Searching and Stumbling: Serendipity, Allegory, and Spenser's Recommender Algorithm

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Shipwrecked in Ephesus, a young man walks through the city looking for his brother. He has a series of bewildering encounters that lurch between extremes of good and bad luck: with his servant, who treats him as both a first-time visitor and a long-time resident; with the servant's mistress, who claims to be the young man's wife; with his long-lost brother, and at last with their imperilled father. Elsewhere, in another fictional world, a modern "middle-class English interior," a man and a woman make polite conversation.[1] They have just met, but each finds the other oddly familiar. By coincidence, both travelled once to London from the city of Manchester. By a stranger twist of fate they took the same train, the 8.30—and shared a compartment. Since coming to London, it transpires, they have lived on the same street, and in fact in the same house: could it be there that they met? In actual fact, they share a bedroom, and each is parent to a little girl, who has one red eye and one white. "My own wife," exclaims the man, "I've found you again!" (5).

Two scenes of searching and stumbling. The first, Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* (1594), depicts an Ephesus where people make wonderfully unlikely but theoretically plausible discoveries. "I to the world," says Antipholus of Syracuse, "am

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[1] Eugène Ionesco, *La cantatrice chauve* (1950), trans. by Donald M. Allen, *The Bald Soprano and Other Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1982), 5.

like a drop of water, / That in the ocean seeks another drop" (I.ii.36-7).[2] The second, from Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950), breaks plausibility's limits: at some stage of London's narrowing down from city to street, street to house, house to bedroom, the chances of the chance encounter become absurd. (After their joyful reunion Mr and Mrs Martin fall into a trance and Mary explains that they aren't actually husband and wife, for reasons just as implausible.)[3] Yet reading *The Comedy of Errors* through the prism of Ionesco's absurdism reveals the uncanny quality of action in Ephesus. Antipholus is looking not just for his brother but also for his identical twin, whose life in part mirrors his own. He is seeking and finding himself, as well as someone else.

This essay is about searching in *The Faerie Queene*, and the place of serendipity—the moment of fortuitous stumbling—in Fairyland. Considering the difference between searching someone and searching *for* someone, I will arrive eventually at a consideration of Fairyland through a prism even more anachronistic than *The Bald Soprano*: the internet search, in the age of the recommender algorithm.

Searching Deep and Wide

One of the strangest places where searching happens in *The Faerie Queene* is within the wounded body. In Book III, "deepely... empight" (III.v.20.8-9) by the first Foster's arrow, Timias receives Belphoebe's care.[4] She pounds out a poultice to "scruze" (33.4) into the wound, and binds it up with her "scarfe" (9); but she does this only "after hauing searcht the intuse deepe" (8). To search a wound in early modern England was to sound its depth, and to determine what was going on beneath its surface—whether suppuration, interpreted as both help and hindrance by medical authorities, had begun.[5] The *Oxford English Dictionary* elaborates, in its definition of "search" in this sense, that examination could be conducted "by touch or with a probe."[6] In early modern medicine this physical probing employed a piece of cleaned fabric, or an instrument with a blunt, bulbous end. George Otes, in a collection of sermons published in 1633, commends Paul for preceding with "not a search-cloth,

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but a searing iron."[7] Yet Belphoebe, a dab hand at poultice-making and scruzing, seems to search mainly with sight and touch; she has no need of hard tools. Considering Belphoebe as healer, and the analogous episode of *Orlando Furioso* where Angelica attends to Medore, Sujata Iyengar notes a nervousness in early modern culture about women incorporating objects into their healing work; about women's medicine formalising into male surgery.[8] Iyengar points to the City of London's Company of Barbers and Surgeons' founding prohibition in 1540 on women wielding "instruments or tools to probe wounds."[9] Such anxieties, Iyengar suggests sharply, "coalesced around fears of the dangerous, tactile, female supplement" ("Handling soft" 31).

