A World of Woven Glass: Tapestries, Mirrors, and Pattern in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Book III

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The metaphor of weaving may aptly describe the craft of the poet as well as the intricacy of computational processes, yet its connection to both goes deeper. In the case of poetic composition, the connection obtains in the shared etymological root of "text" and "textile."[1] In the case of computational processes, the relationship goes back to the invention of the Jacquard loom, which provided inspiration for early computers as "the first binary-controlled production" machine, in which "binary-coded punched cards" were designed to operate looms.[2] In *The Faerie Queene*, Edmund Spenser presents himself as a weaver of words, offering, in his dedicatory sonnet to the Lord Grey of Wilton, his "Rude rymes, the which a rustick Muse did weaue… / …roughly wrought in an vnlearned Loome" (DS10 11-13).[3] Picking up on Spenser's self-characterization as a weaver, this article explores resonances between weaving, algorithmic processes, and poetic form in Spenser's poem. I am interested in *The Faerie Queene*'s metaphorical and literal use of tapestries, as well as mirrors, the reflective capacity of which resonates with

[1] Claire Sponsler, "Text and Textile: Lydgate's Tapestry Poems," *Medieval Fabrications: Dress, Textiles, Clothwork, and other Cultural Imaginings*, ed. E. Jane Burns (Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 19-34 (19).

[2] F. G. Heath, "Origins of the Binary Code," *Scientific American* 227.2 (1972): 76-83 (79).

[3] All quotations from *The Faerie Queene* follow *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A.C. Hamilton and others, 2nd edition (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007).

the shimmer of woven precious metals in the arras hangings of Book III and the pattern and variation of Spenser's verse form.

Spenser's use of tapestries and mirrors in Book III (literal, metaphorical, and poetic) highlights the role of procedure and process in poetic composition and is related to his investment in pattern more broadly. Throughout Book III, tapestries and mirrors are linked via their function and their reflection of Spenser's play with pattern. Weaving is an iterative process, but it also evokes the mirror's reflection in the way it links things together. This connection between tapestry and mirrors also has a historical basis. Laura Weigert writes that wall tapestries were often juxtaposed with mirrors "strategically placed" to fill in the spaces between hangings "with a reflection of figures situated in adjacent tapestries." The use of the mirror thus links figures from one tapestry to other tapestries in the room, effectively "weaving" tapestries together from wall to wall.[4]

In *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser links tapestries with mirrors by highlighting the mirror-like quality of the tapestry in the castle of Busirane. To be precise, it is an arras; woven into it are precious metals, which Spenser emphasizes are remarkably reflective: "That the rich metall lurked priuily… / Yet here, and there, and euery where vnwares / It shewd it selfe" (III.xi.28.4-7). Similar language of mirrors and reflection plays an important role in Spenser's address to Elizabeth I in the *Proem* to Book III. "Ne let his fayrest *Cynthia* refuse, / In mirrours more than one her selfe to see," Spenser writes before he compares Elizabeth I to different figures (III proem 5.5-6). Elizabeth I, while she views her selves in Spenser's mirrors, is herself described as a mirror. As Robin Headlam Wells writes, Spenser praises Elizabeth as a portrait of the ideal ruler which would "serve as a pattern of conduct for her courtiers."[5] Elizabeth is both mirror and mirrored; both she and *The Faerie Queene* serve as patterns for courtiers to follow. *The Faerie Queene* takes up the multiple meanings of pattern, both as it relates to moral exempla and to intricately woven tapestries. Spenser's emphasis on pattern evokes not only his play with weaving and mirroring but also the procedural nature of algorithms. It similarly evokes Spenser's poetic process, as he aims to follow both the pattern of Elizabeth I and the pattern of his own complicated verse form.

[4] Laura Weigert, "Chambres d'amour: Tapestries of Love and the Texturing of Space," *Oxford Art Journal*, 31.3 (2008): 317-336 (325).
[5] Robin Headlam Wells, *Spenser's Faerie Queene and the Cult of Elizabeth* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), 5.

Spenser opens Book III by directly addressing the Queen and offering not one mirror, but many:

> But either *Gloriana* let her chuse,
> Or in *Belphoebe* fashioned to bee:
> In th'one her rule, in th'other her rare chastitee
>
> (III proem 5.7-9)

