To Fashion a Bad Poem: Faunus and Misconstruction

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Throughout his literary career, Edmund Spenser was haunted by the fear that he would be read as a bad poet by a public either unwilling or unable to recognize his writing's merits. His first public declaration of poetic vocation, a short poem prefacing *The Shepheardes Calender*, expresses anxieties about such readers, asking Sir Philip Sidney, "the president / Of noblesse and of cheualree," to protect his work if it is poorly received.[1] Such concerns were not unwarranted. Sidney, although the *Calender*'s sought-after champion, was notably ambivalent in his assessments of these poems' literary merits. His tepid praise in the *Defense of Poesy* argues that, while the *Calender* "hath much poetry" and is "indeed worthy the reading," Spenser's "framing of his style to an old rustic language I dare not allow."[2] Spenser's particular worry, however, is not about stylistic censure, but the risk, as he will later write to Raleigh, that envious readers will warp his good poetry into bad through the lens of their "gealous opinions and misconstructions."[3] Spenser was, I think, fairly confident in the fact that, absent such readers, he was an

[1] Richard A. McCabe, ed., Edmund Spenser, *Edmund Spenser: The Shorter Poems*, (London: Penguin, 1999), 24.

[2] Katherine Duncan Jones, ed., Sir Philip Sidney, *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 242.

[3] A.C. Hamilton et al., ed., Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 2nd edition, (London: Pearson Education [Longman], 2001), 714.

exceptionally good, even historically great, poet. Unlike Torquato Tasso, there is never any sense in either his works or contemporary records that he may have been driven to distraction by artistic self-doubt. He did, however, doubt his readers—an inherent risk when attempting to "fashion" them "in virtuous and gentle discipline" (714). Such readers, "gentlemen or noble" though they may be, are not yet fully trained in virtue, gentility, or discipline. What happens when ill- or partially-formed readers impose their own imperfect fashioning on the poem instead of the other way around?

Sidney's judgment and the concerns Spenser expresses in both the Letter to Raleigh and the *Calender*'s prefatory poem describe two ways of thinking about bad poetry. Whereas Sidney expresses a strictly formal criticism of the poet's technique, Spenser's worry is the moral stakes of readerly response. Might, however, these aspects converge? Perhaps taking too literally the shaping work implied in "misconstruction," I am interested in the reader's capacity to render a poem bad through the fashioning powers of their "gealous opinions," considering how a failed reading of content might recast a poem as a formal failure. A central line of Spenser criticism, one going back at least to C.S. Lewis's contrasting the Bower of Bliss and the Gardens of Adonis as paradigmatic the "method…of Spenser's allegory," is the poet's penchant for staking moral claims on distinguishing "good art" from "the artificial in its bad sense." On the one side, for Lewis, are those "healthy" forms of art that open our minds to the rhythms and processes of nature and the world; on the other are those unhealthy kinds of art whose "sham" imitations project human desire onto our surroundings.[4] Distinguishing good art from bad, however, is an elusive task, for their forms often look eerily similar. The Bower of Bliss is a case in point, offering a *tour de force* of the poet's craft just as well-wrought as the Gardens of Adonis. The difference lies in how they ask to be seen. And that, of course, depends on our willingness and ability to engage with Spenser's poem on his terms.

What then happens when readers refuse to see the poem as intended? What might be at stake, for Spenser, in those readers who recoil in horror at Guyon's destruction of the Bower, or in the nervous giggles of my own students realizing what Spenser is describing "in the middest" of the Gardens of Adonis (III.vi.43)? In both cases, when

[4] C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in the Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 324-27.

readers refuse the poem's moral claims, its formal and aesthetic value falls apart. Venus's mountain no longer appears as a rhetorically virtuoso cosmogony, but seems an overwrought expression of prurient interest. Guyon's wrath, likewise, becomes ludicrous melodrama, an irrational temper tantrum incapable of answering the questions posed by Acrasia's Bower:

> But all those pleasant bowres and Pallace brave,
> Guyon broke downe, with rigour pittilesse;
> Ne ought their goodly workmanship might save
> Them from the tempest of his wrathfulnesse,
> But that their blisse he turn'd to balefulnesse:
> Their groves he feld, their gardins did deface,
> Their arbers spoyle, their Cabinets suppresse,
> Their banket houses burne, their buildings race,
> And of the fairest late, now made the fowlest place.
>
> (II.xii.83)

The garden's lush ekphrases and sensuous *energeia* devolve into the moralist's doggerel. If we are unwilling to accept Guyon's movements as expressions of an urgent moral or political necessity, the poem clumsily erodes into a repetitively declarative exercise in antithesis, anaphora, and alliteration built out around plodding caesuras and end-stopped lines.