As she heals Timias, Belphoebe is unwittingly re-wounding him, thrilling him with love: "still as his wound did gather, and grow hole / So still his hart woxe sore" (III.v.43.1-2). Timias's infatuation demonstrates Belphoebe's (and Elizabeth's) chastely erotic power, but also demonstrates her limits as a healer. From Iyengar's perspective, the accidental second injury assuages the male fear that Belphoebe's wound-searching might attain the expertise of tools. In Book VI, the Hermit tends to Calepine and Serena after their mauling by the Blatant Beast: "searching of their wounds" (VI.vi.5.1), he finds them "ranckling inward" (3), and realizes that they need not material "salues," but "counsell to the minde" (9). The two wounds, literal and metaphorical, have become one; or perhaps the Hermit has understood that, in the allegorical landscape of Fairyland, a wound can open a continuous space between the literal body and the immaterial mind. Elsewhere in *The Faerie Queene*, doctors search bodies with less of Belphoebe's discerning tact.[10] Cymoent's nymphs take care of Marinell after his wounding by Britomart, and "search his grisly wound" (III.4.40.1). Liagore, with "skill in Leaches craft," finds traces of life, but only Tryphon—"of sea gods the soueraine leach" (III.iv.43.9)—can provide treatment. At the end of Book IV, seeing Marinell's wound still unhealed, Cymoent accuses Tryphon of quackery. "Searching euery part" (IV.xii.23.8), Tryphon can only allege that Marinell is suffering a new wound; he cannot heal it.

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[7] George Otes, *An explanation of the generall Epistle of St Iude* (London: Elizabeth Purslow for Nicholas Bourne, 1633), 447.

[8] This was not, intriguingly, a straightforward fear about women accessing prestigious cultural zones marked off as male. Surgery in sixteenth-century England remained inferior to medicine, a craft to medicine's art. The fear Iyengar describes is not so much a social anxiety about women gaining prestigious knowledge as a cultural anxiety about women acquiring various species of artisan knowledge.

[9] Sujata Iyengar, "'Handling Soft the Hurts': Sexual Healing and Manual Contact in *Orlando Furioso*, *The Faerie Queene* and *All's Well That Ends Well*," in *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture*, ed. by Elizabeth D. Harvey (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 39-62, 41.

[10] Even the Hermit's mastery is offset by his humble status, having retired from the life of a "doughty Knight" (VI.vi.4.1).

This kind of searching might be compared to literary criticism: forensic, recursive attention to every part of a displayed *corpus* that keeps still, etherized upon a table. But as the examples above show, successful searches of the wounded body happen rarely in *The Faerie Queene*. Spenser, we could deduce, is suggesting the disanalogy of texts and bodies—only in extreme circumstances, or after death, do bodies keep still enough to be forensically read in the manner of a text. But the poem highlights the sinister potential of bodily searching even in its successful instances. Archimago, making a cameo appearance in Book II, finds Pyrrochles burning with the wounds of Furor:

> He knew right well, and him attonce disarmd:
> Then searcht his secret woundes, and made a priefe
> Of euery place, that was with bruzing harmd,

(II.vi.51.2-4)

It isn't only malicious figures like Archimago who possess the power to search with this efficiency, getting "attonce" to the bottom of the matter. In the House of Holiness, Coelia recruits Patience—another "Leach," surpassing Tryphon for "great insight"—to heal Redcrosse's "wounded hart" (I.x.23.7,3). Having "well searcht" (24.4) his body, Patience "eftsoones" (4) produces a diagnosis. Yet while his methods are benign, they are also intrusive, working to "extirpe" (25.6) all "inward corruption" (2). In making a "priefe / Of euery place," Archimago collects together his observations as if composing a body of evidence ("priefe" is Spenser's spelling of "proof").[11] Patience's "salues and medicines" are of "passing priefe": they have excellent accreditation. These uses of "priefe" demonstrate the process by which critical searching hardens its objects into quasi-legalistic evidence, matter of fact. It seems significant, given the absence of tools in Belphoebe's search, that "proof" could also refer to "a surgical probe." Only goddesses can search a body both thoroughly and with tact; other searchers leave their marks.[12]

Forensic inquiry, Spenser suggests, has both practical and ethical limits. The searching demanded of *The Faerie Queene*'s heroes is different: rather than poring obsessively over a single body fixed in place, they must be prepared to seek their objects in a strange and unknown landscape. Deep searching yields to wide. At the

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[11] Here, "priefe" is closest to *OED* 2: "The action, process, or fact of proving or establishing the truth or validity of a statement; the action of evidence in convincing the mind; demonstration."

