Bad Spenser? A Dialogue

By Andrew Hadfield (University of Sussex) and Richard Danson Brown (The Open University)

***Andrew Hadfield*:** Richard, we have been thinking about Renaissance poetry for most of our working lives, and it is surely fair to say that we both worry that questions of value and quality are either avoided or suppressed. We obviously have our different approaches—I don't think I will ever be able to match your expertise in formal matters, stemming from your experience as a practising poet. My interest has been more obviously in the history and politics of literature, and my career began (more or less) with the advent of New Historicism. However, it does not take a critic of exceptional insight to see the problem with an excessive concentration on the historical, because that way an explanatory relativism lies, i.e., the need to understand everything in its time can easily result in the perception that nothing is ever really bad because it needs to be understood in its historical context. Hence we can value the Chettles and Churchyards of the period as if they were Sidneys and Spensers. Previous generations of literary critics did have a clear sense of value, even if they often asserted what was good and what was bad: remember I. A. Richards sneering at Cambridge students in *Practical Criticism* because they thought Ella Wheeler Wilcox was as good as John Donne, or F. R. Leavis asking the rhetorical question, "How many cultivated adults could honestly swear that they had ever read *Samson Agonistes* through with enjoyment?," a masterly put down if ever there was one. The dangers of not judging are surely obvious enough, not least because we surrender value judgements about

literature to a wider public who often dismiss what we do as hunting for Gerard Manley Hopkins' laundry lists and make their own judgments of what is good and bad. So what do you think and how do we get out of this impasse?

***Richard Danson Brown*:** It's interesting that we both started thinking about Renaissance poetry at roughly the same time in the naff yet distant 1980s, yet with slightly different intellectual, institutional, political interests and influences. Looking back now, it feels like both New Historicism and Cultural Materialism were brilliant, forceful repudiations of both New Criticism and the lingering *belle lettrist* tradition, which still stalked the halls of academe, like a bumptious fogey in a rumpled dinner jacket. With those contexts, raising the politics of literature and insisting that reading and interpretation were always implicitly political acts was important work which neither of us would want to change. For me, though, there was always the worry that the conservatism which those movements rightly diagnosed in, say, Leavis or Pound or Lewis, could spill into the assumption that Spenser and Sidney must've been politically "like" those critics, while the details of the poetry got lost in the noise. I read somewhere long ago that if you don't keep saying something is good, people rapidly forget. I was very influenced by something in Auden's criticism to the effect that while it's pretty easy to slag off a bad poem, it's harder to explain why a good poem is good. Or as Louis MacNeice put it, someone reading and enjoying a poem "is doing something far too subtle for criticism." You can take that in various ways, but for me, the obligation of criticism to explain why something might be good and enjoyable has always seemed at once enticing and subversive. The problem remains good how, good on what criteria, and conversely, bad how, and on what criteria? In terms of Spenser, as with any of the "truly great," as a reader, I always want to try to figure out how on earth they did it, in the vain hope of trying to steal their thunder. That's maybe how formalists are born—a bad case of professional jealousy.

***ADH*:** So, if we are thinking about Sidney and Spenser, can we distinguish between their good and bad writing? To return to Leavis again, he makes it clear that he does not want to deal with Spenser in his major study of poetry, *Revaluation* (1936), by damning him with faint praise and swerving the argument and avoiding revaluation, because Spenser is "in his own way a fact of the first importance in the tradition of English poetry … too simple a fact to need examining afresh." Spenser shunted to one

side, Leavis could concentrate on lyric poetry. If I can then elaborate, what most of us surely value in Spenser—along with his meticulous approach to form about which you can say more—is his careful thinking about words and their significance, tracing these through a series of journeys as we follow the questing knights. In the spirit of epic-romance we often move sideways rather than forwards and find that what we thought we knew is either at one remove from the truth or entirely opposite from our assumptions. We can never stand still because if we do we end up like the Redcross Knight at the start, taking Error at face value when he kills the monster, and so committing all sorts of errors through his complacent literalism.

