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DAVID LEE MILLER

Laughing at Spenser's *Daphnaida*

How could Spenser have written a poem as inexplicably bad as *Daphnaida*, and why did he publish it? Having done so once, in 1591, why did he then republish the poem, unrevised, in 1596? And having published it the first time *solus*, why in 1596 did he republish it as a companion piece to the highly accomplished *Fowre Hymnes*? This essay proposes speculative answers to all three questions.

Daphnaida is deliberately bad and indeed advertises itself as such, explicitly banishing the Horatian pair *utile et dulce* in its opening stanzas. This may be the form Spenser's resistance took if he was prevailed upon by Sir Walter Raleigh to write an elegy proclaiming Arthur Gorges's inconsolable grief for his young wife as part of a campaign to gain control over her estate. This explanation holds for the republication in 1596, when Raleigh had been rehabilitated at court and Gorges was pursuing the wardship of his daughter Ambrosia, but it fails to explain the pairing of *Daphnaidai* with *Fowre Hymnes*. That is explained by reading *Fowre Hymnes* as a revisionary take on Petrarch's *Trionfi*: a generalized work of mourning for all created things, but one from which the motivating event of Laura's death has been elided. *Daphnaida*, written in the same stanza as the *Hymnes*, offers their precise reverse: a death so particularized and definitive that all mourning for it is summarily refused. Together the poems complicate and resituate each other as radically alternative versions of the same underlying recognition, namely that hatred for the world is ultimately a false posture.

Early in 1591 Spenser published what must be his worst poem, the pastoral elegy *Daphnida*. Dedicated to Helena Snackenborg, marchioness of Northampton and first Lady of the Queen's Bedchamber, "this little Poeme," as Spenser calls it, laments the death of Douglas Howard, the nineteen-year-old wife of Arthur Gorges, in verses so tedious and rhetoric so extravagantly lugubrious that *Teares of the Muses* seems sprightly in comparison.¹ The first question this poem raises is why on earth Spenser wrote it, let alone published it under his own name. In the diplomatic phrase of William Oram, it is "one of his most experimental and least-loved works" (487). The second question is why, having committed this gross error of taste once, he repeated it in 1596, when a second edition of the poem appeared. A third question is why in 1596 the poem was republished together with *Fowre Hymnes*, having appeared *solus* in 1591, as what Spenser calls "this Pamphlet" (493).² Probably all three questions are more or less unanswerable, but they are surely more interesting than the poem itself is.

In general, answers to questions like these may be constructed either on formal or on historical grounds. We have a formalist explanation in Oram's interpretation of the poem as a didactic warning against excessive grieving, and a historicist account in Jonathan Gibson's view of the poem as a propaganda piece, designed to leverage sympathy for Gorges in his legal battle with his deceased wife's family.³ This is not an absolute distinction, of course. Oram's reading tempts him to accept the speaker's claim that he has "like cause with [Alcyon] to waile and weepe" (66) as evidence that Spenser's first wife had recently died, a biographical factoid that is otherwise unattested. And Gibson's historical argument involves careful attention to the way Spenser's Alcyon

echoes Arthur Gorges's manuscript poetry. My desire to draw a distinction between the two orders of explanation does not reflect a desire to privilege either, nor does it follow from a bureaucratic sense that they belong in separate drawers. Rather I wish to separate them in order to let them recombine in a slightly different way, one that offers historical grounds for what is essentially an aesthetic response: namely, laughing at the extravagant badness of *Daphnaida*.

It may seem that in proclaiming this badness I am loading the dice against formal explanations. Perhaps. But my intention is not to argue that historical criticism should come in to take up the slack only when formalism reaches a dead end. That is just what happens in this case. Oram makes a respectable effort to recuperate the text, arguing that it represents a generic experiment in which the self-absorbed speaker of pastoral love-complaint wanders onto the neighbor ground of pastoral elegy. The result of this experiment is to arrest the movement toward consolation proper to elegy with the static obsessiveness of a poem like Colin Clout's sestina in the "August" eclogue of *The Shepheardes Calender*.

This reading makes sense, but Spenser's generic trespass still leaves readers who were expecting empathy and consolation for loss suspended in the ironic distance customary for the love-lament. The poem's conspicuous imitation of Chaucer only exacerbates this disappointment, for it invokes the elegant and amusing *Book of the Duchess* as a model only to cut off its consolatory gestures and travesty its delicate decorum. The result is to accentuate the badness of the imitation. Oram's interpretation does not help with this badness, nor does it speak to the heavy-handedness of the verse:

I hate to speak, my voyce is spent with crying:
I hate to heare, lowd plaints have duld mine eares:
I hate to tast, for food withholdes my dying:
I hate to see, mine eyes are dimd with teares:
I hate to smell, no sweet on earth is left:
I hate to feele, my flesh is numbd with feares:
So all my senses from me are bereft.

