

1987

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Publication Info

Published in *Renaissance Papers*, ed. Dale B. J. Randall, Joseph A. Porter, 1987, pages 49-59.

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Figuring Hierarchy: The Dedicatory Sonnets to *The Faerie Queene*

Thy gracious Souerains praises to compile
And her imperiall Maiestie to frame. . . .

Spenser, "To Buckhurst" ¹

The dedicatory sonnets attached to most copies of the 1590 *Faerie Queene* may be only marginally "literary." Spenser criticism has certainly ignored them, as though they occupied not just the threshold of Spenser's text but the boundary between literature and the nonliterary realm of court politics and patronage. Yet their threshold status means that these sonnets mediate between the poem and the social order around it. In fact, the structure of the dedicatory sonnet sequence is that of the "body politic," an ideological formation at once social, legal, mythic, and aesthetic. Carol Stillman has shown that the sonnets are arranged in detailed accordance with a specific social text, the heraldic rules for precedence.² The rhetorical structure of this social text coincides with that of Spenserian allegory, since each is organized with reference to the political body of the sovereignty. This body politic is grounded in the person

To be published also in *The Poem's Two Bodies* by Princeton University Press.

1. I quote from *Spenser: Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. Smith and E. de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912; rpt. 1979), hereafter cited parenthetically as *Works*. The dedicatory sonnets appear on pp. 410–413; in citing individual sonnets I use abbreviated forms of their titles.

2. "Politics, Precedence, and the Order of the Dedicatory Sonnets in *The Faerie Queene*," in *Spenser Studies: A Renaissance Poetry Annual*, vol. 5, ed. Patrick Cullen and Thomas P. Roche, Jr. (New York: AMS Press, 1985), pp. 143–148. Predictably, Stillman's discovery comes as part of the solution to an editorial problem concerning the omission of seven sonnets from some copies of the 1590 edition, not from any critical interest in the sonnets themselves.

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of the monarch and hierarchically distributed throughout the network of social, legal, and artistic texts that constitute the image and idea of Tudor monarchy.

The rhetorical structure that these texts have in common may be termed “ornament,” a species of synecdoche. La Primaudaye observes that Pythagoras coined the term “world” (i.e., cosmos) as a way of specifying the creation’s organization, “For this word *World* signifieth as much as Ornament, or a well disposed order of things.”³ The social and literary senses of the term are related to the cosmic sense in that “ornaments,” properly speaking, are insignia that designate status or rank within a cosmic hierarchy. “As in English,” writes Angus Fletcher, “the Greek term *kosmos* has a double meaning, since it denotes both a *large-scale order* (macrocosmos) and the small-scale *sign of that order* (microcosmos). It could be used of any decoration or ornament of dress. . . .”⁴ It may also be used to describe authorial insignia whose rhetorical purpose is to situate or resituate the poet in social and cultural hierarchies. The term’s double reference will prove especially valuable if it helps us focus on the specularity of the rhetorical relations at work, for the poet who “frames” his ideal portrait of Elizabeth with an image of the social hierarchy seeks at the same time and in the same gesture—by reflex, as it were—to be himself constituted in the image of sovereignty, or as the 1596 title page would declare, “to live with the eternity of her fame.”

Spenser intended the dedicatory sonnets of 1590 to be read as a sequence. Addressing Hunsdon, Lord High Chamberlain to her Majesty, he writes:

Renowned Lord, that for your worthinesse
And noble deeds haue your deserued place,
High in the fauour of that Emperesse,
The worlds sole glory and her sexes grace,
Here eke of right haue you a worthie place,

3. Pierre de La Primaudaye, *The French Academy*, quoted by James Carscallen, “The Goodly Frame of Temperance: The Metaphor of Cosmos in *The Faerie Queene*, Book II.” *UTO* 37 (1968), 136.

4. *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), pp. 110–111.

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Both for your nearnes to that Faerie Queene,
And for your owne high merit. . . .