So, when we don't like Spenser it is because he fails to adhere to what is so great in his poetry, either becoming too diffuse (although that is not necessarily "bad") or too direct and simplistic. As you know, I have long taken his description of *The Four Hymns* as poems of his youth at face value, because, for me, these lack the complexity of the later stages of *The Faerie Queene* and parrot banal bits of sub-philosophy.

***RDB*:** To an extent, even Spenser's fans have had "bad" effects, like when Empson in those wonderful pages on the Spenserian stanza in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*—still one of the passages any formalist really has to engage with—starts off by saying that "it is seldom that one finds relevant ambiguities in Spenser and Marlowe." Marlowe can look after himself, but the effect of this is to suggest that Spenser wasn't generally ambiguous, unlike the book's heroic ambiguists, Shakespeare and Donne.

I like your characterization of the sideways quest of epic romance, which is partly why I mention Empson: when you first read *The Faerie Queene*, you're faced with a plethora of ambiguities. What or where is "the plaine"? Why is Una "As one that inly mourned"? Though there are answers to these questions, the poetic hook is that sideways enigma, that sense of not quite making progress in a rich and spacious hermeneutic field. Maybe it's cheeky to recode "the plaine" into a field, but I'm remembering one of my favourite lines, from Pasternak's "Hamlet" (one of the *Zhivago* poems): "To live your life is not as simple as to cross a field." That's always seemed to me a very Spensery perception. But we need to talk more about bad Spenser: tell me more about why you dislike the *Hymns*.

***ADH*:** I wonder whether we might characterise them, to adapt the words of Eliot on Kipling, as the work of a "good bad poet," one who could see that producing this

volume for those patrons at that time was a sensible move. They read to me like youthful works, which is what he tells you the first two are in the opening sentence of the dedicatory letter: "*Having in the greener times of my youth, composed these former two Hymnes in the praise of Love and Beautie*," implying that he has written the second two more recently so that the poems in praise of love and beauty are now qualified by ones on heavenly love and heavenly beauty. OK, fair enough, we might be able to take this more or less at face value—although there are jokes in the letter about "calling in" the circulating copies that remind us of the recent fate of *Mother Hubberd's Tale*, suggesting to the reader that Spenser is sharing a joke with his patrons. The point is that the volume warns the reader to be careful and alert to nuances, which is why the leaden, reductive Neo-Platonic message of the poems is hard to accept. "An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie" concludes:

> Ah, then, my hungry soule, which long hast fed
> On idle fancies of thy foolish thought,
> And with false beauties flattring bait misled,
> Hast after vaine deceiptfull shadowes sought,
> Which all are fled, and now have left thee nought,
> But late repentance through thy follies prief;
> Ah cease to gaze on matter of thy grief.
>
> And looke at last up to that soveraine light,
> From whose pure beams al perfect beauty springs,
> That kindleth love in every godly spright,
> Even the love of God, which loathing brings
> Of this vile world, and these gay seeming things;
> With whose sweete pleasures being so possest,
> Thy straying thoughts henceforth for ever rest.

Now, I am well aware that many Spenserians strongly disagree with me, so it is a good thing that they are not overhearing this, but these are really flat and uninspired, aren't they? The abjuration of the world recalls "The Visions of Petrarch," another early work revised later, and what we have here resembles any number of complaints, psalms and devotional poems, sixteenth-century lyrics of consolation, and so on. There is serious Platonism, wrestling with the implications of idealist philosophy, and Neo-Platonic troping, the sort parodied so well in Donne's "The Extasy" (see William Empson taking Helen Gardner to task for her misconstrued—but sadly influential—reading of it), whereby the poet stares at a flower and exclaims profoundly, "Lovely, but not as pretty as those in God's flowerbed." Spenser is not Ella Wheeler Wilcox, at least, not usually, though there are similarities between the *Hymnes* and "A March Snow." Spenser is a

poet with a high number of end-stopped lines and it is always easy to make particular couplets sound bad if wrenched out of the poem. However, what works so well in his writing, for me, are the layers of irony surrounding statements that seem gnomic and proverbial, but which are misleading and challenging, daring a reader to accept them as wise when they are really leading us into error, as we discover later on in the story. If we compare what we have here with the disturbing twists and turns of "The Mutabilitie Cantos," we can see how far away we are from Spenser at his most exciting and challenging: "With whose sweete pleasures being so possest, / Thy straying thoughts henceforth for ever rest." Unless read ironically as "good bad" poetry this is Patience Strong isn't it, with tinny rhymes and plodding metre?