(414–20)

The phrase “food withholdes my dying” is provocative, but still, eighty-one stanzas like this one would dull anyone’s ears.

Interestingly, Spenser himself does offer an explanation for these aesthetic facts. His speaker warns us from the beginning not to expect pleasure, rejecting the Muses “and their sweete harmonie” (15) in favor of the Fates:

But who so else in pleasure findeth sense,
Or in this wretched life dooth take delight,
Let him be banisht farre away from hence:
Ne let the sacred Sisters here be hight,
Though they of sorrowe heavilie can sing;
For even their heavie song would breed delight:
But here no tunes, save sobs and grones shall ring.

(8–14)

Critics who agree with this description of the poem have assumed that the speaker does not mean it. Why not take him at his word? He has written an elegy from which Horation *dulce* is excluded by design. The poem is deliberately unpleasing.

If this unpleasingness is not inadvertent, then it calls for another order of explanation. Why deliberately write—and publish—*twice*—a bad poem? The speaker offers a kind of rationale in the opening lines. If the second stanza will exclude *dulce*, this one looks like a parody of *utile*:

What ever man he be, whose heavie minde
 With grieffe of mournfull great mishap opprest,
 Fit matter for his cares increase would finde:
 Let reade the ruffull plaint herein exprest. . . .

(1–4)

He offers his poem as just the thing for anyone determined to wallow in misery. The problem is that this advertisement disparages the reader as much as the poem itself. The poet seems determined to alienate us. The critical history of the poem confirms his success.

So Spenser tells us he has written a poem intended to give no pleasure, a poem we would have to be perversely self-punishing to enjoy—if that is the word. What he does not tell us is why. With aesthetic motives ruled out we must look to the historical context for clues. The result can only be speculative, but it is a kind of speculation the poem does

seem to invite. Jonathan Gibson has proposed that Spenser takes Alcyon's elaborately melancholic rhetoric from the poetry of Sir Arthur Gorges, and that he does so not because Gorges was in fact grieving excessively but because he was engaged in legal battles with the relatives of his deceased wife. "*Daphnida* in this context," writes Gibson, "looks like a propaganda weapon engineered to counterbalance damaging rumours circulating at court" (28), and its melancholic excess looks like a ploy "to help Gorges in his case" (32):

Spenser's strategy is a simple one. The translation of Gorges into Alcyon establishes Gorges as a victim and gains him sympathy. Meanwhile, the depiction of Gorges/Alcyon as irrational and out of control—a man almost mad with grief—powerfully challenges the Howards' view of him as a scheming and opportunistic false claimant to Howard land.

(32–33)

This is a plausible hypothesis, but notice that it too fails to address what I am calling the aesthetic facts. Maybe the poem gains sympathy for Alcyon—and maybe it does not—but either way the reading I am sketching sets itself against the strategy Gibson proposes. This need not mean he is wrong, but it does mean that the poem's deliberate badness points to something in it deeply at odds with its aims as propaganda.

What is this something? In trying to imagine it, I draw support from recent speculations by Andrew Zurcher, who suggests that Spenser's relations with Sir Walter Raleigh in the early to mid 1590s may have been less cordial than previous critics

supposed. Zurcher goes so far as to argue that *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, when it first circulated in manuscript, may have “outed” Raleigh’s marriage to Elizabeth Throckmorton.⁴ Perhaps the main value of such speculations is to weaken our confidence in the generally accepted version of events by reminding us how much there is we cannot know. But if it were true, then we would have to imagine a decidedly fraught relationship between Spenser and Raleigh, one not easily idealized as solidarity between fellow poets and not obviously attributable to solidarity between fellow planters. We know Raleigh was a physically imposing man, but he also lived “large” in every sense. It is easy to guess that Spenser may not only have admired Raleigh and depended on him for an introduction at court, but also envied him and perhaps, at times, deplored his self-aggrandizing behavior. The portrait of Timias in the middle books of *The Faerie Queene* is shot through with this kind of ambivalence.⁵

Raleigh was the link between Arthur Gorges, his cousin, and Edmund Spenser, his client.⁶ In early 1591 Spenser was deeply indebted to Raleigh for the reception of the 1590 *Faerie Queene*; was he at the same time appalled by his patron’s flagrantly deceptive behavior at court? If, at such a juncture, Spenser had found Raleigh calling in favors by asking him to write a poem in support of Gorges; and if the poem he was asked to write involved representing Gorges—for purely strategic reasons—as mad with grief, the result might have been something like the poem we have.