[12] *OED* 16a. The quoted example is from Randle Cotgrave's *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (1610), which translates "curette" as "a Chirurgions Proofe."

beginning of her quest Britomart learns the identity of the man she seeks, and the royal line that will spring from their marriage, but not where to find him. She sets out feeling the pain of the "deepe wound" which Merlin's prophecy (III.iv.6.4), in its incompleteness, has not been able to heal:

> So forth she rode without repose or rest,
> Searching all lands and each remotest part,
> Following the guydaunce of her blinded guest,

(III.iv.6.6-8)

This is a new kind of searching, lacking a body at hand for systematic probing. Artegall is elusive, somewhere in Fairyland; in his absence, and without practical direction from Merlin, Britomart can draw only on the "guydance of her blinded guest," the same Cupid who wounded her when she looked in her father's mirror. ("Through your bright beams doth not the blinded guest," asks the speaker of *Amoretti* VII, "Shoot out his darts to base affections wound?" [5-6]). Britomart's unrequited love is propulsive, but the "guydance" it provides is much more erroneous than a map's. It blows her forward but also, potentially, off course. That erratic motion is expressed in the imperfect resolution of assonantal echo, as "guydance" distorts into "blinded," and in the forceful alliterative transition from "guydance" to "guest"—which, like all alliteration (but especially occasional or ornamental alliteration untethered to a structural or compositional scheme), figures a process of widening divergence; the words start out on the same track and end in different places. Britomart must contend not with the limits of her expertise, like the doctors, but with the contingency of searching.

Later in this essay I will consider the complex analogies between allegorical encounters in *The Faerie Queene* and algorithmic processes of a contemporary, digital kind. But it's worth noting here that the wide, roving search to which Britomart must commit is antithetical to the logic of 'algorithm' even in its older senses. An algorithm in early modern thought could describe a projective method, a way of determining an outcome from a data set presumed to be sufficiently comprehensive.[13] But Britomart's data is wildly inadequate. In order to have any chance of finding Artegall she must renounce not only distractions but also the temptation of method—of searching forensically, in one place, like the prober of a wound (tellingly, another pre-digital

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[13] *OED*, "algorithm" 2: "a procedure or set of rules used in calculation or problem-solving; [...] a precisely defined set of mathematical or logical operations for the performance of a particular task". One example for this sense comes from John Prideaux's *Eight Sermons* (1621), in which a knowable but unspeciable future event evades the forensic specificity of an algorithm: "that the end of the world shall fall, within the compasse of those doozen yeeres betweene 1688 and 1700 is more then my Algorithme findes demonstration for".

sense of 'algorithm' is its use as a term for medical diagnosis).[14] Britomart must search without algorithms.

Andrew Zurcher, in an essay on accident in *The Faerie Queene*, notes the unrelenting presence in the poem of *hap*: the chance encounters stringing together "an incoherent barrage of events" with all the implausibility Tasso warns against in his *Discorsi del poemo eroico* (1594).[15] Lamenting the fruitlessness of her search at the coast, Britomart struggles to reconcile herself to the haphazard character of events in this new land. She compares herself unfavourably to Narcissus—"I fonder, than Cephisus foolish child… I fonder loue a shade, the bodie farre exild" (III.ii.44.6,9)—accusing herself of greater guilt when it comes to feeding "on shadowes" (6). Over-essentializing the incompleteness of her search, Britomart gets it the wrong way round: it's Narcissus, of course, who is more narcissistic; he may have found what he is seeking, but he was always seeking only himself. Britomart has to accept what Zurcher calls "the simply contingent," the open-ended possibilities of chance encounters, which might bring peril but might also "produce serendipitous and significant effects" ("Writing at Hazard").

Serendipity, Self and Other

"Serendipity studies" describes a marked recent surge, across several disciplines, of interest in happy discoveries. Its Merlin figure is the sociologist Robert Merton, who collected examples of serendipity throughout the second half of the twentieth century.[16] Ohid Yaqub, undertaking a study of serendipity in scientific innovation, spent six months working through Merton's notes, and in 2018 formulated a useful taxonomy of serendipitous moments. It was Horace Walpole who coined "serendipity," in a letter of 1754 about discoveries by accident in the Persian story "The Three Princes of Serendip," and Yaqub's first category is "Walpolian serendipity"—"the discovery of things which the discoverers were not in search of."[17] Merton, Yaqub shows, widened serendipity beyond the Walpolian insistence on finding something

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[14] *OED*, 3: "*Medicine*. A step-by-step protocol used to reach a clinical diagnosis or decision".