> Death is not a sleep, but an awakening
> to Life. Casting off the dreams of
> darkness, sorrow, sin and strife-the soul
> arising greets the glory of the morning ray-
> faring forth into the promise of the golden
> day.
> At the gate that swings between this world
> and worlds above-stands the Angel of God's
> mercy with the lamp of love.... Fear not for
> the spirit that has passed into the night.
> Death is not sleep, but an awakening to
> Light.

That's one of her more prosy poems by the way: normally she rhymes emphatically.

***RDB*:** Spenser is a great one for saying the same thing several times, and I agree, there are echoes here of the *Visions*, "The Teares of the Muses," even a faint foreshadowing of Mutabilitie in full cry: "Ceasse *Saturnes* sonne, to seeke by proffers vaine" (a fab line, surely). My difficulty with your reading is even if we accept that the end of this Hymn isn't as inspired as (say) "The Mutabilitie Cantos" or the Mount Acidale passage, that doesn't necessarily make these stanzas bad. From a formal perspective, I would say that there is quite a lot of interest going on here: the pun on "matter" in that line, "Ah cease to gaze on matter of thy grief" is both neat and characteristic, compounding the stodgy "matter" of the sublunar world with the speaker's rhetorical theme and his "foolish thought." And I don't think you need to be a Neoplatonist to enjoy these lines: they have perhaps a different kind of ironic layering from the things you enjoy elsewhere in his work, a twist to conventional thought, skilfully carried through. I'd make a similar point about the central rhyme cluster of the second stanza: *springs:*

brings: things is a neat inversion of the Platonic ascent, as the speaker foregrounds what keeps his feet on the ground at the expense of wherever it is that "al perfect beauty springs." It's different from, but not wholly out of keeping with, the very last fragment of Mutabilitie, the two "vnperfite" stanzas about longing for "that Sabaoths sight."

This brings home to me that weird Spenser effect of the more you look, the more you see. Or, if you prefer, the more *I* look, the more *I* see, that tragic occupational condition of many formalists. To be clear, these are still not my Desert Island Spenser stanzas, but I don't think they are as dire as you do. Which raises the question in another form: can we get to an agreed register of Spenserian badness? I know people who dislike *The Shepheardes Calender*, certain books of *The Faerie Queene*, and—mirabile dictu—some people even don't like the *Complaints*. But I'm going to suggest something else—not exactly a bad poem, a puzzling one in terms of judgement, the sonnet to Harvey:

> *Harvey, the happy aboue happiest men*
> *I read: that, sitting like a Looker-on*
> *Of this worldes Stage, doest note with critique pen*
> *The sharpe dislikes of each condition:*
> *And, as one careless of suspition,*
> *Ne fawnest for the favour of the great;*
> *Ne fearest foolish reprehension*
> *Of faulty men, which daunger to thee threat.*
> *But freely doest, of what thee list, entreat,*
> *Like a great Lord of peerelesse liberty:*
> *Lifting the Good up to high Honours seat,*
> *And the Euill damning evermore to dy.*
> *For Life, and Death, is in thy doomefull writing:*
> *So thy renowme lives ever by endighting.*

The bibliographical and biographical problems are considerable: Harvey publishes it not Spenser; and he does so to make himself look good in the Nashe quarrel (along the lines of "you say that I'm a numbskull, but look who I've got in my corner!"). As a poem of praise, it seems locked somewhere between the perfunctory ("*Lifting the Good up*") and the hyperbolical—"*Life, and Death, is in thy doomefull writing*" is either a hopeless misjudgement, or perhaps covert irony. And though the sonnet is typically well made, it looks like a rather forced performance, gesturing towards an ideal of Harvey as a model of dispassion which Spenser doesn't quite buy. For me, his judgement seems out of keeping with what we know of Harvey: "*Ne fawnest for the favour of the great*" suggests Spenser had overlooked, or had never actually read,

Gratulationum Valdensium. Perhaps this is a genre question, and the dedicatory sonnets in this register are generally harder for us to enjoy than love poems?

