

2006

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Publication Info

Postprint version. Published in *A Critical Companion to Spenser Studies*, ed. Bart van Es, 2006, pages 139-165.

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David Lee Miller

The Faerie Queene (1590)

‘All suddainly I saw the Faery Queene’

Sometime early in 1590, John Wolfe’s London print shop started a job for the stationer William Ponsonby, turning out sheets that would later be folded twice and bound into quarto-sized volumes of more than six hundred pages. Proof was read while the presses worked, with corrections made on the fly. Sheets already printed off were used at random (waste not, want not), with the result that ‘existing copies exhibit an entirely haphazard combination of revised and unrevised readings, and it is quite possible that there are no two copies whose readings agree throughout’.¹ This is not unusual; on the contrary, it is the way early modern books were typically made. Such ‘stop-press’ corrections would be more likely if the author himself were present in the shop, eagerly scanning the sheets on which his words, for so long turned over in the mind or scratched with a goose quill onto loose pages, now came back to him in the mechanical form of print.

The author of the present manuscript was an English civil servant back from Ireland, a learned man with a Cambridge degree and connections at court. A later poem reveals that he read before the queen (*Colin Clouts* 358-67); we do not know whether this took place before or after the manuscript went to press, but a commendatory poem by ‘H. B.’ does mention that the queen ‘biddes’ the poet to ‘bow downe his brow unto her sacred hand’ suggesting that he has already obtained royal favor. If he did visit the print shop, his visits may have presented Wolfe and his men with more complications than any other aspect of the job. Chances are that the author brought the manuscript over from Ireland personally, and with it he ‘seems to have carried a manuscriptive disposition right into the print shop’.² How could he not? This was to be his great work. He had been composing it, off and on, for ten years—changing, rearranging, adding, polishing, sending drafts to friends. Now suddenly he had to surrender his words, first to an industrial workshop and then to the world at large. He must have found time foreshortened by the demands of the production schedule even as anticipation heightened his anxieties about public reception.

While this was going on he added a preface, composed as a letter to Sir Walter Raleigh—his neighbor in Ireland and sponsor at court—explaining the plan and purpose of the work. The letter, dated 23 January of the previous year,³ was ‘annexed’ to the volume oddly, for it appears not at the front, as a preface normally would, but at the end, like an afterthought. So too do the commendatory poems contributed by the author’s friends and the series of dedicatory sonnets addressed to ten notable figures in Elizabeth’s court. That is, in some copies there are ten; in others, fifteen or seventeen; still other copies have both the original ten *and* the expanded group. The confusions created by

¹ Johnson 1933: 13.

² Loewenstein 1996: 100.

³ Brink 1994.

these discrepancies seem especially telling, for if the placement of the series at the back of the book makes it look like an afterthought, the addition of seven new sonnets—along with the loss of two from the first group of ten—looks like an afterthought to the afterthought compounded by mistakes. Decorum clearly mattered, for the sonnets are sequenced according to the rules of precedence,⁴ but their printing and binding seems as rushed and indecorous as Lady Macbeth's farewell to her dinner guests: 'Stand not upon the order of your going'.

The author of these confusions is not named on the book's title page. His name appears on the reverse, where a fulsome dedication to Queen Elizabeth is signed 'Ed. Spenser'.⁵ Throughout the book, eminent names and titles are flourished while the author's name is buried or abbreviated. In the end matter, for example, 'A Letter of the Authors' is addressed 'To the Right noble, and Valorous, Sir Walter Raleigh knight, Lo. Wardein of the Stanneryes, and her Maiesties liefetenaunt of the County of Cornewayll', but it is signed, like the dedication to the queen, with the shortened form of the poet's name. The dedicatory sonnets are subscribed under names accoutered, like Raleigh's, with titles and adjectives, but only a few are even so much as initialed 'E. S.'