[15] Andrew Zurcher, "Writing at Hazard: Accidental Spenser," *Spenser Review* 47 (2017).

[16] Merton's observations were published posthumously in a book co-authored with Elinor Barber: *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[17] Walpole's letter (to Horace Mann, January 28 1754) calls it "accidental sagacity." Walpole had "bespoken a frame" for the visiting Bianca Cappello, Duchess of Tuscany and husband of Francesco de' Medici. Looking in a Venetian volume of arms he found two crests ("Capello" and "Caepllo"), both showing the Capello emblem of a hat—but one shows, faintly superimposed, the Medici emblem of the fleur-de-lis, reflecting the ancientness of the allegiance between the families. Walpole compares his experience to the prince in the story, deducing that a camel blind in its right eye had passed on the road, and happening later to need this piece of information to save his skin. See Sean Silver, "The Prehistory of Serendipity, from Bacon to Walpole," *Isis* 106 (2015), 235-255.

you weren't looking for: it could also apply to the "solution of a given problem via an unexpected route" ("Mertonian serendipity").[18] Yaqub also observes two kinds of serendipity where there is no "targeted line of enquiry": "Bushian," in which the seeker has no particular object in mind; and "Stephanian," where both a new problem and an unexpected solution are found.

Yaqub focuses on scientific enquiry: he's interested less in serendipities of informal searching than in a particular kind of *research*. The heroes of *The Faerie Queene* are questers across terrain rather than scientists in a laboratory; scientific enquiry is more akin to the forensic wound-searching of the poem's variably skilful quacks and healers. Nevertheless, the poem's quests do turn on moments of serendipity that align most neatly with Yuqub's "Mertonian" category. The heroes know what they are seeking, but it's elusive or remote. Parted from Guyon while he visits Mammon, having been earlier denied "passage" (II.viii.3.3) by Phaedria, the Palmer finds an alternative route "by further search" (4). That searching yields the serendipitous discovery of Guyon, watched over by a beautiful angel who tells the Palmer of the "euill... at hand" (8.7) awaiting his "pupil" (7.5). A few stanzas later, unfortunately, Archimago and his motley crew (Pyrochles, Cymochles and Atin) arrive; but in a reversal of fortune Arthur comes hot on *their* heels, to the rescue. Afterwards Arthur furthers Guyon's quest, assisting him in the defence of the House of Temperance. Serendipity is more than plain chance: the serendipitous discovery must have some substantial relation to a quest or its object, to counterpoint the inherently accidental nature of its arrival. Arthur's fortuitous appearances exceed chance because he is (a version of) what the heroes of each book are looking for: he embodies the virtuous whole of which he can help them seek parts.

Much later in the poem, at the tournament for the wedding of Florimell and Marinell, Guyon emerges—without warning, "as by fortune then befell" (V.iii.29.3)—from the "preasse" (4) of spectators, to claim his horse. Braggadocchio stole it, way back in the 1590 text, along with Guyon's spear, and proceeds to acquire the Snowy Florimell. Guyon's horse is one of several haphazardly amassed effects—Artegall calls them "borrowed plumes" (20.7)—with which Braggadocchio composes the impression of a knight. For all his accidental association with Braggadocchio, however, the horse remains essentially Guyon's: only Guyon knows about the "secret marke" (34.6) in his

mouth, and it's only when Guyon says his name (Brigadore) that the horse opens his mouth to be searched, before returning to Guyon with "gladful glee" (8). Self and other, predestination and contingency, are finely balanced in this serendipitous reunion. Guyon is trying to restore and maintain his knighthood, which includes but is greater than Brigadore, but the horse's recovery amounts to more than an incidental slice of good luck. Brigadore is not quite part of Guyon's substantial self, split off in animal form, but neither is he wholly external, a pure accident; horse and rider belong to each other.