Such responses starkly display the transformative power of readers' "gealous opinions and misconstructions" to recast and reinvent, pervert and ironize whatever they encounter. To recall A. Leigh DeNeef, these are the stakes of the poem's inability to fix relations between its reception and that Sidneian "idea, or fore-conceit" on which the poet pins their intentions.[5] The perils, and the underlying impulse behind such interpretive catachresis, fascinated and vexed Spenser, and they lurk behind some of his most potent figures—the Blatant Beast, Sclaunder, Busirane, and Duessa come immediately to mind. What, however, might that interpretive practice look like as it unfolds in real time? Perhaps no episode dramatizes the very act of willfully misreading good poetry as bad so explicitly, if enigmatically, as Faunus's illicit gazing on the bathing Diana in the Mutability Cantos (VII.vi.37-55). Recalling my (much) younger self's responses to this scene—glancing over it on the way to the weightier philosophical material elsewhere in the

[5] A. Leigh DeNeef, *Spenser and the Motives of Metaphor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1982).

cantos—suggests that, at least for a bad or ill-formed reader, Spenser's adaptation of the myth of Diana and Acteon, which relocates it to the Irish landscape surrounding his estate in Kilcolman, might itself be read as bad poetry. Certainly, its fabliau offers an unexplained digression from the main narrative which, in turn, momentarily redirects the Cantos' grand cosmological allegory into the realm of homely burlesque. The remainder of the "Cantos of Mutability" offer Spenser's most elaborately realized metaphysical vision since the Gardens of Adonis in Book III. Here we get a tale of voyeurism, deception, and punishment that might be more at home in a novella or stage comedy, transposing Ovid's urbane wit into the key of rustic bawdry. We might, then, read this episode as truly a reflection of, to invoke the headnote to Canto VIII, an "unperfite" work, as evidence of the Cantos status as a rough draft whose loose ends were never tied up in the process of expansion and revision. A shrewder reading understands the scene, however, not as poetic failure awaiting inevitable revision in an unfinished work, but rather as an instance of the kind of irony Harry Berger, Jr. describes as "self-amused…a critically and comically squint reenactment of attitudes, topics, and norms characteristic of a traditional literary mode."[6] It reenacts a mythographic, cosmogonic, and imperial epic through the eyes of a reader who refuses to acknowledge, or perhaps simply cannot see, the mysterious authority expressed through its iconographies of power. Faunus's violation and reaction describes, in other words, good poetry made bad through the failed judgment of a bad reader.

The scene views Diana through both the resistant eyes of Faunus and the ironies of Chaucerian fabliau. This is a familiar move for Spenser, most notably performed in his burlesquing of Homer in his tale of Hellenore, Paridell, and Malbecco. That scene's transformation of Paris, Helen, and Menelaus into bestial players in a ludicrous May-December farce frames, to recall another of Berger's essays, our doubled vision of the moment through both Malbecco's and the narrator's eyes. It thereby allows us to imagine the exhaustion and necessary discarding not only of a literary tradition, but of its underlying ethical and metaphysical assumptions in the poem's production of a new "historical consciousness."[7] A similar dynamic is at play in this moment, but with a key

[6] Harry Berger, Jr., *Revisionary Play: Studies in the Spenserian Dynamic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 277.

[7] Harry Berger, Jr., "The Discarding of Malbecco: Conspicuous Allusion and Cultural Exhaustion in *The Faerie Queene* III.ix-x," *Studies in Philology* 66.2 (1969): 135-54.

difference. Whereas Spenser represents himself in full control over his poem in the Malbecco episode—there, only Malbecco loses control—in "Mutability," Spenser imagines what might happen if he lost control of his poem to a fabliau-making reader. In Chaucerian terms, the scene asks what happens if, like Chaucer's Knight, Spenser's allegory encounters an ungentle Miller who refuses to recognize a noble tale and participate in its fantasies of order and hierarchy? How might the shape of the poem itself be subject to the consciousness and desires of such a reader? Most dangerously, how might a reader like the Miller, who refuses to accept the decorums and social assumptions within which the Knight's tale is received, expose those mores' follies and pretenses to critical scrutiny? Faunus's will to violate Diana's sanctity recalls the Miller's refusing to doff his hat and kowtow to gentlemen: both characters conspicuously and self-consciously set themselves apart from authority by refusing the normativizing claims of good and bad on which that authority depends. Just as the Miller's refusal illuminates the insufficiencies of both the Knight's rhetoric and the ideologies of order such rhetoric reflects, so Faunus's threatens to reveal the insufficiencies of imperial power—and of that power's figuration in *The Faerie Queene*—to the ordering of an English polity in Ireland.