This might especially be the case if the Gorges strategy were something Spenser had already seen, and already recoiled from, in Raleigh himself. Timias mourns this way in *The Faerie Queene*. Extravagant grief is also the idiom in which Raleigh would choose to present himself when, in the summer of 1592, he was disgraced by the Throckmorton

marriage. According to Nicholls and Penry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, this style of self-presentation backfired: “Elizabeth,” they write, “was irritated rather than pacified by these gestures, smacking as they did of implicit defiance and a wholesale lack of remorse. It was a curious but somehow characteristic miscalculation, which provoked a venomous response from the queen.”⁷ If Spenser, by 1590, had already recognized such behavior in his patron as both “characteristic” and miscalculated, he may have wanted to distance himself from it.

Our witness to the gestures that irritated the queen is none other than Arthur Gorges. Writing to Cecil—but adding in a postscript, “I could wish her Majesty knew”—Gorges describes “a strange Tragedye that this day had like to have fallen out between the Captain of the Guard and the Lieutenant of the Ordinance”—that is, between Raleigh and his jailor—“If I had not by great chance cummen at the very instant to have turned it into a Comedy” (Sandison 657). It seems that Raleigh, seeing the queen’s barges on the river below Durham palace, where he was under arrest in the custody of Sir George Carew, flew into a melodramatic fit of love-melancholy, “And as a man transported with passion; he sware to Sir George Carew that he would disguise himself; and get into a payer [pair] of oars to ease his mind but with a sight of the queen; or else he protested his heart would break.” In the ensuing battle, we are told, “the Jailor had his new periwig torn off his crown,” and the two men drew their daggers. At this point Gorges intervenes, and while he does get his fingers bloodied, he is luckier than Mercutio, for the combatants break off when they see him injured. Gorges protests that he “cannot tell whether I should more allow of the passionate lover or of the trusty Jailor,” and confesses his fear that “Sir Walter Raleigh will shortly grow Orlando Furioso” (658).

Tracing the fine line between comedy and tragedy, Gorges seems thoroughly knowing when it comes to the histrionics he reports. The scene is essentially literary: Raleigh's model is Orlando. The reference may be intended to elevate and dignify the *faux* passion on display, but a note of the ridiculous creeps in just the same, for the stakes of the fight are at once enormous and trivial: Raleigh's political survival, on the one hand, or on the other, a dislodged periwig and a rap on the knuckles. The letter's subtle combination of sympathy and amused distance suggests that such behavior both is and is not to be taken seriously. Perhaps we may view Alcyon's extravagant grief with a similar sense of its inherent absurdity and its strategic ineptitude. Spenser, I want to say, senses its absurdity and, motivated by distaste for an assignment he is not in a position to refuse, translates the ineptitude into bathos.

This is my answer to the first question, why did Spenser write such an awful poem. The second question, you will recall, was why he should republish it in 1596. Raleigh by that time had been rehabilitated, and had just shared in Essex's triumph at Cadiz. Gorges, meanwhile, was once again pursuing the Howard fortunes, now with a petition involving the wardship of his daughter Ambrosia (Sandison 652). In short, the logic that reads the poem as propaganda on Gorges's behalf in 1591 applies once again in the autumn of 1596.

What this logic does not explain is the decision to publish *Daphnaida* in a single volume with *Fowre Hymnes*—the third question I said the poem raises. Here again I would like to suggest a stubborn counter-strategy designed to accentuate the poem's combination of perversity and ineptitude. What *Daphnaida* and the hymns most

obviously have in common is their stanza form—the rhyme-royal, handled in the hymns with a graceful fluency that calls attention to the lumbering feet of the elegy in contrast.

I think the poems also share a strategy of seeming—but only seeming—to endorse a grandiose rejection of the world. I have developed this view of the *Hymnes* more fully elsewhere and will only summarize it here.⁸ Spenser's *Hymnes* are a generic hybrid, a fusion of sacred hymn and Petrarchan triumph. They are modeled on the *Trionfi* not just in the rhetorical trappings of the first hymn (“thy victorious conquests to areed,” HL.11) but in the deeper structure that underpins both sequences. Petrarch's sequence moves from earthly love to Eternity, with each triumph explicitly vanquishing its predecessor: thus Chastity prevails over Love, Death over Chastity, Fame over Death, Time over Fame, and Eternity over Time. The pattern is dialectical: each victory repeats but also reverses its predecessor's terms, starting with the Roman emperors from whom Petrarch takes the triumphal form, displayed in the first triumph as Love's captives.

