

## The Spenser Review



### Better than Bad Words

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There is no poetry in *The Faerie Queene*. That is, no character ever recites a poem for the pleasure, or the judgment, of another character. The default nine-line stanza is the only form to be found across its six books, if you don't count the little ballad-arguments at the starts of the cantos, which are spoken by no one the plot knows about. Here and there, a character will sing a song, like Phaedria on her idle island or Amavia to the sleeping Verdant, or make a complaint like Britomart's to the sea. But the book is nothing like *The Shepherdes Calender*, where inset poems in various forms are everywhere and of the greatest interest to the local community of shepherds. Nor, for that matter, is it like Gascoigne's *Adventures of Master F. J.*, or Sidney's *Arcadia*. In those works, singing competitions and judgments about good and bad poetry are part of the texture of the narrative and have narrative consequences. Nothing like that happens in Spenser's epic.

This essay will mostly be about what good and bad poetry mean in *The Faerie Queene*, but I want to start by looking at one of those other prosodically polyglot works, the *Arcadia*, by way of developing the contrast. Consider the following excerpts from a song contest between the shepherd Lalus, and Dorus, a prince disguised in shepherd's weeds. Lalus first:

Come, Dorus, come, let songs thy sorowes signifie:  
And if for want of vse thy minde ashamed is,

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That verie shame with Love's high title dignifie.  
No stile is held for base, where Love well named is:  
Ech eare suckes up the words a true love scattereth,  
And plaine speach oft then quaint phrase better framed is.

This is good poetry, true hexameters, well-rhymed, with a flexible caesura. It is generous in its address to the outsider Dorus, if a little condescending. He responds:

Nightingales seldome sing, the Pie still chattereth:  
The wood cries most, before it throughly kindled be,  
Deadly wounds inward bleed, ech sleight sore mattereth.  
Hardly they heard, which by good hunters singled be.  
Shallow brookes murmure most, deep silent slide away;  
Nor true love loves his loves with others mingled be.<sup>1</sup>

Dorus has taken up the formal challenge of Lalus's twelve-syllable lines. But the tone has darkened, the rhyme is subtly altered (from ABABAB to ABABCB, from a closed sixaine to an open terza rima—he maneuvers to dictate Lalus's next rhyme), and the odd-numbered lines are in a new, dactylic counterpoint with the iambs of the even. Lalus may be impeccable, but Dorus is aggressively virtuosic, and he maintains his edge for the rest of their exchange. We find ourselves in a world, as readers, in which skill in versifying stands in for nobility of character, and our own informed judgment allows us to identify with the ablest performers. There are, it should be said, no truly bad poets in *Arcadia*. Sidney cannot bear to write bad poetry for anyone, not even the yokel Dametas.<sup>2</sup> But more and less accomplished and ambitious poetry has moral meaning in his work. When a better poet falters morally (as both his poet-princes do), it is an irony that *Arcadia* can surface, but cannot solve.

Edmund Spenser's relationship to bad poetry is much more intimate, because he writes so much of it in *The Faerie Queene*. For example:

Yet nigh approaching, he them fowle bespake,  
Disgracing them, him selfe thereby to grace,  
As was his wont, so weening way to make  
To Ladies loue, where so he came in place,  
And with lewd termes their louers to deface.  
Whose sharpe prouokement them incenst so sore,

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Sidney, *The Poems of Philip Sidney*, ed. William Ringler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 14. I have written about this exchange at greater length in "Hardly They Heard," in *Shakespeare up Close: Reading Early Modern Texts*, edited by Russ McDonald, Nicholas Nace, and Travis Williams (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 87-94.

<sup>2</sup> For a different view, see Matthew Harrison's essay in this volume. I would maintain that Musidorus remains a virtuoso, even in his distress, but Harrison points to some lines that are challenging to defend, and he does well to raise the question of the badness of Sidney's quantitative verse generally.

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That both were bent t'auenge his vsage base,  
And gan their shields addresse them selues afore:  
For euill deedes may better then bad words be bore.