The author's name appears wittily disguised at II.ix.27 and xii.42, and again in the commendatory poem by 'H. B.', addressed to the Muses, which refers to the poet as 'this rare dispenser of your graces'. It is even, after a fashion, announced in the poem's opening flourish, although it does not appear there: 'Lo I the man, whose Muse whilome did maske, / As time her taught, in lowly Shephards weeds'. This opening recalls the concluding envoi to his earlier poem *The Shepheardes Calender*: 'Lo I have made a calendar for every year'. But since the Calendar was published anonymously, the reference is teasingly circular, identifying the author of each poem as the 'I' who writes the other, but without naming either. Indeed, the movement from 'Lo I have made' to 'Lo I the man' suggests that the author as author is as much an effect of his poems as he is their source; they originate with his Muse and belong to the patrons who sustain him. They are 'named' rather after these patrons than after their maker, in a gesture that distinguishes sharply between the text's invention, proper to the poet, and its authority, which resides elsewhere.⁶ *The Faerie Queene*, published in 1590, is named for the patron to whom it was presented.

Because *The Faerie Queene* is the first recognizably epic poem in English, its initial publication belongs to many histories, some of them literary. What must it have been like for the poets of London during the late 1580s, as parts of the poem circulated in manuscript, or still more in 1590, when Spenser's astonishing volume appeared in the bookstalls? How does its impact register in the work of Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson, and Donne? Despite interesting work on specific texts and authors, there has been little systematic attempt to address such questions; we know more, relatively speaking, about the poem's influence on early seventeenth-century 'Spenserians' like Samuel Daniel and Phineas Fletcher or on still later writers, than we do about its immediate impact on

⁴ C. Stillman 1985.

⁵ The dedication appears in most copies, but in some the title page verso remains blank, which might indicate that royal permission for the dedication arrived after printing had begun.

⁶ Orgel 2002:3, 80-1.

Spenser's contemporaries.⁷ Perhaps the first of Raleigh's two commendatory sonnets, with its suggestive mingling of visionary awe and envy, evokes some sense of what it was like to read *The Faerie Queene* for the first time:

ME thought I saw the grave, where Laura lay,
Within that Temple, where the vestall flame
Was wont to burne, and passing by that way,
To see that buried dust of living fame,
Whose tumbe faire love, and fairer vertue kept,
All suddeinly I saw the Faery Queene:
At whose approach the soule of Petrarke wept,
And from thenceforth those graces were not seene.
For they this Queene attended, in whose steed
Oblivion laid him downe on Lauras herse:
Hereat the hardest stones were seene to bleed,
And grones of buried ghostes the heavens did perse.
Where Homers spright did tremble all for grieffe,
And curst th'accesse of that celestiall theife.

Presumably it is not only the souls of Petrarch and Homer who may fear the Promethean 'accesse' of a poet so clearly determined to rewrite literary history. At the same time, rivalry is not the whole story. Great work may be enabling as well as preemptive; female authors and readers such as Mary Sidney and Lady Mary Wroth found openings for their own work—for inspiration as well as resistance—in the radical experiments Sidney and Spenser were making with versification, lyric form, allegory, and romance narrative.

The framework of events

Spenser's poem is immersed in the religious and political history of early modern England, but its concerns can be difficult to pin down. The poem approaches but also avoids contemporary history, an ambivalence not surprising in an author who identifies himself with 'all the antique Poets historical' at the same time as he seeks to ward off 'gealous opinions and misconstructions' along with 'the daunger of envy, and suspition of present time' (*LR* 12-13).

We may locate the moment of publication within what one historian calls 'the framework of events' during the late sixteenth century in England.⁸ Spenser's poem appeared not long after the defeat of the Spanish Armada. During the decade in which it was composed, Queen Elizabeth's resistance to the 'war party' among her privy council finally gave way to a prolonged military conflict with Spain; the Earl of Leicester led an expedition to the Netherlands in support of Protestant resistance there. A Spanish invasion of England had been anticipated for years; when it finally came in 1588 the decisive English victory created a short-lived wave of euphoria. During the 1580s, the

⁷ Recent work addressing this question includes Reid 1993, Cheney 1997, 2004, and 2008, and Gross 2004.