Before the battle with Malaeger, Arthur and Guyon engage in a form of enquiry much closer to the scientific experiments which interest Yaqub: research, of a very gentlemanly variety. Browsing in Eumnestes's library they stumble on two books which convey information of extreme (and extremely serendipitous) personal relevance: the chronicle called *Briton Moniments* and the "rolls of Elfin Emperours" (II.x.*Arg*.3). Again, the relationship between seekers and the objects they serendipitously (re)discover combines contingency with a sense of fate. "Sir Guyon chaunst," says the narrator, on his "booke" (ix.60.1). Yet in Arthur's literary discovery—of information both foreign and familiar, external to him and descriptive of his identity—the agency inverts and the object becomes the grammatical subject: "there chaunced to the Princes hand to rise / An auncient booke" (59.5-6). The serendipity of this encounter is enhanced, not diminished, by the pertinent comprehensiveness of the chronicle Arthur (with help from Eumnestes) has found: as in the tradition of the *Sortes Virgilianae*, happy textual discoveries rely on the right reason both of the text and its reader.

Allegory: Algorithm and Hypallage

In this ideal of discovery, objects make themselves known to the searcher with an aptness of timing or relevance which somehow does not destroy the randomness of the search, or collapse the distinction of self and other. Anyone who has lingered in a collection like that of Eumnestes knows that libraries and bookshops are venues of serendipity. We happen upon something miraculously pertinent which is, at the same time, authentically new. Most of the time this effect is not engineered, but arises—itself accidentally—from the venturing of inquisitive minds into spaces with particular configurations: the open stacks of a research library, where trade-offs of accessibility and categorisation produce bizarre sequences of contiguous titles; or the sheer jumble

of a second-hand bookshop.[19] To a degree, serendipity can be encouraged through fine-tuned calculation. Libreria, a bookshop in east London, is configured especially for serendipitous discoveries: its shelves are continuous, marked only discreetly into sections; comfortable chairs are provided, to slow readers down.[20] Of course, engineering and serendipity ultimately sit at odds with one another: if discoveries were fully predictable, they couldn't be serendipitous.

A recent study thinks about how the physical arrangement of Libreria might inform future digital environments designed to combine "goal-directed seeking" with "exploration and encountering."[21] Consensus has emerged in serendipity studies that the contemporary internet is good at the former and bad at the latter. It's easy to search online for a specific piece of information, but weirdly difficult to stumble on something good. If the digital world has become inimical to serendipity, it's striking that this wasn't always so. The story of serendipity's decline is the story of the rise of the recommender algorithm. In *Filterworld* (2024), Kyle Chayka narrates that rise. Algorithms are not new, he stresses: by the late 1990s the internet already comprised millions of documents, and Google had devised ways of filtering results for relevance to the search (this algorithm, PageRank, is still working away).[22] But vast swathes of the early civilian internet remained unfiltered: if you posted on a discussion forum, there was no knowing the responses that would come, and in what order. Searching the internet was variously analogous to visiting a lightly curated[23] space like Libreria, or wandering round the most jumbled bookshop in the world, a tower of Eumnestes stretching infinitely upward: both are environments of serendipity.[24]

All this changed with the advent of the social media monopolies in the 2000s and their intensification of algorithms in the mid-2010s. An exponential increase in

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[19] Pertinence itself, as a property of a randomly discovered item, depends on the (re)searcher's double commitment to her project, on the one hand, and on the other, that which lies outside the project: a curiosity about what is new, tempered by a determination to incorporate the finding without losing sight of the project's "first intent."

[20] Everard Meynell (son of Wilfrid Meynell, early twentieth-century man of letters and a key evangelist for the study of serendipity), owned a location-shifting shop in London selling books and prints, called "Serendipity Shop." See Merton and Barber, 73.

[21] S. Makri and others, "Discovering the Unfindable: The Tension Between Findability and Discoverability in a Bookshop Designed for Serendipity," in *Human-Computer Interaction – INTERACT 2019*, ed. by D. Lamas and others (Springer, 2019), 3-23.

[22] Kyle Chayka, *Filterworld* (London: Heligo Books, 2024), 24.

[23] For some, serendipity is necessarily threatened by intentional design. "A computer program," asserts the "serendipotologist" Pek van Andel, "cannot foresee or operationalize the unforeseen and can thus not improvise… The very moment I can plan or programme 'serendipity' it cannot be called serendipity anymore." Pek van Andel, "Anatomy of the Unsought Finding. Serendipity: Origin, History, Domains, Traditions, Appearances, Patterns and Programmability," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 45 (1994), 631-648, 644, 646. More recently, serendipotologists in computer science take a more cautious and optimistic view, perhaps as a result of witnessing the exponential increase of computing power since van Andel made his argument. Configuring recommender algorithms for serendipity is difficult, but it is "possible to progress." Reza Jafari Zirani and Reza Ravanmehr, "Serendipity in Recommender Systems: A Systematic Literature Review," *Journal of Computer Science and Technology* 36 (2021), 375-396, 377.

