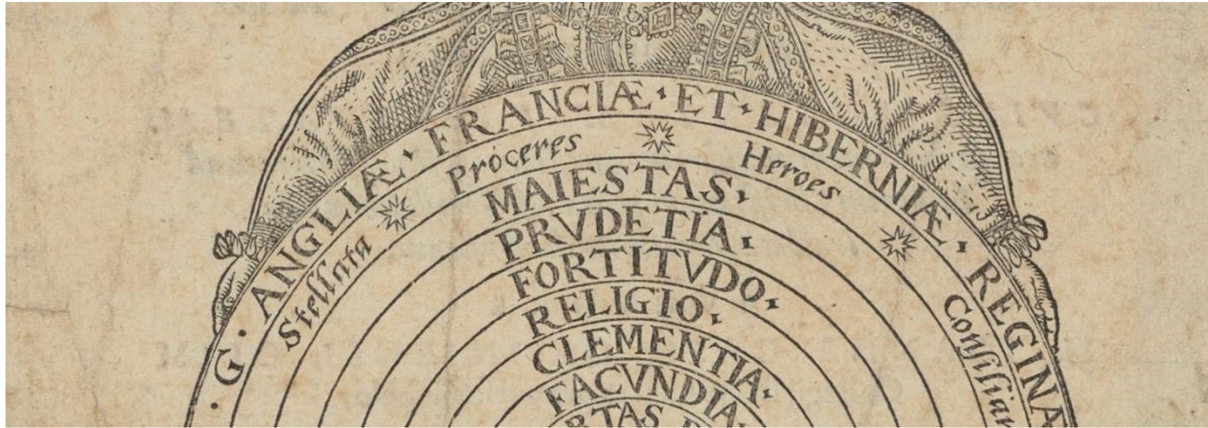

Bad Poets Fail to "Compasse"?

By Bethany Dubow (University of Oxford)

In Book V of *The Faerie Queene*, Bonfont, now Malfont, is seen fixed to a post, a nail through his tongue:

> For the bold title of a Poet bad
> He on himselfe had ta'en, and rayling rymes had sprad.
>
> (V.ix.25)[1]

The scene is Arthur and Artegall's welcome to Mercilla's court, where the knights are made witnesses to the punishment of the "Poet bad" as they pass through the "Scriene" that divides the throne room from the outer halls (V.ix.25.1). According to Mercilla's "law" (V.ix.25.3), Malfont's writing is "bad" because it attacks the reputation of the "mayden Queene" (widely taken as a figure for Elizabeth I) (V.viii.17).[2] But Malfont's writing is additionally bad, Spenser suggests, because this kind of writing—until the sovereign drives a nail through its source—is difficult to limit. Malfont is compared to an uncontrolled fire: "he blazed had" (V.ix.25). And he is likened to a bubbling fount: a *mal*, as in "bad," "font," and "a welhed, / of euill words" (V.ix.26). Having "sprad" and "shed" his "wicked" script throughout the land (V.ix.26), Malfont's crime is twofold: he has not kept himself within the bounds of licensed subject matter (he has offended his sovereign); nor has he bounded his writing in spatial and formal terms (it has spread, shed, blazed, welled). In other words, Malfont's "trespasse" is against his queen and her realm (V.ix.25). That he is exhibited by the "Scriene," a point of spatial

[1] Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed., A. C. Hamilton et al. (London; New York: Routledge, 2007). All quotations from *The Faerie Queene*, cited parenthetically, refer to this edition.

[2] On Mercilla and the historical allegory, see Andrew Hadfield, *Spenser's Irish Experience: Wilde Fruit and Salvage Soyl* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 164-86; Bart van Es, *Spenser's Forms of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 158-161; Richard McCabe, *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment: Elizabethan Ireland and the Poetics of Difference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; repr. 2005), 222-23; Thomas Herron*, Spenser's Irish Work: Poetry, Plantation and Colonial Reformation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 167-68.

division, adds poetic justice to the sovereign's punishment of his formal, territorial transgression. For, in contrast to the "Poet bad," Mercilla is accomplished in the poetics of formal containment. Just after Malfont, she is revealed "[e]ncompassed" by a "thousand" angels bordering her "cloth of state" (V.ix.29). Beyond this, she is ringed again, "round about," by a "beuie of faire Virgins" (V.ix.31). The virgins delineate a further tier in a hierarchy of purity that has the "Angel-like" Mercilla at its cosmic center (V.ix.29). The visual messaging is clear: even as the "Poet bad" crosses lines, the sovereign, in her power, reclaims and reasserts the limits.