***ADH*:** I see that my strong critical remarks have tried your patience: and, at least Spenser avoids really dreadful puns. You are right, there's a bit more nuance in the Hymns' verses than I admit, and the comparisons are perhaps overly provocative. But the four poems still read to me like a major writer skilful enough to phone in a moderate performance and to produce verse that looks like the real thing. I think you are also right about the Harvey sonnet, and the Harvey-Spenser relationship is a complicated conundrum. I wonder whether Harvey's significance for Spenser was really his library rather than anything more substantial. There's little sense of much contact after Spenser leaves for Ireland in 1580 and you could make a case that Spenser learned how to manipulate prefatory works from his experience of being involved in Harvey's project of the familiar letters of the previous year so he was surely aware that Harvey wanted to cast him, the rising star of English poetry, as his protégé. You wonder whether this sonnet was ever meant for publication, or whether it was Spenser throwing his old mentor a bone. It seems, like the passage from the *Hymnes*, familiar and unimaginative in its courteous description of its addressee. But I do suspect it might be a bit more nuanced than you initially suggest, and as you suspect in your later comment. The line "*Ne fawnest for the favour of the great*" would either seem to be just wrong and Spenser is surely not that oblivious to the ways in which Harvey operated, or, pointedly ironic. The same might also be said of the description of Harvey as "*a great Lord of peerlesse Liberty*," as Harvey was forever getting into quarrels and scrapes, sought out the patronage of the good and the great, and was frustrated in his attempts to advance himself, as Nashe points outs often and at great length during their exchanges in the 1590s. The sonnet might be read like Jonson's poem "To Sir Robert Wroth," reminding the addressee of what he should be and so pointing out what he is via the gap between the real and the ideal. Harvey was surely not a happy man who looked on fondly at the world's vanities, but a man who wanted to be in the thick of the action. Spenser may be reminding him of where his happiness might really lie. It is undoubtedly a sign of Harvey's desperation and/or blind self-regard that he published the poem six years after its date as a salvo in the Nashe-Harvey quarrel, a strange hostage to fortune perhaps. The lines "*Ne fearest foolish reprehension / Of*

faulty men" may have been taken by Harvey as a vindication when it was really a warning.

So the poem may not be as bad as you think and have a certain amount of clever advice and irony (which may well have been wasted). What about a poem that has been considered bad, *Daphnaida*? Read one way it represents the grief of Arthur Gorges for his dead wife, expressed in a repetitively, excessively graphic manner; read another way it counsels Gorges to temper his grief and remember to keep things in proportion, a message that could be seen to fit nicely with the advice given to Harvey in the sonnet (if I read it right). We might also remember Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, an obvious source of Spenser's poem, a work that counsels John of Gaunt to restrain himself and remember that there is an afterlife. What does your formalist perspective suggest?

***RDB*:** I'm oddly conflicted about *Daphnaïda*: you remember David Lee Miller's hilarious essay, "Laughing at Spenser's *Daphnaïda*," which lands some solid blows, particularly on Alcyon's protracted complaint. This stanza is the *pièce de resistance* in the case against the poem, a rather turgid anaphora fest which reminds me of a Dead Kennedys song I enjoyed as a teenager ('This world brings me down/Drag with every breath/I'm lookin' forward to death'; maybe you had to be there):

> I hate to speake, my voyce is spent with crying:
> I hate to heare, lowd plaints haue duld mine eares:
>
> I hate to taste, for food withholds 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.