[24] Cofion Books in Tenby—"if thou euer happen that same way" (III.iii.8.1)—is famous for its tottering, near-unnavigable stacks of books. It's tiny: as uncannily miniature as the internet is (or was) sublimely infinite.

the capacity of surveillance means that algorithms now filter content for relevance not only to the search but also to the searcher, who on social media is looking not necessarily for specific information (like on Google) but more vaguely for something informative or entertaining. Algorithms have become too good at providing exact matches for what they reckon we want, and this reckoning departs from particular and culturally specific sets of assumptions on the part of the algorithms' designers.[25] They have gained the power not only to guide us as we search through the world, but also to shape the world in their image, flattening real-world culture into an unmoored homogeneity—Chayka's example is the modern middle-class coffee shop, which all over the world is converging on an algorithm-determined type.[26] The social media companies are uninterested in modifying their algorithms: they make their money not by designing algorithms for fruitful searches but by keeping us searching. A fundamental psychoanalytic principle, that we only partially want what we think we want, is at play here, but only tacitly so. We, meanwhile, are stuck in "a pernicious feedback loop," our searches quickly answered in a way that leaves us strangely unfulfilled.[27] There is little serendipity because our searches have started to turn up only ourselves. We rarely experience the excitement of Britomart looking in the mirror, or Guyon reuniting with Brigadore: of encountering something which feels deeply integral to the self, and at the same time miraculously other; something at once ancient and genuinely new.

To return to the scene of Guyon's faint in Book II: having delivered his message to the Palmer, Guyon's guardian angel stretches his "nimble wings" and vanishes "quite away" (II.viii.3.9). This is classic angel behaviour, but the abrupt vanishing also illustrates the complex interrelation of serendipity and allegory. The Palmer himself plays a wise, pseudo-angelic role; Guyon, as the angel says, is the Palmer's pupil. The compounding of guides at this point, and the Palmer's ability to discern the angel's voice directing his search, suggests that the angel's relation to the Palmer might straddle the binary of self and other: not quite reducible to the Palmer's conscience, and not quite the independent presence of the divine. *The Faerie Queene* continually

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[25] Reckoning and thinking are related but distinct processes, and at present this distinction still maps onto the difference between the human brain and the computer.

[26] This is, of course, the softer side of the harm dominant algorithms can cause. On the oppression of workers by algorithms in what is called the 'gig' economy, see Craig Gent, 'The Politics of Algorithmic Management: Class Composition and Everyday Struggle in Distribution Work', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Warwick: https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/132957/. See also Gent's book, forthcoming at the time of writing: *Cyberboss: The Rise of Algorithmic Management and the New Struggle for Control at Work* (London: Verso, 2024).

[27] Allison J.B. Cheney, Brandon Stewart and Barbara E. Engelhardt, "How Algorithmic Confounding in Recommendation Systems Increases Homogeneity and Decreases Utility," *Proceedings of the 12th ACM Conference* ["RecSys"] *on Recommender Systems* (ACM, 2018), 224-232, 224.

tempts us to resolve such ambiguities in our allegorical reading, to reinforce the boundaries of self and other by indexing a personage as merely an externalised part of one of the main characters. Allegory in this sense—a kind of reading which sucks the external figures and images of Fairyland back into the psyches of the questers—would seem to exist in tension with serendipity. If the external personages the poem's characters meet are really just figments of themselves, then the poem's serendipitous encounters are fake: Guyon rediscovering his horse is analogous to our stage-managed stumbling upon a perfect but creepily familiar coffee shop. Allegory becomes the recommender algorithm hiding behind all apparently miraculous stumbling.