(*Works*, p. 412)

Hunsdon's part in quelling the Northern rebellion has earned him a "deserued place" in Elizabeth's favor, that of Lord High Chamberlain. His "place" in the sequence of dedicatory sonnets reflects the status of this office with precision. The repeated rhyme-word stresses a consonance of decorums whereby the warrior preserves his sovereign, the sovereign rewards her warrior with high office, and the poet rewards both together by assigning them places "of right" in "the record of enduring memory" (ll. 5, 12). What these lines particularly stress about the organization of the sequence as a whole is its absent point of reference, for the basis of precedence is "nearnes to that Faerie Queene."⁵ Like the poem's allegory, then, the dedicatory sonnets refer to the absent body of the monarch; they manifest what may be called the structure of Gloriana's traces. Their "literary" mode of doing so is well illustrated by this play on notions of place and placement: the rules of precedence say nothing about where Spenser should allude to the structure of the sequence, but, as so often in his poetry, we find the self-conscious allusion to placement "in the midst," in the ninth sonnet out of seventeen.

In the eighth sonnet Spenser refers to the sequence as "this same Pageant" (l. 6). Elsewhere he uses the word "pageant" for emblematic processions like those in the House of Pride and Busyrane's castle, modeled on the rituals of court life, and for whole books of the poem—so perhaps it should not be surprising to find the dedicatory sequence taking shape similarly, as a ceremonial procession in profile, depthless but heavily ornamented. The extent of this analogy between social and literary forms may be suggested by analyzing the sequence in terms of Fletcher's "ornamental" theory of allegory. Specifically, the dedicatory sonnets illustrate, 1) the authoritarian basis of allegory; 2) the function of ornaments (or *kosmoi*) as insignia of hierarchical status; 3) the tendency of allegory to constrict or compartmentalize meaning; 4) the role of

5. In context this phrase also refers to the fact that Hunsdon was the Queen's cousin.

the corporate protagonist; 5) the taboo of the ruler; and 6) the emotive nature of ornament.⁶

The authoritarian basis of allegory is implicit in its reliance on hierarchies. By the same token the heraldic rules of precedence, as a complex and historically specific instance of such hierarchies, tend to structure life itself "allegorically." The elaborate formulas of address that make the titles of the dedicatory sonnets too long for convenient reference (e.g., "To the right honourable the Lo. Ch. Howard, Lo. high Admiral of England, knight of the noble order of the Garter, and one of her Maiesties priuie Counsel. &c.") are pure instances of *kosmoi*, or "ornaments," in Fletcher's sense: they specify status, and in doing so elaborate the implicit image of hierarchical totality within which stations of rank are distributed. Other, less explicit ornaments of status also mark the diction of the sonnets at various points. For instance, the opening phrase of the very first sonnet ("Those prudent heads") implies a literary mimesis of the political body by its conspicuous placement at the "head" of the sequence.

Fletcher observes that the systematic character of allegory tends to preserve the distinctness of its individual agents and so to restrict or compartmentalize the significance of each. He also observes that "this personifying process has a reverse type, in which the poet treats real people in a formulaic way so that they become walking Ideas" (p. 28). Spenser's addresses to his dedicatees are formulaic in this sense as well, casting each in the generic "type" most appropriate to his or her status and interests. The catalogue of types includes the magistrate, the warrior, the noble lord, the aristocratic patron, the epic poet, the love-poet, and the virtuous and beautiful lady. Individuation may be achieved by inflecting the type slightly or by crossing types, but several sonnets appear to be almost pure apostrophes to the type itself. The first two, addressed to Hatton and Burleigh, are nearly indistinguishable appeals to "the magistrate" for leniency. Northumberland receives a paradigmatic address to the nobility in which the "right noble Lord" himself is not mentioned until the couplet, where he is belatedly recruited to meet the obligations of his type. Walsingham receives a comparably generic address to the aristocratic patron, or Maecenas, while the "Precedent of all that armes ensue" finds embodi-

6. Page references in *Allegory* for these six topics are, 1) 22-23 and 135-140, 2) 108-120, 3) 28-33, 4) 35-38, 5) 273, 6) 117-120. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

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ment in Sir John Norris. The final sonnet, "To all the gracious and beautifull Ladies in the Court," registers their lower status partly in the anonymity of its collective address, but it does so also by manifesting a generic mode that has operated implicitly throughout the sequence.

The same sonnet offers an aesthetic analogue to the body politic:

The Chian Peincter, when he was requirde
To pourtraict Venus in her perfect hew,
To make his worke more absolute, desird
Of all the fairest Maides to haue the vew.