⁸ A. G. R. Smith 1997:101-6, 223-34.

growing threat of invasion was accompanied by plots to depose or assassinate the queen—the Throckmorton plot in 1583, the Babington plot in 1586—and by the infiltration of Catholic priests from a seminary founded at Douai in 1568 and moved to Rheims ten years later. In 1587 Mary Queen of Scots was finally executed for her part in conspiracies to supplant Elizabeth. This combination of threats intensified English patriotism, but nationalistic zeal was always in tension with the internationalism of the Protestant cause. This ambivalence was embodied in the queen, who from the beginning of her reign had been a powerful symbol of Reformed religion but who was also the principal icon of English nationhood.

The 1580s were also a decade of mounting conflict over church governance. The Elizabethan settlement initially sought a precarious balance among contending forces, but as the Church of England established itself on a more secure footing, the Anglican hierarchy, led by Archbishop Whitgift, began to assert its authority more aggressively. By the time *The Faerie Queene* appeared in 1590, Whitgift was in the midst of a concerted and eventually successful campaign to root out Presbyterianism, which favored decentralized governance. At about the same time (1589), the first of the Martin Marprelate tracts appeared, trashing the bishops with an exuberance that stands out even in an age saturated by religious invective. These broadsides provoked virulent counter-attacks by hired pamphleteers such as Thomas Nashe. Caught the crossfire, an advocate of moderation like Spenser's friend Gabriel Harvey found himself denounced along with the Puritan radicals.⁹ By the time the poem appeared, then, both the 'cult' of Elizabeth that emerged in the 1570s and the militant patriotism of the 1580s were already receding, while resistance to the increasingly authoritarian character of the church was building rapidly. Sidney and Leicester, key members of the Puritan faction at court, were both dead—Walsingham, another Puritan leader, died in 1590—while Lord Burghley, their chief opponent, was more powerful than ever. By the mid-1590s the situation had changed even more drastically. Raleigh, Spenser's chief sponsor at court, was imprisoned in 1592 for secretly marrying Elizabeth Throckmorton. In 1593 the plague struck; a year later England suffered the first of four successive crop failures, leading to widespread famine. By 1596, when the second installment of the poem appeared, England was drastically altered. It was especially so for Spenser, as his reference to 'my freendless case' in the 1595 poem *Prothalamion* (140) suggests.

It is traditional to contrast the poem's first and second parts in terms that mirror the changing mood of the 1590s. Books IV-VI have been seen as darker than I-III, and sometimes as less inspired. There are obvious reasons for this: one need to look no further than the opening and closing attacks on Burghley to see why the second part of the poem has been read as combative and discouraged. But it is worth bearing in mind that *The Faerie Queene*, although occasionally topical, is also creatively out of synch with 'the framework of events' surrounding its publication. Major developments of the 1580s, such as Lord Grey's recall from Ireland or the execution of Mary Stuart, do not appear as allusions until the 1596 installment, while those in the 1590 text reach back to the Ridolfi plot and the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre in the early 1570s, to Elizabeth's accession and coronation pageant in the late 1550s, and perhaps even to the

⁹ Huffman 1988:104-5.