(IV.iv.4)<sup>3</sup>

In this stanza, the knight Blandamour approaches the well-assorted quartet of Campbell, Triamond, Canacee, and Cambina, disparaging the other knights in hopes of sowing a discord that might somehow win him one of their ladies as his own. In the next stanza Cambina lightly reconciles everyone, leaving behind a little bit of narrative business that has refreshed the moral polarities of the scene, then blurred them a little, with the good knights so quick to anger. It is hard to find a word that couldn't be replaced without damage, possibly excepting the second line's nifty chiasmus with "grace." Keeping the wanton parentheticals straight requires a concentration that they do not much reward. The redundancy of "As was his wont" and "where so he came in place"—both tell us this is typical behavior for Scudamour—is particularly hard to defend as anything other than stanza-filler. The sententious final line takes an interest in bad words, but words that are morally bad—slanderous, shaming and shameful—rather than unskillful. (That is what at stake when we encounter the poet Bonfont, renamed Malfont, in the next installment.) Between those two kinds of bad, moral and technical, there is no relation to speak of.

Contrast that stanza with another from Book IV, a little earlier on, when the narrator describes the virtues of Triamond and the two brothers whose souls will later transmigrate into his:

Stout *Priamond*, but not so strong to strike,  
Strong *Diamond*, but not so stout a knight,  
But *Triamond* was stout and strong alike:  
On horsebacke vsed *Triamond* to fight,  
And *Priamond* on foote had more delight,  
But horse and foote knew *Diamond* to wield:  
With curtaxe vsed *Diamond* to smite,  
And *Triamond* to handle speare and shield,  
But speare and curtaxe both vsd *Priamond* in field.

(IV.ii.42)

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<sup>3</sup> A.C. Hamilton et al., ed., Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 2nd edition (London: Pearson Education [Longman], 2001). All parenthetical citations are to this edition by book, canto, and stanza number.

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This is among the better-known of a class of stanzas in the poem that exhibits what Angus Fletcher might call a templar form, balanced, with an architecture of sense that corrects for the chronic asymmetries of the eccentrically rhymed and rhythmized nine-line form. It is subtly tendentious, too: the reader is likely to expect that Triamond, destined to survive, would be a summa of his brothers' virtues, as Arthur is to be a summa of the poem as a whole, but in fact they are all equal both in ability and liability. (The stanza, that is, will not comply with a narrative that must choose only one of them.) Perhaps the martial props could be swapped out, a sword for a spear, say. But there is no real waste here: everything is turned to allegorical account. If we take a stanza like this to be paradigmatic for the poem, we have a Platonist poet, one whose forms are not so much rhetorical as they are mimetic of supervening orders. That mimesis is less a bravura performance than an act of homage or even prayer. Insofar as it exhibits skill, the craftsmanship defers to the beauty of its paradigm.

Most of the poem's stanzas, however, are somewhere in-between these two limit cases. Here Campbell and Diamond, the second of the brothers, join combat after the death of Priamond, the first:

With that they both together fiercely met,  
As if that each ment other to deuoure;  
And with their axes both so sorely bet,  
That neither plate nor mayle, whereas their powre  
They felt, could once sustaine the hideous stowre,  
But riued were like rotten wood a sunder,  
Whilist through their rifts the ruddie bloud did showre  
And fire did flash, like lightning after thunder,  
That fild the lookers on attonce with ruth and wonder.

(IV.iii.15)

This stanza has its share of redundancy: it is hard to say what "whereas their powre / They felt" adds to the idea that the knights' armor cannot withstand the rain of blows upon it, and even "whereas" is an otiose, metrically convenient substitute for "where." "Deuoure" is a striking word, but seems to lead nowhere in the metaphors of the larger passage. Then there is that strange penultimate line, "And fire did flash, like lightning after thunder." The uncanny thing about thunder is that it follows the lightning strike it seems to cause, as anyone who has ever watched a summer storm will know. Does Spenser reverse the order carelessly, for the sake of the rhyme? Bad poetry, leading

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nowhere. Or—is there something tendentious in that reversal, a peculiar eddy of backwards time in the midst of the larger, orderly succession of transubstantiations that structures the combat as a whole? In that case, is the poetry good? Combat in Spenser is often like this, an exchange of blows in which cause and effect, the identity of the participants, get lost. Perhaps this disorientation is that of the spectators, transfixed in their simultaneous rapt and wonder, rapt from any larger hopes or fears for the outcome.