(*Works*, p. 413)

The anecdote to which Spenser here alludes was a commonplace of classical and Renaissance mimetic theory. Analogies between Venus and the personified state are unavoidable in Elizabeth's court, but as Panofsky notes there were also specific precedents for the comparison between painting an ideal visual image and describing an ideal moral one: "Aristotle formulated this basic view in his characteristically lapidary manner: 'Great men are distinguished from ordinary men in the same way as beautiful people from plain ones, or as an artfully painted object from a real one, namely, in that that which is dispersed has been gathered into one.'⁷ Fletcher adapts this notion to the theory of allegory when he considers the relatively more complex protagonists of a major work such as *The Faerie Queene* to be assembled like mosaics out of discrete conceptual counters. "Is not the nature of such heroes," he asks, "comparable to the nature of a whole poem like 'The Phoenix and the Turtle,' where the whole was a complex system of interrelated terms, each of which was circumscribed?" (p. 35). He suggests that such "conceptual heroes" tend to generate secondary personalities or subcharacters which represent aspects of themselves. This has become a familiar approach to the protagonists of *The Faerie Queene*, especially Arthur and Gloriana, but it also describes a social and political structure in which the various officers of the government derive their authority from, and function as specialized extensions of, the crown,

7. Erwin Panofsky, *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory*, trans. Joseph J. S. Peake (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968), p. 15.

where the body politic and its sovereignty are concentrated. It is in this sense that the sequence may be described as a pattern of Gloriana's traces.

Elizabeth's two bodies are both absent from this structure. Yet insofar as the sequence is ordered according to the principle of "nearnes to that Faerie Queene" and ornamented with signatures of the totality she incarnates, her political body is reflected everywhere within it. Much the same thing has been said of the main text itself. In a discussion that powerfully evokes the ideological function of aesthetic form in *The Faerie Queene*, Fletcher associates this feature of the poem's design with the Freudian notion of taboo:

Of the three kinds of taboo which Freud treated in *Totem and Taboo*—of enemies, of rulers, of the dead—all can be illustrated by Spenser's poem. Most marked of all is the taboo of the ruler: Gloriana is the unapproachable yet infinitely desirable object of courtly desire. She is at once the avenging Britomart, the melting Amoret, the chaste, athletic Belpheobe, the transparently beautiful Florimell, the just Mercilla, the truthful Una. . . . 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. While the taboo keeps the courtier from his actual Queen, and the reader from the final vision of the fictive Queen, it ineluctably draws both courtier and reader into her embrace.

(p. 272)

Fletcher has earlier discussed the emotive charge carried by insignia of rank, which have, he says, "more than a 'merely' decorative or 'merely' hierarchical function. Nothing could be more likely to arouse intense emotional response than the status symbol" (pp. 117–118). Hierarchical insignia in a monarchy carry a specific emotive charge, then, because they distribute the ambivalent charisma of the royal taboo, just as the bearers of such insignia distribute the duties, powers, and prerogatives of the crown.

This distribution of emotional ambivalence is easiest to observe at the highest and lowest ends of the sociopolitical scale. Thus Spenser's address to the ladies of the court revolves its elaborate compliment from Elizabeth to her "faire Dames" with a patronizing facility that turns mildly flirtatious in the couplet:

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Much more me needs to draw the semblant trew,
Of beauties Queene, the worlds sole wonderment,
To sharpe my sence with sundry beauties vew,
And steale from each some part of ornament.
If all the world to seeke I overwent,
A fairer crew yet no where could I see,
Then that braue court doth to mine eie present,
That the worlds pride seemes gathered there to bee.
Of each a part I stole by cunning theft:
Forgiue it me faire Dames, sith lesse ye have not lefte.

(*Works*, p. 413)

The cosmic and cosmetic meanings of “ornament” are fused in the phrase “some part of ornament.” Having recomposed the scattered ornaments of feminine beauty into the cosmic body whose “parts” they are, the poet will address that awful presence in a rhetoric of abject adoration, but it is clear from the tone of these lines that such beauty offers no real terror in its dispersal, where it may only fancifully be said to “tyranyse” (“To Lady Carew,” l. 9).