Spenser's treatment of Malfont may be satirically exaggerated.[3] But to the "new Poete,"[4] and those who joined him in constructing a "poetics of English nationhood"[5] that would "sustain England's own version of its past" as well as authorise "its future as an imperial power,"[6] one criterion for bad writing was a failure to assert and maintain formal limits. Like Malfont, whose crime is aggravated by its formal "sprad," the "bad" writer was someone who neglected to order their words within, and without, controlled borders. As colonial administrator in Ireland, Spenser measured the success of expansion against the containment of the colonial subject.[7] His Irish career committed him to the consolidation of New English control both within and beyond the English Pale, and to the suppression of Old English and Irish rebellion. Indeed, via the figure of Malengin, with whom Malfont is lexically linked, Spenser appears to relate Mercilla's nailing of the "Poet bad" with the necessity of containing anti-imperial rebellion (*Wilde Fruit and Salvage Soyl* 165). And if the imperative to contain directed Spenser's political career, it also shaped the territory of his page. In his literary writing, Spenser reflects on the necessity of reforming his "Rude rymes" into an appropriately Anglo-imperial, civilised form. This idea emerges particularly where he connects his poetic to his political career, as in his dedicatory sonnets to *The Faerie Queene*, where he refers to his intricately arranged poem as one "a rustick Muse did weaue / in sauadge soyle."[8] Scholars have identified points of convergence between the shaping

[3] David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance*, rev. edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 118.

[4] E.K., *Epistle* to *The Shepheardes Calender*, in *The Yale Edition of the Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. William A. Oram et. al. (London; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 13-21 (13). All further references to E.K.'s *Epistle* are from this edition and are cited by line number in the text.

[5] Claire McEachern, *The Poetics of English Nationhood, 1590-1612* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[6] Stephanie Elsky, *Custom, Common Law, and the Constitution of English Renaissance Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 102; see also Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992).

[7] See discussion of Spenser's views on the implementation of English common law in colonial Ireland in Hadfield, *Wilde Fruit and Salvage Soyl*, 57-77, and McCabe, *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment*, 223-30.

[8] Dedicatory Sonnet 10, "To the most renowmed and valiant Lord, the Lord Grey of Wilton," lines 11-12; see also, Dedicatory Sonnet 7, "To the right Honourable the Earle of *Ormond* and *Ossory*," lines 1-4 *et passim*.

effects of Spenser's policy in Ireland and his poetics.[9] This short essay proposes that, to Spenser, it was especially the containing form of the poetic "compasse"—as rhetorical period and unit of his stanza—that suggested not just the imperative to contain and subject but the "badness" of failing in this project.

The circular syntax of the classical *periodos* was admired by English humanists for its poetic realisation of the values of unity and self-sufficiency.[10] However, in the late sixteenth century, its "compasse" became newly charged with the territorial claims of Elizabethan Crown. In his *Epistle* to *The Shepheardes Calender*, E.K. lauds Spenser as England's "new Poete," praising the periodic syntax that he describes as Spenser's "compasse": "the whole Periode and compasse of speache so delightsome for the roundnesse," (27-28) "al the compasse of the speach, it is round without roughnesse" (120-121). For E.K., Spenser's "compasse" is "well grounded, finely framed, and strongly trussed up together" (125-27). Its carpentered clauses protect the "good and naturall" English words restored by Spenser "to theyr rightfull heritage" (84-85). By contrast, the "loose" and "ungyrt" sentences constructed by those E.K. calls "our ragged rymers" make no claim to containment (125-128). These "ragged rymers" are formally at fault like Spenser's "Poet bad": failing to "compasse" both themselves and their subject, they "rage and fome" without limit (130). To E.K., their failure is both formal and patriotic.

In the context of E.K.'s well-known support for Spenser's reinstatement of an "olde" but "very naturall" English diction (99), Spenser's containing "compasse" claims a territory of language. It protects within its limits an "auncient" English diction elsewhere "disherited" by words from "other languages" (26, 85-92). In this, Spenser's "compasse" ringfences a linguistic kingdom. Moreover, it does so by recourse to a geometry that, in the late sixteenth century, was becoming increasingly associated with the encompassing fiction of an island nation.[11] The year after the *Calender* was published, John Lyly drew on the form of the "compasse" to imagine England: "We are nowe sayling into an Iland, of small compasse, as I gesse by their Maps, but of great ciuilitie," Lyly writes at the beginning of *Euphues and his England* (1580).[12] Making

[9] See, for example, McCabe's reading of the Bowre of Blisse as lesson to the colonist in Ireland who, like Spenser's reader, "must become deaf to Spenserian verse in order to become a Spenserian hero" in McCabe, *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment*, 133-41 (141).