For Rachel Hile, "The automaton meter, repetitive diction, and clichéd imagery are hallmarks of bad poetry," so maybe it's a fool's errand saying anything positive about it. But a bit like your nuanced defence of the Harvey sonnet—a poorish, conventional poem which tacitly reprehends GH for virtues he singularly lacks—I think you can see in this passage Spenser's critical reaction to the poetry of an earlier generation. So the (over)use of what I call the 4/6 line (an iambic pentameter with a mandatory pause after the fourth syllable) glances back at the work of writers like George Gascoigne and Thomas Churchyard, who produced lengthy poems where (almost) every line follows this pattern. Gascoigne's *Certayn Notes of Instruction* go so far as to say that if you want to write pentameters, this is the form you should follow; it's interestingly

disenchanted (and disenchanting) advice which has no real sense of the flex and bounce which later writers found in the line. So my point is that what we're reading here is an essay in bad writing. Spenser is effectually characterising the complainant, Alcyon (who stands for the grieving Arthur Gorges, himself a poet with some tendencies towards metrical monotony) as a bad, traditional poet. It's an obsessional formal pattern, mirroring Alcyon's death wish, which we're intended to read ironically.

The other point I'd make is about the formal twist in the *Daphnaïda* stanza. It looks like Chaucerian or *Mirror for Magistrates* rhyme royal (*Ababbcc*), but in fact inverts the last b-rhyme and the first c-rhyme to produce an unusual hybrid form (*Ababcbc*). What's clever about rhyme royal—why ultimately it's the best source for the Spenserian stanza—is that it has two distinct couplet climaxes. Spenser's revised seven-line stanza upends that structure, so the reader's ear doesn't get the satisfaction of those couplet climaxes. I've called this a "denatured" form because I suspect this is a deliberate tampering with how traditional, baddish, poetry works: you expect it to sound like this, but in fact it sounds like that. It's a disturbing, designedly destablizing, effect; the formal rug is pulled out from beneath the reader's feet. But again, I admit that doesn't necessarily make *Daphnaïda* as a whole any more compelling. In contrast with *The Book of the Duchess*, which always seems so humanly tangible (as in the narrator's final understanding of the man in black's bereavement: "Is that youre los? Be God, yt is routhe!"), Spenser's poem is more sombre, more rhetorically intricate, and also more experimental. But of course not all experiments come off. It feels like Spenser is indicating that Alcyon/Gorges has complained himself into a rhetorical dead end—"But he no waie recomforted would be,/Not suffer solace to approach him nie"—yet since he has given over so much of the poem to Alcyon's monotonous grieving, the reader is ultimately fatigued by the poem. One way of understanding it would be as a version of a jazz standard where the performer has taken a pretty ordinary, hackneyed tune and has failed to transform into something new—instead of John Coltrane's incandescent "My Favorite Things," this is more like Bob Dylan's version of "Young at Heart" (apologies in advance to any Dylanologists overhearing us).

But I think we're circling around a bigger question: to what extent can we see bad elements in *The Faerie Queene*, and are they deliberate or accidental? Where would we look for such writing? Your earlier remarks on the *Hymnes* suggested that

juvenilia is likely to be worse than mature work (not sure that I agree), so does that suggest that possibly earlier bits of *The Faerie Queene* might be worse than later ones?

***ADH*:** Well maybe the jazz analogy has some force. Spenser's verse seems to be experimental, if it is, as much in its use of popular forms rather than being avant-garde as such, breaking with tradition. If anything seems more like jazz improvisation it might be most obviously applied to *The Shepheades Calender*, which is riotously experimental and no one quite knew what to do with it then, just as they don't now, although those experiments are rooted in the familiar and the popular as much as the intellectual and future-oriented. So I'm not quite as wedded to the assumption that, unlike Wordsworth, poets get better with age, as you suggest! I wonder whether your Dead Kennedys analogy is more telling really. There's the startling rhyme, "But in my room / Wish you were dead / You bawl like the baby / In *Eraserhead*" from "Too Drunk to Fuck," which seem experimentally Spenserian in spirit, if not exactly in style and execution. More to the point, isn't Spenser the ancestor of Schoenberg, and possibly Stravinsky, rather than John Lydon and David Johansen?