The Faunus episode's implication in such questions depends on Diana's figuration of Gloriana, and through that figure, both *The Faerie Queene* and Elizabeth "that is soueraine Queene profest" of "the *British* Islands" (VII.vi. 38 3-7). Likewise, Spenser's account of her imperative to "hide / In couert shade, where none behold her may: / For, much she hated sight of liuing eye," evokes the Letter to Raleigh's description of allegory's "darke conceit," while recalling Spenser's awareness that his poem is "clowdily enwrapped" in ways that seek to avoid, while also soliciting, wayward readers' "gealous opinions and misconstructions." When Faunus removes divine authority's "clowdy enwrapping" and sees the naked Diana, he breaks out in an inexplicable and involuntary peal of laughter:

> There *Faunus* saw that pleased much his eye,
> And made his hart to tickle in his brest,
> That for great ioy of some-what he did spy,
> He could him not containe in silent rest;
> But breaking forth in laughter, loud profest
> His foolish thought. O foolish *Faune* indeed,
> That couldst not hold thy selfe so hidden blest,

But wouldest needs thine owne conceit areed.
Babblers vnworthy been of so diuine a meed.

(VII.vi.46)

Neither Faunus's laughter, nor Spenser's account of it, make sense. In the case of Faunus, this is literally so: the laughter is described as wholly involuntary and is strangely disjunctive from the figure provoking it. There is, in other words, no obvious logical correlation between this laughter and the image of the naked Diana. From a poetic standpoint, likewise, Spenser does not offer the reader any clear interpretive grounds on which to link this reaction to Diana. If allegory depends on granting its readers some kind of hermeneutic key, none is on offer here. The laughter remains an enigma. Perhaps it embodies the sense of shock both classical and biblical authorities ascribe to the encounter with divinity. Perhaps, too, it reflects simple schoolboy humor, the kind of laughter with which my own students responded to Venus's mount in the Gardens of Adonis. Erasmus, a key source for Spenser and his contemporaries, however, understood that the unrestrained bodily reactions of schoolboys reflect a failure of civility itself, embodying an inaptness to conform to the civilizing process.[8] Indeed, as Carla Mazzio argues, Spenser's was a culture that saw real political charge in inarticulate utterance, and understood that when "high-level articulation plummets into chaos," inarticulacy potentially "thwarts community altogether."[9] Spenser understood that there could be real meaning, and real danger, in this evidently meaningless laughter.

The stakes of Faunus's response to Diana are clarified when placed in relation to a crucial, if generally unnoted, parallel: Arthur's response to encountering a lacuna while reading a figural embodiment of *The Faerie Queene*, the book of "Briton Monuments" in Eumnestes' chamber in II.x's account of Alma's Castle. Pausing at the broken off narrative, Arthur stands astonished before

that so vntimely breach
The Prince him selfe halfe seemed to offend,
Yet secret pleasure did offence empeach,
And wonder of antiquitie long stopt his speach.

[8] Desiderius Erasmus, *De civilitate morum puerilium* (1530). My remarks are informed by Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, rev. ed. (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000).

[9] Carla Mazzio, *The Inarticulate Renaissance: Language Trouble in an Age of Eloquence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 94.

> At last quite rauisht with delight, to heare
> The royall Ofspring of his natiue land,
> Cryde out, Deare countrey, O how dearely deare
> Ought thy remembraunce, and perpetuall band
> Be to thy foster Childe, that from thy hand
> Did commun breath and nouriture receaue?
> How brutish is it not to vnderstand,
> How much to her we owe, that all vs gaue,
> That gaue vnto vs all, what euer good we haue.
>
> (II.x. 68-69)

There are clear similarities linking these readers who stand astonished before the revelation of secret truths. Both Arthur and Faunus are driven by a desire to see more than they otherwise can, or perhaps ought to, know. Both seek a secret, concealed, or otherwise unspeakable pleasure. The moment of revelation, in each case, is described as a breach. Each figures' encounter with mystery is couched in the language of offense. And each is rendered inarticulate at the climax of their revelatory encounters, stunned into releasing involuntary cries.

As reflections on the varying quality of readers a poem may encounter in its public life, these two moments use the figure of apostrophe to distinguish the ways different readers might fashion the same poem as either good or bad. In the Faunus episode, the apostrophe imposes critical distance between Faunus and Spenser's presumed audience by having the narrator directly address the reader. It glosses Faunus as a foolish reader incapable of receiving the lesson embodied in the allegorical Diana. Spenser's narrator thereby regains control of the narrative from Faunus's response, reminding us that Faunus is a bad reader of a good poem and not the other way around. He is a synecdoche for all those unworthy readers persistently haunting Spenser throughout his career, those envious "Babblers vnworthy been of so diuine a meed" (VII.vi. 46, 9). To redirect an argument I have made elsewhere, encountering such a reader puts Diana's divinity at risk.[10] Through an ironic deployment of epic simile, Spenser imagines what might happen to Diana if we linger on the image with Faunus' prying eyes. Such a gaze reduces this emblem of cosmogonic epic and imperial mythography from goddess to a lowly

[10] Andrew Wadoski, *Spenser's Ethics: Empire, Mutability, and Moral Philosophy in Early Modernity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022), 148-52.