By contrast, the opening sonnets to “those prudent heads” Hatton and Burleigh are marked by an anxiety absent from the verses that follow. The reason may have less to do with personal or factional animosity toward either than with their “nearnes to that Faerie Queene.” Here alone Spenser reverts to the pose Richard Helgerson has identified with literary amateurism, that of the prodigal poet whose work is not a spur to virtue and a monument to valorous deeds but “ydle rymes” presented “vnfitly,” “the labor of lost time, and wit vnstayd” (“To Hatton,” l. 13; “To Burleigh,” ll. 6–7).⁸ In *The Shepheardes Calender* Spenser had portrayed this figure in Colin Clout, who served at once to advertise the author’s skill in making and to draw off onto himself (almost like a lightning rod) the negative values of passion, immaturity, and self-indulgent excess associated with the cultural stereotype

8. Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and the Literary System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 21–34, 55–67. See also his *The Elizabethan Prodigals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). My differences from Helgerson are stated in “Authorship, Anonymity, and *The Shepheardes Calender*,” *MLQ* 40 (1979), 233–236.

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of the prodigal. Eleven years later, in 1590, the type of the wayward boy is revived in the phrasing of the sonnets to Hatton and Burleigh, as though the figure of the sage and sober governor had summoned this apparition as its dialectical complement. Perhaps it has. In discussing the psychological dynamics of affirming authority symbols, Kenneth Burke suggests that any approach to the epiphany of authority at the summit of the social hierarchy will be marked by incest-awe and the threat of castration,⁹ effects of the "taboo of the ruler." From this point of view Spenser's reversion to an adolescent self-image associated with an early phase of his own career would appear as an instance of symbolic regression, a defensive way of "assuming castration" through self-abasement.

The sequence of dedicatory sonnets thus comprises a complex image of social and political hierarchy, ranking the "members" of a political body each in its prescribed station and designating each according to its corporate function. Two crucial figures, however, do not appear within this "pageant": that of the poet and that of the queen. In one sense Elizabeth has already taken her place at the "head" of the procession, on the title page and in the formal dedication that follows, set on its own page entirely in capitals and shaped in an ornamental pattern. In another sense Elizabeth *is* the procession. Or, rather, the procession, as an exposition of the hierarchy she embodies, offers an abstract "pourtraict" (etymologically, a "drawing-out") of the royal body politic, "her imperiall Maiestie to frame." The poet himself, then, is the only persona whose relation to the hierarchy remains strategically indeterminate. His lack of a prescribed "place" in the pageant is at once an opportunity and a source of anxiety.

The anxiety, most pronounced in Spenser's addresses to Hatton and Burleigh, can be traced also in economic figures of negotiation and indebtedness. Such rhetoric is a generic feature of dedicatory prose and verse, and at times Spenser can play on the conventions with a witty self-consciousness. In dedicating "Muiopotomos" to Lady Carey, for instance, he first dispraises the poem as inadequate payment and then resorts playfully to a principle of common law:

9. *Attitudes Toward History* (1937; rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 209-211.

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Therefore I haue determined to giue my selfe wholly to you, as quite abandoned from my selfe, and absolutely vowed to your seruices: which in all right is euer held for full recompence of debt or damage to haue the person yeilded. My person I wot wel how little worth it is. But the faithfull minde and humble zeale which I beare unto your La: may perhaps be more of price. . . .¹⁰

(*Works*, p. 516)

Spenser's tone of genteel banter may reflect touches of personal affection, but it also reflects Lady Carey's lack of "serious" worldly status. The sonnet to the ladies of the court is pitched in a similar tone for much the same reason. It turns most playful in closing accounts on the economic metaphor, an indication of how little is really at stake in the transaction: "Of each a part I stole by cunning theft: / Forgiue it me faire Dames, sith lesse ye haue not lefte." The anatomical pun in "cunning" teasingly casts the female pudendum as a bodily absence that ironically cannot be "less."