reign of Mary Tudor.¹⁰

It would be revealing if we could correlate the poem's composition with contemporary developments. Did Spenser's general conception change significantly between 1579, when an early draft was underway, and 1599, when he left the poem unfinished at his death? We know little of his plans. The major work to have addressed this issue, Josephine Waters Bennett's *The Evolution of 'The Faerie Queene'* (1942), demonstrates both the interest of the topic and the difficulty of its pursuit. Bennett develops an elaborate but entirely hypothetical account of the stages through which the poem 'evolved'. Subsequent critics tended to dismiss the argument too quickly. In part this was because formalist doctrines in the post-war years decreed the finished artifact, not the process of composition or the intentions of the poet, to be the proper object of critical attention. But it was also in part because Bennett makes uncritical use of aesthetic judgments: passages she considers inferior are simply assumed to have been written earlier. More recent accounts take stylistic contrasts among different sections of the poem to be significant rather than inadvertent. Spenser probably did work much of the time by arranging previously drafted fragments, but the final revision and disposition of such mosaic pieces is just as deliberate a creative act as their initial composition. We should read Bennett with caution, then; but this does not mean her work can be ignored. *The Evolution of 'The Faerie Queene'* abounds in closely researched historical argument. Chapters 5 and 6, for example, trace fluctuations in the climate of skepticism surrounding chronicle accounts of Arthur; Chapter 7 delineates with some precision Spenser's use of names and heraldic symbols associated with the Leicester genealogy. Moreover, Bennett's hypothesis—that the poem began as an imitation of Ariosto and then developed in other directions—remains plausible in broad outline. And her description of the narrative structure contains a striking insight:

It would have been easy enough to make [Arthur] the hero-in-chief. By all the rights of allegory and legend, the twelve exemplary knights belong in his court or train rather than in that of the Faery Queen. As virtues they are the parts of which Arthur is the sum, and as knights of romance Arthur is their natural lord. But the poet had begun by substituting the Faery Queen for Arthur in order to pay homage to a feminine sovereign, and he could not thereafter find a suitable place for Arthur in his poem. (54)

We have learned since Bennett's day to give more weight to an allegorical and analogical structure in which Arthur's role is every bit as central as it is incidental to the narrative. In fact most criticism now takes the tension between these roles to be highly significant, not a defect or failure. But Bennett's perception of the way Gloriana displaces Arthur from Camelot in Spenser's version of the story rings as true now as it did in 1942.

The form of the poem

However *The Faerie Queene* evolved, its form is a remarkable invention, reminiscent of almost every major work and genre in the history of European literature without really

¹⁰ McCabe 1987; Miller 1988:120-64; Hough 1964a, b:9-11.

resembling any of them. Virgil divided the *Aeneid* into twelve books, while Ariosto organized the *Orlando Furioso* into forty-six cantos. Spenser's title page announces a poem in twelve books, like the *Aeneid*, although the first installment contains only 1-3. But each book is then divided into twelve cantos, a hybrid structure that resembles neither of his originals. Cantos are further divided into stanzas, following Italian practice, but in place of the eight-line stanza common to Ariosto and Tasso, Spenser creates a nine-line stanza with an intricate rhyme scheme, adding an extra metrical foot to prolong the final line. The result is a verse form so original that it goes by the poet's name and so versatile that it lends itself equally to rapid narrative movement, lush description, song, lament, sententious generalization, buffoonery, oration, epic catalogue, extended simile, and every other variation necessary to a long poem. Its sheer difficulty is such that successful use by later poets is taken as a sign of technical mastery.

Across this grid Spenser lays out a storyline more diffuse than anything that came before, unless we look to romance cycles rather than individual poems. He says 'the history of King Arthure' is his subject, but each book of *The Faerie Queene* introduces a new protagonist, and while Arthur appears in every book he is, on the level of story, central to none. Nor is he the mythic king 'made famous by many mens former workes', for Spenser chooses 'to pourtraict in Arthure, before he was king, the image of a brave knight' (*LR* 11-12, 18-19). In this version the king's legendary exploits give way to a borrowed story that seems, on the face of it, the most inappropriate material imaginable for the ancestor of the Tudor dynasty: Chaucer's 'Tale of Sir Thopas', narrated in *The Canterbury Tales* by Dan Geoffrey—a ballad so inept the host breaks it off with the objection that 'thy drasty rhyming is nat woorth a turd' (ref). Spenser resumes the tale of Sir Thopas as that of Prince Arthur questing for the queen of Fairyland, who visited him in a dream. Like Chaucer, Spenser leaves the tale unfinished, but in every other respect it is changed, changed utterly. In his hands Chaucer's elaborate joke turns into a narrative marked by high pathos and ethical idealism, and it generates the allegorical structure through which Spenser purports to gather his far-flung narrative into a unified *ethos*.