> huswife, that with busie care
> Thinks of her Dairie to make wondrous gaine,
> Finding where-as some wicked beast vnware
> That breakes into her Dayr'house, there doth draine
> Her creaming pannes, and frustrate all her paine;
>
> (VII.vi.48 1-4)

Failure to read correctly imperils the poem itself. Contrast this with Arthur's apostrophe to the "remembraunce" of his "Deare countrey." Arthur's apostrophe embeds him deeper into the poem by putting him in imagined dialogue with the historical narrative he has just read. The narrator does not need to intrude and gloss this reaction. By a process of figural implication, we, too, are pulled in, allowed to identify with Arthur's own joyous identification with this narrative of providential historical mandate.

Faunus ruins the vision by attempting to constrain it within the "compasse" of "his desire." He thus reduces this vision to his own level. Arthur, however, yields himself up to that image's authority and its desires for him. Through the mechanism of historical "remembraunce," Arthur fulfills and continues that broken vision by allowing it to "fashion" him in the image of its "virtuous and gentle discipline." The image of Arthur crying out in Eumnestes' chamber describes *The Faerie Queene*'s ideal reader, one who recognizes, and is thus susceptible to, good poetry. After Arthur's initial delight, he finds a restored eloquence, the cry segueing into the repeated phrase "dear country" that unfolds itself into an encomium for the nation that is also a theory of virtuous citizenship. The moment brings to mind Wallace Stevens' account of the ways such an ideal reader of Spenser "knows how the poem comes to possess the reader and how it naturalizes him in its own imagination and liberates him there."[11] In this yielding of reader and text to one another on the grounds of mutual affirmation, Arthur's response is not only the confirmation, but also the cause of the *Briton Moniments-cum-Faerie Queene*'s status as good poetry.

Faunus, unlike Arthur, is a reader who cannot be possessed, naturalized, and liberated into this poem's imagination. His laughter, as a parodic inversion of Arthur's rapturous cry, depicts a bodily rejection of this poem. Answering one metaphor with

[11] Wallace Stevens, "The Figure of the Youth as a Virile Poet," *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951), 37-68, citation, 50.

another, albeit one Spenser might find apt, Faunus's laughter is what happens when the seed of good poetry is planted in bad soil. Faunus and his laughter thereby figure a buffer against the charge of writing bad poetry: the fault is the reader's. In this sense, perhaps, we see Spenser anticipating John Milton's request that Urania grant him a "fit audience…though few" for his poetry.[12] Placing Faunus, however, in the Irish context of the Mutability Cantos offers a far more unsettling way of thinking about this figure. Faunus emblematizes an Ireland that is perhaps irredeemably "wilde" and resistant to English rule. *A View of the Present State of Ireland* is centered around the question of why English legal and political formations – those ideologies allegorized both in and as *The Faerie Queene*, and thus as Diana in this episode – have failed to take hold in Ireland and "draw the Irish, from desire of warre and tumults, to the love of peace and civility."[13] The answer is rendered explicit in Spenser's arguments that the Irish were themselves to blame for the violence to which the English subjected them, such as the English-made famine in "these late warres of Mounster" that, Spenser claims, "they themselves had wrought" (101-102). This failure to conform to English law, Spenser imagines, results from "the very genius of the soyle" and its inhabitants (11). Faunus's laughter thus places the question of bad readers and bad poetry at that nexus of early modern racecraft and settler colonialism of which Spenser was a foundational theorist. Read in such a way, the image might further enlarge the scope of bad poetry as a critical framework. In light of what five centuries of historical practice and hindsight reveal as the unambiguous and comprehensive failings—moral, political, social, psychological, economic—of the colonialist project, is it possible to read Spenser's writings as good poetry? We cannot be satisfied with C.S. Lewis's all too easy evasion of this question with his claim that the "wickedness [Spenser] had shared" in the Elizabethan government's "detestable policy in Ireland…begins to corrupt his imagination."[14] How do we productively coordinate our appreciation for this poet's objectively demonstrable mastery of craft with his commitment to objectively bad ideas? And how might we, like Faunus, resist and challenge the spell of this poem's ideologies without reducing it, as Faunus does, to a flattened image, the "compasse," of our own desires?

[12] Barbara K. Lewalski, ed. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 7.31.
[13] Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland,* ed. Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 150.
[14] C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 349.