I have been talking about two kinds of bad here: mistake, and redundancy. The first is a particularly baggy category, into which the problem of thunder would fit, along with breaches of decorum, catechesis, dropped threads or disordered events at the level of narrative, and so on. The experienced reader of the poem will already have recognized that *The Faerie Queene* has a recuperative category for such lapses, in its generative concept of error. It only takes the ingenious, interpretive intervention of a Harry Berger to bring an errant line into a pattern, or a counterpoint, that you missed when you dismissed it. Redundancy is a different order of complaint. It identifies moments of the poem as mere filler, or perhaps dead matter, like Orgoglio's leg when it is cut from his body. These are the words and phrases and sentences packed in-between the meaningful bits in order to sustain the total form, as though the poem did not have quite enough poetry to fulfill its grand architectonic, and has to prop and pad here and there with substandard building materials, with slack prose or cliché or near-nonsense. Here too the poem has its defenses, though, especially its preoccupation with doublings—who is to say a redundancy is not a meaningful variation, the proper difference of which you have not yet understood?

Who is to say? And here is a strange and special virtue of *The Faerie Queene*, that it can make us so uneasy in our judgments, line by line, of its quality, when we should bear down and when we can glide by (or even, if we love the poem, courteously avert our eyes from its lapses). It is inevitable to ask, since we are all readers of Milton also, whether the poem, at such moments, is judging us? But if so, certainly not in the way that *Paradise Lost* surprises us with our sin, with the doctrinal error of misplaced sympathies. The bad poetry in *The Faerie Queene* is not evil. It is just—unlovely, unrewarding, distracting, a little embarrassing. Not a place to relax, a recreative idyll, nor a site of unexpectedly profitable interpretive labor. By its very length the poem

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obliges us to learn to recognize when we are wasting our energies. Given the way it punishes lapses of vigilance among its characters, of course, this is much easier said than done; the poem also cultivates an interpretive paranoia that makes any attenuation of interpretive activity feel risky. There is no question that it is full of bad poetry. But which lines are really the bad ones? And bad how—could a line be slack prosodically, and narratively important; locally redundant, and architectonically vital? I sometimes feel that Spenser has written a poem to optimize, from his own standpoint, the ratio between readerly effort and writerly design. He can write a bad line, an obviously bad line, and let it go—he let so many go—but we cannot quite believe it, and we will work at it, much harder than he did, until we make it good some other way.

There are by now a few senses of “good” and “bad” in play, so it will be useful to turn back to Sidney to clarify them. The poems in *Arcadia* are written to meet, and exceed, and even transfigure a standard of craft that is recognized and judged by characters within the fiction. Many readers at the time would have read them as models for their own ambitious compositions. “Good” means technically skillful. No such social matrix of evaluation is to be found in *The Faerie Queene*. (Perhaps the closest is the pastoral of Book Six; but while skill is discussed there, it is never performed.) Bad lines can be obviously bad without the poem noticing. Modern readers are left to wonder whether interpretation might redeem the want of craft, making them good in a different sense, integral to the larger aesthetic achievement. Is local redundancy a reliable sign that the lines are poetically dispensable? At the last minute, let me suggest that there may be a better language for the problem in Spenser, not good and bad, not good and evil, but living and dead. Any reader of a long poem must practice some triage. Attention is a finite resource, and each of us must decide where to spend it. We leave some lines for dead, breathe life into others. If the poem is, parts of it, lifeless, this is one more way in which it is not so much like a person—not like that magnanimous Arthur—as it is like the world, good and bad, living and dead mixed in together. Perhaps that made it an easier poem for Spenser to write, at least stanza by stanza, but not an easier poem for us to read, or to live in.