeth's government. He was unsuccessful and executed; during the rebellion, Worcester was placed under house arrest. It is unclear whether the poem succeeded in meaningfully improving Spenser's position at court. He died shortly after its publication in 1599, after having been driven from his estate in Ireland in the Nine Years' War.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- History of the Epithalamium — A detailed history of the genre from which "Prothalamion" emerges, the "epithalamium." (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epithalamium)
- Leda and the Swan — A poem by the Irish poet W. B. Yeats, which also tells the story of Leda and the Swan—though Yeats's take on it is much less positive than Spenser's. (https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/leda-and-swan)
- Reading of "Prothalamion" — A group reading of "Prothalamion." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWDeKCe4zAM)
- "The Waste Land" — The full text of T.S. Eliot's famous long poem, "The Waste Land," which prominently cites the refrain of Spenser's "Prothalamion." (Jump to section III, "The Fire Sermon" to find the citation). (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land)
- "Epithalamion" — The full text of the sister poem to "Prothalamion," Spenser's "Epithalamion," written for his own wedding, the year before in 1595. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45191/epithalamion-56d22497d00d4)

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