But we should resist the temptation of this kind of allegorical reading, not just because of its nullifying of serendipitous encounters, but also because it ignores *The Faerie Queene*'s particular allegorical character. The "peculiar quality" of Spenser's allegory, Zurcher argues, is the "pervasively hypallactic relation it creates between persons and things" ("Writing at Hazard"). Here Zurcher adapts *hypallage*, the rhetorical figure by which a quality is displaced from its proper place: examples include "unhappy chances, cruel steel, rowsed couches" ("Writing at Hazard"). Spenserian allegory is "hypallactic" in that "substances are displaced by accidents... agents repeatedly find that their own substance is being revealed to them through an encounter with the accident of some thing." To think for an anthropocentric moment of Guyon's horse, Brigadore, as an object, we could see this process at work in the reconciliation of horse and rider: Guyon's substance is displaced from his own person onto an external accoutrement, separated from him by accident; in finding Brigadore, he recovers some of his lost selfhood. But the accidental quality of this reconciliation is key. Understood as the distribution of selfhood across a landscape the features of which are irreducible to a mere projection of that selfhood, Spenserian allegory emerges not as hostile to serendipity, but inherently generative of it. In Fairyland you can find yourself, but the finding will always be by accident: algorithmic determinism, like a wayfinding app in the Caucasus Mountains, doesn't really work.

Zurcher's argument, and his adaptation of *hypallage*, is focused on the displacement from the substances of persons onto the accidents of things. I have shown here how we might extend his argument to the relationship between a person and their favourite animal, and this prompts the question of whether Zurcher's *hypallage* could usefully illuminate the encounters between questing heroes and allegorical personifications. Guyon's faint follows his long tour of Mammon's house.

Harry Berger, in his celebrated study of Book II's allegorical encounters, stresses the voluntary nature of that tour: Guyon is motivated, Berger says, by "the hero's curiosity, his desire of novelty."[28] It never occurs to Guyon that the love of money embodied in Mammon might have anything to do with his own psyche. For critics, however, it's perilously easy to swing to the opposite extreme, and to dismiss Mammon as simply an externalized image of Guyon's own vice. Guyon's attitude, in Berger's account, is that of someone not looking for anything in particular; he briefly becomes a *flâneur*, seeking novelty as an end in itself. Conversely, critics who flatten Mammon's riches into a mere projection of Guyon's own potential vice see him governed by a determinism not unlike that of the recommender algorithm. According to serendipity studies, the space between these two positions—between indifferent drifting and forensic hunting, contingency and fate, random otherness and extreme selfhood—is where the great discoveries are made. It's also, I've argued here, the space in which Spenserian allegory operates.

Coda: On Research

When I started to think about this essay, I remembered a description I had read long ago, of *The Faerie Queene*'s "labyrinthine unsearchability." I couldn't remember the critic in question, only the phrase's slightly intimidating resonance. I had stumbled on it as an undergraduate, reading Spenser for the first time, trying to keep the episodes straight and at the same time let myself get lost in their entanglement. Years later, my computer holds hundreds (they feel like millions) of documents containing notes from reading (about) Spenser. But a simple Ctrl + F search cut through them, identifying the phrase in my undergraduate dissertation—and at last, quoted by Jan Karel Kouwenhoven in his book of 1983, the author: Alastair Fowler. For Spenser, says Fowler, "labyrinthine unsearchability is a desired effect."[29] The advent and advance of computer technology since Fowler's remark, published in 1977, have provided scholars with astonishingly powerful searching tools. Ripples of citation across publications, which once hid in plain sight on open stacks, can now be traced; references can be tracked down. The possibility of ruthlessly efficient tracking compounds the institutional pressure on humanities scholars to present their work as highly

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[28] This curiosity complements the particularly aristocratic form of temperance Guyon exemplifies, a sense of disinterested enclosure from the world. Harry Berger, *The Allegorical Temper: Vision and Reality in Book II of Spenser's Faerie Queene* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 20.

[29] Alastair Fowler, *Edmund Spenser*, for *Writers And Their Work* 258, ed. by Ian Scott Kilvert (Harlow: Longman for the British Council, 1977), 26.

methodical. Fortuitous stumbling is dressed up as methodical investigation; the mazy searching of a wide landscape becomes the forensic research of a wound. In an era of digital resources, the tools for searching electronic copies of the texts will only improve, exceeding the humble but useful "Find" function that might help a reader of a downloaded digital *Faerie Queene*. We should be careful not to allow this increase in efficiency to eliminate serendipity: not to forget the gradual, non-forensic kind of reading from which serendipitous discoveries are made. In that case *The Faerie Queene* would, on a deeper level, remain unsearchable.