Arthur's counterpart in this allegorical structure is Gloriana, the queen of Fairyland. In the Letter to Raleigh, Spenser identifies these characters with the virtue of magnificence and its reward, glory. In doing so he puts a number of contradictions into play. Ordinary inhabitants of Fairyland journey to Gloriana's court without difficulty: even a farm boy like Redcrosse can find his way. Yet Arthur searches endlessly and in vain; so far as we know, he never finds the fairy queen. Spenser describes his projected twelfth book not as the ending but the beginning of his story—not the marriage of Arthur with Gloriana, but the twelve-day feast that launches the quests of Holiness, Temperance, and the rest. As an elusive and mysterious symbol of transcendence, Gloriana occupies a place in Spenser's narrative analogous to that of the Grail in the *Morte D'Arthur*.¹¹

She also represents Elizabeth Tudor, and her realm stands for the kingdom of England. The historical allusions that let us read through Fairyland to sixteenth-century England have generated a long tradition of commentary, but so far as form is concerned

¹¹ Fletcher offers an eloquent statement of Gloriana's place in the formal structure of Spenser's narrative: 'The taboo on Gloriana holds the poem together, even unfinished, like a retreating glow of light around the deity, lambent in the distance, deadly when we approach it' (1964:272).

the crucial point would seem to be that Arthur cannot find Gloriana without collapsing the structure of a metaphor. For his quest to end, Fairyland must become England so that Elizabeth I can be joined in matrimony to the fifth-century ancestor who has dreamed of her. Spenser never says that this will happen, leaving us to speculate that Arthur's quest may be not only unfinished but also, even on the literal level of the narrative, structurally incapable of conclusion. Spenser hints that Gloriana does not exist in quite the same way as other characters. When Arthur first describes his dream of her, he says 'So fayre a creature yet saw never sunny day' (l.ix.13.9). This means, as Hamilton's gloss puts it, that 'either she is fairer than any other woman in this world; or, since he is dreaming, she does not exist in this world'—that is, Arthur's world. But if Gloriana does not exist by daylight, then the 'fiction' of Arthur's quest is no less absurd than that of Sir Thopas, though it is considerably more serious. Both the narrative and the imagined world in which it unfolds would have to be understood, radically and from the start, as figurative, and the figure would have to be understood as provocatively broken: if Arthur's errancy begins with an error about the essential nature of his experience, then even within the terms of the story it can never quite make sense.¹²

The Spenserian Narrator

Spenser's peculiar sensibility has eluded many readers over the centuries. His use of Sir Thopas, for example—at once sublime and ridiculous—has moved critics to suggest that Spenser missed the humor of Chaucer's burlesque, that he had no gift for narrative, or that he worked somehow inadvertently, which is rather like saying that Renoir became an impressionist because he could not draw lines. This tendency to underestimate the sophistication of the poem's design goes hand in hand with a tendency to identify the narrative voice as the author's, and consequently to assume that everything the narrator says should be taken at face value. The 'Spenser' created by such assumptions was earnest, idealistic, sentimental, and learned but not very clever; a lover of beauty and old books so carried away by his own music he was apt to lose track of the story. In short, he was 'Dan Edmund': the comically inept figure Chaucer always pretended to be, though gifted with special powers of song.