This use of multiple mirrors is in part a response to the poetic anxiety introduced at the beginning of the proem: both the difficulty ("So hard a workemanship") of depicting the sovereign and the risk of tainting "her perfections with his error" (III proem 2). It is fitting that Spenser highlights weaving throughout his poem which strives to be a reflection of the sovereign, since, as Rebecca Olson has discussed, English monarchs frequently displayed tapestries at public events as a kind of "visual rhetoric" with which to impress their subjects.[6] At the same time, Spenser carefully distances himself from such grandeur when he says in the tenth dedicatory sonnet that he weaves using an "vnlearned Loome" (DS10 11-13) and when he describes himself in the proem to Book III as an "Apprentice of the skill," conscious of possible presumption—"so high to stretch mine humble quill" (III proem 3). This presumption may be related both to portraying the virtue of chastity, which his sovereign embodies, and to the fact that the queen is herself a poet and presents herself as a poet-monarch.[7] In diminishing his own skill as a poet-artist, Spenser may subtly be praising hers by comparison and acknowledging the risk of addressing his poem to a sovereign noted both for chastity and for poetry. As A.C. Hamilton points out, Spenser offers the queen only a "shadow," an "imperfect image" (*FQ* 288). He may shadow her in the sense of portraying her while also in the sense of emulating her, following her rule as well as the example established by her verse. (And as Jennifer Summit notes, Elizabeth I also followed the example of other "poet-monarchs" such as James I of Scotland and Henry VIII, even as she differentiated herself from their gendered personae in important ways [*The Arte of a Ladies Penne* 398].) This double meaning resonates with Spenser's emphasis on the need for many mirrors to portray the different aspects of the queen in the same interwoven, composite portrait as well as the formal pattern he follows in his

[6] Rebecca Olson, *Arras Hanging: The Textile That Determined Early Modern Literature and Drama* (University of Delaware Press, 2013), 29.

[7] Jennifer Summit, "'The Arte of a Ladies Penne': Elizabeth I and the Poetics of Queenship," *English Literary Renaissance*, 26.3 (1996): 395-422 (396).

stanzas. Spenser, as poet-weaver, must follow two kinds of predetermined patterns: one determined by Elizabeth I and the other, his stanza form, determined by himself.

Nowhere is the pattern more intricate than in the weaving of the Spenserian stanza, in which sonic variation tangles with Spenser's fixed form. The self-conscious "wovenness" of Spenser's poetics links him to the same tradition as that of a poet like John Lydgate, whose tapestry poems, as Claire Sponsler notes, "point to the various material shapes a text could take, whether it be writing, pictorial image, or performance" (*Lydgate's Tapestry* 20). Unlike Lydgate, who wrote several poems "designed to accompany pictorial representations" including "statues, wall hangings, tableaux, or frescoes" (*Lydgate's Tapestry* 24), Spenser weaves together text with textile within *The Faerie Queene* itself. The textiles that accompany Book III are woven out of words, while evoking the "textured" walls created by tapestries that Weigert describes (*Tapestries of Love* 326)—and, as a weaver, Spenser uses his formal procedure to create the texture of his lines, combining variable like sounds with his complex rhyme scheme (326).

The tapestry in the castle of Busirane covers all the walls, enveloping the viewer: "round about, the walls yclothed were" (III.xi.28.1). This overwhelming arrangement of tapestries is typical of the period, and yet, as Weigert argues, the physical presence of arras hangings in a room are frequently neglected in art historical discussions of tapestries (325). Early modern tapestries would have covered "almost every available wall surface in the room" (*Tapestries of Love* 326). The tapestry's materials only heighten this effect. Spenser emphasizes both the extent to which the tapestries cover the walls and the reflective power of the metals woven into them:

> For round about, the walls yclothed were
> With goodly arras of great majesty,
> Wouen with gold and silke so close and nere,
> That the rich metall lurked priuily,
> As faining to be hidd from enuious eye;
> Yet here, and there, and euery where vnwares
> It shewd it selfe, and shone vnwillingly;
> Like to a discolourd Snake, whose hidden snares
> Through the greene gras his long bright burnisht back declares.
>
> (III.xi.28.1-9)

Spenser highlights the extent to which the woven metal both hides and shines in spite of itself. The tapestry gleams, but the gold is woven so close with the silk that the eye can

detect only the light it reflects. In this way the tapestry resembles a mirror and overwhelms Britomart's senses, much like the tapestry rooms Weigert describes. This combined with the fact that the tapestry covers the walls "round about," enveloping the viewer, explains the room's impact on Britomart: "The whiles the passing brightnes her fraile sences dazd" (III.xi.49.9).

As Rachel Eisendrath argues in her study of the tapestry description, the "immersive experience of art" that Britomart encounters in the tapestry is reflected in the Spenser's own "immersive poetics."[8] This immersion is linked to the danger of the human imagination, which is invoked both in the tapestry and in the poet-weaver's recreation of it; Eisendrath writes that "the poetry of the tapestry itself is insidious" because it suspends proper judgment and blurs boundaries (*Art and Objectivity* 136-37)—between the "gold and silke" woven so "close and nere" that they cannot be differentiated (III.xi.28.1-9), and between subject and object which is contrasted by the detachment recommended by Francis Bacon and others (*Art and Objectivity* 133-35). This kind of detachment, which prioritizes "epistemological objectivity," emphasizes distancing oneself from the object of observation (*Art and Objectivity* 133), in contrast to the entanglement that we see in the themes and materials of the Ovidian tapestry, which Eisendrath discusses, and in Spenser's own poetic weaving. In depicting this dangerously dazzling arras of silk and gold, Spenser weaves a tapestry out of words, as overwhelming as the tapestry it describes. He does so both through fixed patterns in his stanzas and through variable combinations of like sounds in his lines. Sonic repetitions—alliteration, consonance, internal and end rhyme—call to mind visible reflections, evoking the formal capacities of visual phenomena—woven tapestry and mirrors—through language.