[10] On the humanist valuing of the rhetorical period, see Janel Mueller, "Periodos: Squaring the Circle" (61-80) and Russ McDonald, "Compar or Parison: Measure for Measure" (39-50), both in *Renaissance Figures of Speech*, ed. Sylvia Adamson, Gavin Alexander, and Katrin Ettenhuber (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[11] On the Elizabethan imagining of England as an island nation, see Lorna Hutson, *England's Insular Imagining: The Elizabethan Erasure of Scotland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

[12] John Lyly, *Euphues and his England Containing his voyage and his aduentures, myxed with sundrie pretie discourses of honest loue, the discription of the countrey, the court, and the manners of that isle* (London, 1580), B^{r}.

England's bounds coextensive with those of an island territory, the "compasse" performs a politics at once insular and expansionist.[13] At the same time, its "small" scale suggests the periodic "civilitie" of Lyly's own self-consciously (if incompletely[14]) English writing. Comparably, when after Sidney's death in battle, Fulke Greville commits "to saile" by his "Compasse" in practising "this kind of writing,"[15] Greville connects Sidney's periodic style ("this kind of writing") with his military service to his Anglo-imperial nation.[16] Signifying self-sufficiency, boundedness, and national destination, the "compasse" was well-placed to express the politics and poetics of late Elizabethan England.

It is curious, then, that where Spenser relates the shape of his own writing to the form of the "compasse," he doubts its efficacy:

> How can they all in this so narrow verse
> Contayned be, and in small compasse hild?
>
> (IV.xi.17)

Here, Spenser relates the marriage of the Thames and the Medway in Book IV of *The Faerie Queene*. Brought to attention in the part of the poem "most obviously indebted to chorographical description" *(England's Insular Imagining* 76-77), Spenser's "small compasse" recalls Lyly's territory-making "island of small compasse," except that Lyly's confident comprehension of that island stands in contrast to Spenser's uncertainty. The stanza bears full quotation:

> But what doe I their names seeke to reherse,
> Which all the world haue with their issue fild?
> How can they all in this so narrow verse
> Contayned be, and in small compasse hild?
> Let them record them, that are better skild,
> And know the moniments of passed times:
> Onely what needeth, shall be here fulfild,
> T'expresse some part of that great equipage,
> Which from great *Neptune* do deriue their parentage.
>
> (IV.xi.17)

[13] On the Elizabethan "erasure of Scotland," see Hutson, *England's Insular Imagining.*

[14] Catherine Nicholson, *Uncommon Tongues: Eloquence and Eccentricity in the English Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 72-99.

[15] Fulke Greville, *The life of the renowned Sr Philip Sidney. with the true interest of England as it then stood in relation to all forrain princes* […] (London, 1651), 172.

[16] On Greville's connecting of Sidney's "writing to action," and contemporary admiration for Sidney's anglicised prose *periodos* (or compass), see Gavin Alexander, *Writing After Sidney: The Literary Response to Sir Philip Sidney, 1586-1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 223-232, 263.

Reflecting on the viability of his project of "Contayn[ment]," Spenser's problem arises from the incommensurability of the scale of his vision (the gods, the peoples descended from them, and the world's rivers and oceans) with the materially constrained scale of his poetics. He worries that the form of his containing "compasse," which here suggests the stanzaic unit as well as the periodic sentence, is still too "small" to compass the matter of the "world" itself, in all its abundant generation. At this metapoetic crux, Spenser's "small compasse" allies with his spatially and syntactically compassed stanza which, as has been well-noted, is typically end-stopped.[17] David Scott Wilson-Okamura describes the scheme of *The Faerie Queene*'s stanza as designedly "microcosmic," its syntactic closure reflecting the contemporary distaste for "leaking stanzas" (*Spenser's International Style* 44, 30). While there may be other ways in which Spenser's stanzaic compasses leak linguistic matter,[18] at this moment, as Spenser unites the Thames and Medway, the issue is particularly one of scale; Spenser implies that his stanza's "small compasse" cannot expand in step with his epic's will to cosmic comprehension.[19]