This picture of Spenser made the poem easier to read. Without Dan Edmund to take us by the hand, it is a lot harder to know which meanings we can trust. The opening of Book I, Canto iii, is a case in point. After Redcrosse abandons Una at the start of Canto ii, the story follows his exploits with Sansfoy, Duessa, and Fradubio before returning to the wanderings of Una. Spenser marks the transition back to Una by opening Canto iii in his standard manner, for as editors since Upton (1758) have observed, he 'usually begins his canto with some moral reflection, agreeable to his subject':¹³

Nought is there under heav'ns wide hollownesse,
That moves more deare compassion of mind,
Then beautie brought t'unworthie wretchednesse
Through envies snares or fortunes freakes unkind:
I, whether lately through her brightnes blynd,

¹² See Kouwenhoven 1983.

¹³ *Variorum* 1.206.

Or through alleageance and fast fealty,
 Which I do owe unto all womankynd,
 Feele my hart perst with so great agony,
 When such I see, that all for pittie I could dy. (l.iii.1)

Like Chaucer's Dan Geoffrey, the narrator in these lines casts himself as a humble servant of women—too unassuming to put himself forward as a lover, but deeply susceptible to beauty in distress. What seems to be missing, when we look through the eyes of Romantic and Victorian readers, is a sense of comedy, a feel for some ironic distance between the poet and the earnest naivety of his narrator. The opening line offers a keynote for this response, since heaven will seem hollow either to the 'Forsaken, wofull, solitarie mayd . . . in exile' (l.iii.3.2-3) or to the reader who finds his empathy quickened by her distress. This pathos, reinforced by the music of the phrase 'heav'ns wide hollowness', would be sharply qualified by ironic distancing of the sort we associate with Chaucer.

As the *Variorum* shows, readers of this passage from Coleridge to the early twentieth century respond to the 'plenilune loveliness' of the 'tender stanzas' that open Canto iii much as Dan Edmund responds to Una's beauty in distress.¹⁴ Leigh Hunt (1844) offers a note of dissent: quoting Coleridge on 'the indescribable sweetness and fluent projections' of Spenser's verse as illustrated in stanza 3, Hunt objects that there are better examples to be found.¹⁵ He is right. What distinguishes the passage is not its sheer beauty (though it is beautiful) but its pathos—and, more specifically, its gender politics. Romantic critics typically rhapsodize over three qualities in Spenser: his imagery, his verbal music, and his heroines. Emile Legouis (1924) illustrates the first tendency—'fortune made him a painter in verse'—while Edward Dowden (1888) illustrates the last: 'They rejoice, they sorrow; fears and hopes play through the life blood in their cheeks; they are tender, indignant, pensive, ardent; they know the pain the bliss of love; they are wise with the lore of purity, and loyalty, and fortitude'.¹⁶

None of these critics notices the equivocation in lines 5-6 of the stanza quoted: the narrator is pierced with agony, he tells us, either because of the allegiance he owes to 'all womankynd', or because 'her brightness' (beauty's?) has blinded him. This blurring of motives repeats a key feature of Redcrosse's response in the previous canto to Duessa, who simulates Una's pathos as well as her virtue:

In this sad plight, friendlesse, unfortunate,
 Now miserable I *Fidessa* dwell,
 Craving of you in pittie of my state,
 To do none ill, if please ye not do well. (II.ii.26.1-4)

Line four with its singsong rhythm sounds just a little too pat, but Redcrosse hears no warning bell. Instead he responds like a Romantic critic:

He in great passion al this while did dwell,

¹⁴ Cory 1917, cited in *Variorum* 1.206.

¹⁵ *Variorum* 1.206-7.

¹⁶ *Variorum* 3.392, 3.384.