Anyway, in answer to your question about *The Faerie Queene*, I'm not sure all that much of it is really bad. It's such a strange mixture of the episodic, accretional, and diverse, reflecting its complicated and discontinuous composition (so far as we can work out), and the coherent, with an insistent and complicated narrative drive signalled at the start in the Error episode. I see much of the narrative driven by the expansive discussion and analysis of words, so that episodes raise issues about particular words and their meanings, as well as dichotomies—civil/savage, holiness and marriage, war/peace, rebellion/order, male/female, pity/justice, and so on. But, then again, there are sections that seem a bit underdone, misplaced and poetically unsatisfying. I think there are few poetic episodes that stand out that are not part of a larger poetic narrative because Spenser works by forcing the reader to consider what they know and whether they can be sure that other examples/situations qualify their understanding and undermine their security. The set pieces that everyone likes—The Bower of Bliss, the Bloody Babe, Archimage, Mount Acidale, Mutability versus Jove—all stem from long-standing debates in the poem which is why they are so powerful. Perhaps the Thames and the Medway sequence of river marriages is an exception? I'm not sure. Maybe I don't read Book IV carefully enough.

The criticisms of the poem by Yeats and Lewis have always seemed astute to me. For Yeats there is good symbolism and bad allegory, which could be mapped on to what I am suggesting if we read symbolism as multivalent and integrated, and allegory as rather flat and forced—an idiosyncratic reading that begs a number of questions, I realise. Lewis is undoubtedly too quick to equate poetry and morality, but he is surely onto something when he complains that Book V is sometimes bad because Spenser is a bad man.

I have long argued that while Lewis sees Ireland corrupting Spenser's imagination, on the contrary, it inspires him, and his relationship with the country and people influences him at key moments, often in ways that confront and disturb us as readers and which we cannot easily accept. Ireland is central to *The Faerie Queene* as we now have it, as I think most critics accept. Where the allegory is more forced and leaden is when Spenser is not fully engaged with the imaginative scope of his romance-epic and either explains too much or assumes too much. I still cannot see the Sansloy/Sansfoy/Sansjoy trio of brothers as one of the most exciting sections (although I'm sure some will disagree), because I don't think Spenser is particularly interested in crusades, the Ottoman Empire and contemporary perceptions of Islam (when compared to writers such as Marlowe, Greene or Kyd, say), but feels he ought to signal the clash of cultures that he saw in the Mediterranean in his story of a world in chaos, although I will add that I think Benedict Robinson's work is pretty good. In another vein, the Belge episode towards the end of Book V seems to me to require too much explanation and it does not lead on to vital other questions, a section of the narrative that sags after the Mercilla-Duessa-Malengin excitement of canto 9, and before the canto concludes with Irena and the compressed poetic resonance of the appearance of the Blatant Beast, and Envy and Detraction hounding Artegall. Maybe you see it differently, and I'm eager to hear what you think does not work in *The Faerie Queene*, and why.

***RDB*:** I think we're in great danger of agreeing as our discussion draws to a close. I am very taken with what you say about Lewis's perception that Book V is bad because of the badness of Spenser's actions—I remember when I first read this taking some comfort from the directness with which Lewis faced the material and his refusal to draw to gloss over the horrific aspects of the colonial project and Spenser's defence of this. But as you suggest, it's not quite enough, that pushing together of good poetry

and good beliefs and bad poetry and bad beliefs. Ezra Pound was an appalling man, but pages of the *Cantos* are still beautiful and touching as much as they are discomforting. In the same kind of way, though one imagines that Robert Lowell was an abysmal husband, I wouldn't want to be without *Life Studies* and the sonnet sequences which detail his marital imperfections. I think we're both similarly skeptical of the flattening aspects of this kind of biographical reading, even if the impulse to invoke these criteria remains strong.

And I agree with you that, unlike say Tasso or Camões, Spenser doesn't have much to say about Islam. Words like "Paynim" are ideologically vague: "But that proud Paynim forward came so ferce" is arguably more focused on the mechanics of some juicy alliteration than saying anything specific about Sansloy's beliefs. And the interiority which elsewhere Spenser is so good at seems beside the point in these passages. This though is definitely an area for further work and reflection.