There is also suggestion that Spenser's writing breaks down under the pressure of this project. At the end of the fourth line, "hild" is a variant of Spenser's more commonly used "hold"—chosen apparently more by the need to make the rhyme than by a semantic reason to vary diction.[20] The required *-age* rhyme of the sixth line is bad in the sense that it is *not there*; but, in light of the lines' self-reflexivity, the deviation invites serious reading. The line's "moniments of passed times" may be a conscious blank verse "moniment" to classical, unrhymed metres. Alternatively, Spenser could be signalling that the failure of his "compasse" to "hild" his subject matter together has ramifications for the coherence of the language within it. We later learn that the poet "Cannot recount" the "Irish Riuers," "Nor read the saluage cuntreis through which they pace" (IV.xi.40), adding to the impression that this "compasse" is incomplete, or only patchily comprehensive. In the lines just quoted, Spenser goes on to signal his inadequacy in comparison to those who are "better skild," but states that what his

[17] Thomas M. Greene, *The Descent from Heaven: A Study in Epic Continuity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 327; David Scott Wilson-Okamura, *Spenser's International Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 29.

[18] See Bethany Dubow, "Toadstool Poetics: Alliteration in *The Faerie Queene*," *Spenser Studies* 36: 91–135;

"A Fruitful-Headed Beast?: Rhyme in *The Faerie Queene*," in *Edmund Spenser and Animal Life*, ed. Rachel Stenner and Abigail Shinn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 203-236.

[19] On epic's "aim to grasp forms of totality," see Ayesha Ramachandran, "Shaking the Steadfast Globe: Early Modern Futures for the Global Turn," *Spenser Review* 52.3.2 (Fall 2022).

[20] For an articulation of each side of the debate regarding how far Spenser's rhymes are semantically invested, see the introductory essays in Richard Danson Brown and J. B. Lethbridge, *A Concordance to the Rhymes of The Faerie Queene* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

superiors have is knowledge (they "know the moniments") rather than the poetic-*cum*-political craft that is actually needed: the ability to scale up the "compasse" of "narrow verse" to global proportion.

Indeed, the hope that, as geometric abstract, one "compasse" (being structurally identical to the next) can do the work of any other is part of what drew Elizabethan writers to this figure. The dilating concentric spheres that structured the early modern cosmos showcased not just formal identity across scale, but implied the possibility of expansion from the smallest of its compasses to the largest (see Fig. 1, discussed below). In one sense, this model of a concentric universe rotating around a controlling, scalable center, is at the center of every Spenserian stanza: the central b-rhyme couplet is, one line out, ringed again by that same rhyme's first and fourth terminal—a version of enclosed rhyme, or what George Puttenham called "concord" in "Plaine compasse."[21] Kenneth Boris interprets the nine-line structure of Spenser's stanza as a conscious attempt at cosmic "attunement," given that nine is the number of the Ptolemaic spheres, Muses and traditional angelic orders.[22] "Nine" is the cosmic compass, "the circle sett in heauens place," in Spenser's infamous arithmological stanza (II.ix.22). In Mercilla's throne room, the sovereign is "[e]ncompassed" by angels and, then again, "round about" by virgins. The circle locates the center of the metropole from which order emanates: any badness that troubles its dilating borders it either reforms or, as in Malfont's case, neutralises.

If there is an aspiration to totality, even cosmic comprehension, implicit in the form of the compass, Spenser's deployment of the figure on Mount Acidale is more straightforwardly successful:

> All they without were raunged in a ring,
> And daunced round; but in the midst of them
> Three other Ladies did both daunce and sing,
> The whilest the rest them round about did hemme,
> And like a girlond did in compasse stemme:
> And in the middest of those same three, was placed
> Another Damzell, as a precious gemme,
> Amidst a ring most richly well enchaced,
> That with her goodly presence all the rest much graced.
>
> (VI.x.12)

[21] George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007), 176–77.

[22] Kenneth Borris, *Visionary Spenser and the Poetics of Early Modern Platonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 53.