Each of the dedicatory sonnets enacts some figure of transaction, and the sequence as a whole illustrates Kenneth Burke's notion of culture as a public "symbol exchange." This is true whether the sonnet works out a specifically personal indebtedness, like that to Lord Grey, or sets forth in generic terms the symbolic economy relating poets to noblemen and military heroes: from sonnet to sonnet throughout the sequence, gifts and favors circulate in an intricate dance of the courtly graces. Precisely because of their generic cast, the sonnets

10. There is a grim edge to the poet's wit in this passage, which refers to imprisonment for debt, enforceable by a common law writ known as *capias ad satisfaciendum*. Sir William Blackstone explains that "Executions in actions where money only is to be recovered . . . are of five sorts," the first being "against the body of the defendant" (*Commentaries on the Laws of England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), vol. 3, p. 414). Execution against the person of the debtor was a historically late and comparatively severe development of the common law. In the sixteenth century, imprisoned debtors were responsible for feeding and clothing themselves; when they were unable to do so, the law (as stated with brutal candor by Plowden) gave them permission to die by the grace of God. See A.W.B. Simpson, *A History of the Common Law of Contract: The Rise of the Action of Assumpsit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 587–595, for a discussion that includes the above citations from Blackstone and Plowden.

to Northumberland, Walsingham, and Norris offer schematic formulations of the exchange system.

The mixed sense of opportunity attended by anxiety that results from the poet's indefinite placement in the courtly hierarchy is clearly reflected in these transactions, which allow us to trace his speculative investments in a symbolic economy. He trades for "countenance," a term whose several senses are all relevant: Spenser wants royal sanction, a place of honor at court, and above all, a *face*, a public identity as Elizabeth's laureate. The scope of these ambitions generates anxiety about the envy they must arouse among competitors for patronage, so Spenser's most frequently repeated request is for protection against backbiting. In 1591 "Colin Clouts Come Home Againe" is dedicated to Raleigh,

The which I humbly beseech you accept in part of paiment of the
infinite debt in which I acknowledge my selfe bounden unto you
. . . and with your good countenance protect against the malice
of euill mouthes, which are alwaies wide open to carpe at and
misconstrue my simple meaning.

(Works, p. 536)

The dedicatory sonnets to the 1590 *Faerie Queene* similarly ask "to bee / Defended from foule Enuies poisonous bit" or "from all, of whom it is enuide"; to be maintained "Against vile Zoilus backbitings vaine"; and to be granted "protection of [the Muse's] . . . feebleness" (Works, pp. 410, 411, 412).

"Vile Zoilus" presents a mortal threat to the poet because their strategies are so similar: envy works through verbal exchanges to fashion a value-laden image of its object, and in doing so seeks indirectly to enhance the status of its own "author." Spenser and Zoilus share the same audience, too, which means finally that their source of protection and the source of danger are also the same: royal power. Hence the ambivalence, the loss of confidence, that marks Spenser's addresses to Hatton and Burleigh. Instead of offering them life itself, he offers mere recreation, and instead of asking for protection he asks merely to be tolerated. In a sense, the recreative apology Spenser offers in these sonnets mirrors the playfulness of his address to the ladies at the bottom of the courtly hierarchy. The "patronizing" intimacy with which he

indulges the ladies is exactly what he himself craves from “The rugged brow of carefull Policy.” In both instances the emphasis on play marks a regression from the didactic and memorial services stressed in his negotiations with the intermediate figures, men who are neither powerless nor too powerful.

Viewed as transactions in the “symbol exchange,” Spenser’s dedicatory sonnets show the interdependence of the several “identities” he seeks to fashion in the course of framing England’s imperial majesty. The queen and her court are specular images of each other, for she is constituted as queen by the hierarchy that explicates her sovereignty just as surely as the hierarchy itself is constituted by its sovereign point of reference. Spenser’s portrait of ideal sovereignty is therefore set within an ornamental border depicting a pageant of the body politic, a procession of the essentially “allegorical” personae with which the officers of her courtly hierarchy are invested. Yet if Elizabeth is in one sense the radiant center that fixes all else in place, there is another sense in which the poet as “the author of their praise” is her effaced counterpart, a center for the rhetorical production of sovereignty. In the ornamental border of Spenser’s allegorical portrait we can therefore read a specular relation between the poem, which internalizes the social hierarchy in its formal organization, and the social order, which appropriates the signifying structure of allegory in its display of power relations. The poet’s labor in mirroring hierarchy has value precisely *because* the social order (like any rhetorical construction) is based on mutually constitutive relations. It is therefore the constructive force of his rhetoric—its power to give life to what “els would soone haue dide”—that Spenser offers in exchange for “countenance,” the mask of Poet in the social allegory of the court.