More busying his quick eies, her face to view,
Then his dull eares, to heare what shee did tell,
And said, Faire Lady hart of flint would rew
The undeserved woes and sorrowes, which ye shew. (1.ii.26.5-9)

The conventional masculine response to imperiled beauty thrives on the bad faith of disavowed egotism and imperfectly repressed sexual desire. Duessa knows this, and uses her knowledge repeatedly to manipulate Redcrosse. In the closing stanza of Canto ii she distracts him from Fradubio's warning by pretending to faint: 'Her up he tooke, too simple and too trew, / And oft her kist' (45.7-8). As commentators always notice, the phrase 'too simple and too trew' is adroitly suspended between the knight and his lady, applying to each in very different senses.

This stanza directly precedes the opening of Canto iii. Since Una is not actually mentioned until the second stanza, Duessa/Fidessa remains tantalizingly available in stanza one as a point of reference for beauty brought to wretchedness—a gambit that extends the ambiguity already in play at the close of Canto ii. This possibility makes the narrator's equivocation in lines 5-6 seem less innocuous, and may even turn our sense of the stanza on its head. In place of clichéd sentiment embroidered with hyperbole, we find a passage that tempts us to recreate the Redcrosse knight's error as part of the reading process. And the alternatives are not just different. As the critic Paul de Man writes in another context, 'The two readings have to engage each other in direct confrontation, for the one reading is precisely the error denounced by the other and has to be undone by it'.¹⁷ The Romantic reading, here, is denounced and undone by the ironic reading.

The difference between these responses depends on our sense of the narrator. The ironic possibility is subdued, not emphasized by any pointed stylistic device: indeed, the most attention-getting flourish of the stanza is probably the sonorous music of its opening line, which (as we have seen) cues a sentimental identification with suffering beauty. By contrast, the signals for a more ironic reading include a juxtaposition we might ignore, since it spans the break between cantos, and a skeptical take on line 5, with its hint that the narrator's response to beauty may inhibit his powers of perception. The ironic reading also borrows an assumption from reader response criticism, the idea that if a text invites misunderstandings, even momentarily, these misunderstandings may be meaningful as part of the reading process.

Modern criticism recognizes such mixed signals as a pervasive element of *The Faerie Queene*. The text offers a profusion of cues, often muted, that invite incompatible responses. Many other questions are therefore bound up with our sense of the narrative voice: What values does the poem convey? How deliberate are its effects? How deep do its ironies go, and how frequent are they? One influential answer to such questions was provided by critic and poet William Empson in remarks directed not to the character of the narrator but to the stylistic qualities of the Spenserian stanza—specifically its 'use of diffuseness as an alternative to, or peculiar branch of, ambiguity'. Empson observes that

you have to yield yourself to [the stanza] very completely to take in the variety of its movement, and, at the same time, there is no need to concentrate the

¹⁷ 1979:12.

elements of the situation into a judgment as if for action. As a result of this, when there are ambiguities of idea, it is whole civilizations rather than details of the moment which are their elements; he can pour into the even dreamwork of his fairyland Christian, classical, and chivalrous materials with an air, not of ignoring their differences, but of holding all their systems of value floating as if at a distance, so as not to interfere with one another, in the prolonged and diffused energies of his mind. (1930:34)

If we shift this evocation of the author's mind back in the direction of the text, we may wish to add that differences among systems of value are often experienced precisely in and through details of the moment. We may even want to insist that concentrating elements into a judgment can be productive because it activates what is latent in the text, bringing floating systems of value into contact to reveal that they *do* sometimes interfere with one another. Thus in the passage we have examined, an Augustinian warning against carnal understanding interferes with the chivalric ethos of fealty to womankind. Activating this latent conflict of values lets us see in the poem a prophetic critique of the neo-chivalric sexual politics of Romantic and Victorian critics.

A skeptic might object that in the process I am describing it is we, not the poet or the text, who trigger the clash of values. This is true: readers activate or ignore what is latent. But as I mentioned earlier, a distinctive feature of Spenserian authorship is its separation of invention from authority. That authority, ceded in the first instance to Elizabeth, necessarily passes to each new reader who picks up a copy of *The Faerie Queene*. When Spenser 'defers' the meaning of his text, he is deferring *to us*.