The reversals that key this progression are anchored at its midpoint, when after her death Laura returns to the poet in a dream. He asks whether she is dead or alive; she answers that she is alive, but that *he* will remain dead until he leaves the earth (II.22–25). In *Fowre Hymnes*, Spenser adapts the dialectical pattern elaborated by Petrarch, moving from effect (love) to cause (beauty), and then ascending from earthly effects to heavenly causes. Along with this dialectical pattern Spenser adopts the reversal of terms at its heart, the transvaluation of life and death. At the same time, however, he suppresses the event—the actual death—that anchors this reversal in Petrarch. Eliding Laura's death as a literal turning point, he absorbs it into the general mortality of all things. What was for the Italian poet an explicit work of mourning therefore emerges in *Fowre Hymns* rather as

a program of idealization that labors to relinquish all earthly objects in favor of their divine counterparts.

Spenser's *Hymnes* complicate their Petrarchan model in a second way by playing the dialectical logic of the triumphal sequence against the generic form of the hymn, in which an opening invocation leads to a creation myth, a celebration of the deity, and a closing petition or prayer. The result of this tension between forms is that when each hymn turns to the theme of ascent and retreat from the world, it is effectively *undoing* the act of creation it began by celebrating. In all four hymns the labor of idealization therefore bears an odd resemblance to the work of death: in each case the soul abandons the body and the world, returning to "her first perfection" (HB.216) in heaven.

Juxtaposing the hymns to "Daphnaida" invites us to see further connections between the process of meditative purification that the hymns appear to advocate and the process of mourning that the elegy repudiates. It invites this second look by a curious act of mirroring, one in which a work of mourning from which the death has been subtracted is followed by an elegy for a deceased beloved that refuses the work of mourning. This juxtaposition invites a yet another dialectical reversal: a critique of the idealizing motives that seem initially to govern the hymns, which appear now as an unacknowledged work of mourning.

In particular, this retrospective contrast between the hymns and the elegy invites a second look at the account of the Incarnation and Crucifixion in the "Hymn to Heavenly Love." *Contemptus mundi* appears at key moments in all four hymns and is consistently presented as their destination, but it cannot be the governing value of a vision that celebrates God's willingness to abject himself—and "abject," by the way, is Spenser's

word (HHL.137)—for a creature whose resemblance to him has been all but destroyed by sin. Revisiting this section of the third hymn with yet another dialectical reversal in mind—a critique of the motives of meditative purification—a reader may be prepared to see the hymns very differently. For example, when the speaker at the close of the final hymn views the created world itself as “vile” (HHB.299), we may notice that his language echoes the treatment of Jesus by the Roman soldiers, “Revyling him, that them most vile became” (HHL.152).

Such perceptions open a reading of Spenser’s hymns as deeply at odds with the motives they apparently advocate. *Daphnaida*, I suggest, even more unmistakably treats hatred of the world as an utterly false posture. Placing the poems side by side in 1596, Spenser invites us to see them both differently: to revisit the hymns with a skeptical eye to their rejection of the world, and to laugh at Alcyon’s heavy-handed rendition of Gorges-Raleigh-Orlando, recognizing it as a literary mimesis not of John of Gaunt’s inconsolable grief but of Sir Walter Raleigh’s cynical posturing.

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¹ *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. William Oram et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 492. All quotations are from this edition.

² Thanks to Cathy Blose of the University of Alabama, who provoked this essay by posing the third question during a seminar discussion hosted by the Hudson Strode program and ostensibly devoted to *Fowre Hymnes* and *Prothalamion*.

³ Oram, “*Daphnaïda* and Spenser’s Later Poetry,” *Spenser Studies* 2 (1981), 141–58; Gibson, “The Legal Context of Spenser’s *Daphnaïda*,” *Review of English Studies*, n.s., 55.18 (2004), 24–44.

⁴ Zurcher, “Getting It Back to Front in 1590: Spenser’s Dedications, Nashe’s Insinuations, and Raleigh’s Equivocations,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 38:2 (2005), 173–98.

⁵ William Oram, “Spenser’s Raleghs,” *Studies in Philology* 87 (1990): 341–62, argues persuasively that Spenser’s portraits of Raleigh in *Colin Clouts* and *The Faerie Queene*, Book III reflect a pointed ambivalence about Raleigh’s use of courtship as a vehicle for courtiership in wooing the queen.

⁶ Helen Estabrook Sandison, “Arthur Gorges, Spenser’s Alcyon and Raleigh’s Friend,” *PMLA* 43.3 (1928), 645–74.

⁷ Mark Nicholls and Penry Williams, “Raleigh, Sir Walter (1554–1618),” *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/23039>, accessed 10 Sept 2010]).

⁸ “*Fowre Hymnes, Prothalamion*,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser*, ed. Richard A. McCabe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 293–313.