Here, the "compasse" of Spenser's end-stopped stanza (all a single sentence) performs commensurately, in verse and syntax, the encircling geometry of the maidens' dancing rings. And as Spenser goes on to compare their concentric formation to Ariadne's celestial "Crowne"—the constellation under which Elizabeth I was born, and around which "the starres [...] moue in order excellent" (VI.x.13)—it becomes clear that the compass of this scene is also cosmic, and that its address includes an Elizabethan "Crowne" engaged in expanding its own imperial "compasse." This is how Walter Raleigh, in his annotations to Book IV, interpreted it. As David Norbrook observes, Raleigh identified himself as the errant Calidore, Spenser as the controlling Colin, and the scene, by suggestion, of Ireland under English colonial administration (*Poetry and Politics* 130). That Elizabeth I is not more obviously reflected in the figuration of the central maid makes some sense as an admission of the impossibility of "in compasse stemm[ing]" a power that is itself encompassing. In John Case's *Sphaera civitatis* (1588), Elizabeth I is not confined to the center of its diagram, but instead she enwraps the consciously cosmographical structure (Fig. 1). The monarch's arms form the outermost ring in "an allegory of the benefits of the queen's rule and her godlike imperial aspirations."[23]

The "compasse" on Acidale is also "like a girlond." Suggesting the laurel crown of empire as well as of the Apollonian poet, the simile points to Spenser's interest in the "compasse" as a form that orders subjects both political and poetic.[24] For, the imperial imaginary articulated by Acidale's dilating compasses is invested in the project of reforming, through subjection, the "badness" that Spenser located in "that country of Ireland," which he was committed to "reducing [...] to better government and civility."[25] On Acidale, Spenser's stanzaic "compasse" extends, sequentially if not concentrically, what Spenser describes in the Proem to Book VI as Elizabeth I's "faire [...] patterne" (VI.Proem.6.2). Addressing his Mercilla-like sovereign, Spenser locates Elizabeth I at the center of a virtuous order that flows to and from the subjects "which round about you ring" (VI.Proem.7.7). This "ring" resounds in the dancing rings of maidens on Acidale and in the periodic circuit of the verse itself, syntactically bounded

[23] Peter Barber, "England II: Monarchs, Ministers, and Maps, 1550-1625," in *Monarchs, Ministers, and Maps: The Emergence of Cartography as a Tool of Government in Early Modern Europe*, ed. David Buisseret (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 77.

[24] Gabriel Harvey describes Apollo's wreath as a "Garland" in Gabriel Harvey, "Spenser-Harvey Correspondence. 1579-80," in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1904) 1: 87-122 (116). On the laurel crown and Roman empire, see Julia C. Fischer, *Power and Propaganda in the Large Imperial Cameos of the Early Roman Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2024), 81-82.

[25] Edmund Spenser, *A View of the State of Ireland* (1633), ed. Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley (Oxford and Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 11.

within the “compasse” of the stanzaic unit. Yet, in narrative action, the “compasse” on Acidale also fails in its project.

Fig. 1. John Case, *Sphaera Civitatis* (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1588), title-page verso, in Christ Church Library, Ol.7.2. Used with permission of Christ Church, University of Oxford.

Dissolving the moment that Calidore compromises its bounds, it cannot metabolise his unnatural element (Vi.x.18). Where Spenser’s “compasse” at the Marriage of the Thames and Medway is too “narrow” to hold its subject, his “compasse” on Acidale is too fragile in its immaterial conception. Its dissolution exposes the unworkability of a form that disbands the instant it comes up against another, unanticipated, subjecthood. To the extent that this points to a weakness of the “compasse,” Spenser suggests the impossibility of securing a complete imperialism in Ireland—a legal and

cultural containment, which was, as his Irenius admits, "almost impossible to be compassed" (*A View* 34).

In Book V's "Poet bad," Spenser theorises bad writing as a "trespasse" against the queen and her realm. As foil to the implied model of the civil, courteous poet, Malfont's uncontained writing is seditious in its message and "sprad." By contrast, the "good" writer must defend the sovereign and her claims to land, shaping the territory of the page according to the logic of the "compasse"—a form that is "round without roughnesse," in E.K.'s praise of it, and associated by Lyly with the shape of a fantastic island-England. Allied by Spenser with the island of his stanza, the "compasse" suggests a model of an imperial polity, conserving through enclosure, claiming through dilation. However, while the "compasse" is an active organising form in *The Faerie Queene*, patterning both page and image, its power is necessarily contested, resisted, and undone by the tautological fallacy of its own claim to self-sufficiency. At the marriage of the Thames and the Medway, Spenser's "compasse" proves too "narrow" and "small" to hold all the rivers of the world. On Acidale, its fragile abstraction cannot withstand an errant subject's contact and incursion. If, by this Elizabethan logic, "bad" writing inheres in a failure to compass an imagined subject, Spenser may be (even by his own admission) implicated: "How can they all in this so narrow verse / Contayned be, and in small compasse hild?". In both his poetic and political careers, the poet struggled to make material the ideal abstractions of the containing "compasse."