Reading Allegory

The deferral of authority in Spenser has as its corollary the openness, the suspension of judgment, that Empson describes. The term 'dreamwork' is particularly suggestive of the uncensored ease with which incompatible networks of value and feeling pass into the text. This is not only a quality of mind, however; it is also a formal feature of the allegory.

Perhaps you dream of a librarian. She has your sister's name, with long hair braided like your first wife's, but she is saying things that remind you of a particularly scary colleague, and wearing a dress the color of ripe watermelon, like one you saw once on your babysitter when you were very small. Such a fusion of recent and archaic memories would be the result of what Freud calls dreamwork, a signifying process that evades conscious censorship through displacement, and that produces texts marked by condensation and overdetermination. Something similar happens when we read of a hero who bears a saint's name but does not know it, who wears metaphoric armor from the Book of Ephesians but thinks he is an elf, and who has embarked on a quest that resembles both the exploits of Perseus and events in the Book of Revelation, though along the way he will encounter figures from pagan myth, classical epic, folklore, *The Canterbury Tales*, and chivalric as well as Italian romance, many of whom will behave like figures in a morality play. Lewis Carroll was that kind of allegorist.

We rationalize allegories by tracking correspondences among the registers from which their elements come: the adventures of Redcrosse recapitulate the salvation of

Everyman, which resembles the history of the early church, which parallels the fortunes of the reformed church in England, which corresponds to events in the Book of Revelation. These analogies are marked by ‘the telling substitution that we call the “allegorical interpolant”, the sign that gives allegory away’—a special form of allusion.¹⁸ They are virtually innumerable, since each new allusion opens yet another set of potential correspondences; and they are theoretically open-ended, since in principle each new set is infinitely extensible, although sooner or later it will always break down in practice. In this way the text continually invites and frustrates the tracing of its ‘continued Allegory, or darke conceit’ (*LR* 2).

‘Allegorical interpolants’ work (as the name suggests) by moving us out and away from the text, into related fields of discourse—moral philosophy, theology, chronicle history, law, medicine, cosmology, literary history, Tudor politics, royal and civic pageantry, emblem books, and so on. But the movement outward is less important finally than the return: what matters most is not that a particular image in the narrative refers us to theological concepts, but that these concepts find their way into a particular image, through which they are called out of theology to appear in the text of the poem. This movement of return takes the poem itself as the most important context for its parts, and for this reason it gives more weight to analogies among them. Spenser represents these analogies through narrative and symbolic means. His most explicit symbol for the unity of the poem is given at the opening of Book I, Canto ix, following Arthur’s rescue of the Redcrosse knight:

O Goodly golden chayne, wherewith yfere
 The vertues linked are in louely wize:
 And noble mindes of yore allyed were,
 In brave poursuitt of chevalrous emprize (l.ix.1.1-4)

In this passage Spenser appropriates a familiar symbol of cosmic harmony to signify the ideal unity of holiness, temperance, and the rest as they are perfected in the crowning virtue of magnificence, which ‘containeth in it them all’ (*LR* 39). These lines also associate the golden chain with specific episodes in the narrative that establish alliances among the patron knights of the virtues, episodes that include not only Arthur’s appearance in support of each knight except Britomart, but also ‘linking’ incidents found in the first canto of each book, where the knight whose quest is beginning greets the knight whose quest has just ended, and they pledge themselves allies.

The poem offers these pointers toward an ideal narrative and thematic unity, but the text itself offers too many cues, too many paths diverging in its wandering woods, for a single structure of meaning to encompass them all. The virtues linked in that golden chain so admired by Dan Edmund are fractured by powerful and irreconcilable contradictions. As E. Fowler (1995) eloquently describes it, one of the great achievements of Spenserian allegory is ‘the *failure* of moral philosophy’ (emphasis added).

¹⁸ Nohrnberg 1976:ix.