Book V is a conundrum. We agree that it has terrific moments: the giant with the scales; the Radigund episode, taking in as it must the Isis church canto and the one comic, almost humanizing, moment with Talus, where the immoveable robot is terrified of telling Britomart the bad news about Artegall. Britomart's reinstatement of patriarchal order though after she's disposed of Radigund is still deeply troubling. And like you I do think there's a loss of proportion (as the Giant might have said) the closer we get to the realities of the sixteenth century and the (to me) rather clunky historical allegories of the last few cantos, as though the poet is unsurprisingly running out of gas. My candidate would be the Burbon episode, which has the look of something inserted at the last minute, with the argument summarizing the episode coming *after* its appearance at the end of canto XI. While it's no surprise to have Spenser presenting Henri IV as an incompetent chivalric scoundrel for laying aside his shield/converting to Catholicism, Artegall's wordy and periphrastic rebuke is a low point: "Hard is the case, the which you doe complaine;/ Yet not so hard (for nought so hard may light,/That it to such a streight mote you constraine)/As to abandon, that which doth containe/Your honours stile, that is your warlike shield." Artegall sounds nearly as bored as the reader feels, and the interrogation of words which you spoke about earlier seems to have deserted Spenser at this point.

Conversely, the argument that there is a deliberate shortfall in these cantos, as Spenser experiments with the limitations of justice, or at least the justice which Artegall and Talus want to dispense, seems to me useful and suggestive for the future.

There's been interesting work on this in recent years: Daniel Moss does fascinating things with the gap between Ovidian allusions to Medea in the Souldan episode and their referents in the poem. This highlights the way in which the texture of the poetry is almost deliberately foregrounding the pinch points between the contemporaneous allegory and the poetic and mythological hinterland. That's rather clever, and opens up new ways of approaching the book.

So though I don't think we can really talk about *The Faerie Queene* being bad, I'd like to close with the thought that we're perhaps not the best witnesses. I'm thinking of Catherine Nicholson's brilliant work on the reception of the poem, and the fact that a large amount of this has been dictated or channelled by people who may not have read the poem in its entirety. In other words, because of its scale, *The Faerie Queene* is more often assumed as a cultural property, a mark on the historical landscape, than as a living work of art. I'm reminded of that brilliant line of Ralegh's, "All suddeinly I saw the Faery Queene," which makes available the hint that Ralegh was thinking as much of seeing the actual Queen than of reading his client's poem. As professional Spenserians, we might need to think about how we overcome that resistance to reading in the same way that say Joyceans have to mediate *Finnegans Wake*, another epic work more often referred to than read. I remain optimistic, in that the fascination of these ornery, original works—works which assimilate and flout convention, including badness—remain available to future readers.

***ADH*:** Well, despite our best efforts we end up more or less on the same page. I think we agree that even Homer sometime nods, as Horace and Pope put it, and that there are some underwhelming passages in Spenser, but really very few. I often wonder how he actually composed his poetry as so much came out in a wonderful creative burst of six years (1590-96) that transformed him from the forgotten man of English poetry to its undisputed laureate. Clearly much was already written before 1590, but which sections and how was it composed? In rapid frenzies? Or, more likely, produced in sections that were then woven together, as Josephine Waters Bennett outlined during The Second World War. If so, that surely explains the odd dodgy passage, underwhelming section and second-rate poem, but it is remarkable that a man who wrote so much in a twenty-year publishing career produced so little that is bad. Some of that, I'd want to argue, is because it is juvenilia; and some, which I'm not really

counting as actually bad, is dramatic monologue, the bad verse expressing the nature of the bad character.

***RDB*:** I suspect we have gone as far as we can go on our journey today. There is no end of talking, so "let us homeward now night draweth on,/And twincling stares the daylight hence chase."

***ADH*:** Maybe one relaxing drink for reflection? Perhaps not quite "Pour out the wine without restraint or stay," as our master has it.