This combination of consistent pattern and variation atop it is part of what makes Spenser's verse, like the arras, dazzling and even at times overwhelming. J.B. Lethbridge suggests that the "dominating characteristic [of *The Faerie Queene*'s verse-form] is repetition of many and varied sorts,"[9] while William Empson describes the Spenserian stanza's combination of "variety" and "fixity."[10] We see this quality in the stanza's interplay between variable internal rhyme and the end rhyme established by its pattern

[8] Rachel Eisendrath, "Art and Objectivity in the House of Busirane," *Spenser Studies* 27 (2012): 133-161 (133, 135).

[9] J. B. Lethbridge, "The Poetry of *The Faerie Queene*," *Spenser in the Moment*, ed. Paul J. Hecht and J.B. Lethbridge (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 2015), 169-216 (187).

[10] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1953), 34.

when Spenser describes the reflection of light in the arras: "Yet here, and there, and euery where vnwares" (III.xi.28.6). This line is bursting with four instances of internal rhyme (here/there/where/-wares), almost one for every stressed syllable, almost one for every foot. The internal rhyme is woven into the meter itself, a variable pattern atop the fixed pattern of Spenser's stanza form. Here, Spenser furthers the parallel between weaving and writing, his tapestry and his poem, evoking again his description of himself as a weaver in the tenth dedicatory sonnet.

We see Spenser's investment in variation atop a fixed pattern not only within stanzas but also in the spaces in between them. Theresa Krier writes about the importance of the intervals in between the stanzas of *The Faerie Queene*, which create their own varied rhythm.[11] Their placement varies relative to the plot: sometimes occurring at a natural break, sometimes interrupting the action. While they provide closure at an expected point, Spenser varies this as well; Krier highlights several moments when Spenser places an interval in the middle of the action (*Time Lords* 7). We see this variation in Spenser's description of the tapestry in the castle of Busirane; in most cases, individual scenes are each allotted one stanza, as if we moved with the stanzas from section to section. However, at times, one stanza describes multiple scenes, such as stanza thirty-four which describes two scenes featuring Jove ("Twise was he seene in soaring Eagles shape" [III.xi.34.1]). In other cases one scene will take up multiple stanzas, as with the depiction of Neptune, when Spenser devotes a stanza to both Neptune's appearance and to the glittering of the waves (III.xi.40-41). In combining variation (through internal rhyme, like sounds, and stanza intervals) and fixity (through his stanza form), Spenser calls to mind processes of weaving, and algorithms through procedure and iteration.

An aspect of poetic composition that resonates most with algorithms in their general sense is the procedural nature of form, particularly rhyme. Spenser's stanza, more than most poetic forms, calls attention to the demands and restrictions of its procedure. Lethbridge argues that "Spenser's stanza is almost suffocatingly restrictive."[12] Yet what emerges for Lethbridge is the "freedom" Spenser exercises within this scheme (*Bondage of Rhyme* 77), his balancing of pattern with variation. While Spenser largely suppresses

[11] Theresa Krier, "Time Lords: Rhythm and Interval in Spenser's Stanzaic Narrative." *Spenser Studies* 21 (2006): 1-19 (6).

[12] J. B. Lethbridge, "The Bondage of Rhyme in *The Faerie Queene*: Moderate 'this Ornament of Rhyme'." *A Concordance to the Rhymes of the Faerie Queene With Two Studies of Spenser's Rhymes*, ed. Richard Danson Brown and J.B. Lethbridge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 76-180 (77).

rhyme, drawing attention away from the poem's surface to its matter, Lethbridge concedes that this suppression also provides opportunities for "the highlighting of rhyme when it seems good for it to be leant on somewhat" (*Bondage of Rhyme* 77). One such example occurs in Spenser's description of the tapestry in the castle of Busirane, wherein fixed procedural end rhyme joins with dazzling, variable internal rhyme and like sounds to highlight the surface, making something so dazzling that the viewer forgets what they are looking at. This raises the moral danger of a certain kind of tapestry, and a certain kind of poetry: their capacity to "[ensnare] the subject in the object," as Eisendrath puts it (*Art and Objectivity* 136).

The formal inputs that poets establish for themselves inevitably influence the outputs, and the resulting work becomes something of a negotiation between poets and their forms. In Spenser's case, Jeff Dolven argues, it is the sufficiently high "incidence of conformity" that makes the moments when "expectation is violated—or transcended" more meaningful.[13] Through this process, the form can lead the poet to surprises even as the poet shapes and reshapes the form. Indeed, this is one of the affordances of form; in letting go of complete control over the output, a poet finds that constraints can lead to new formulations, phrasings, and sound combinations. An algorithmic reading of Spenser may emphasize the extent to which a formal procedure establishes a kind of pattern for thought, one capable of complicating poetic intention. And yet, as Dolven has shown, that pattern is flexible; while Spenser's unique form establishes some conventions—the medial turn, the closure of the final line—"there are plenty [of stanzas] that defy these structural generalizations" (*Spenser's Stanza* 23). The writer of the Spenserian stanza, like the weaver of tapestries, follows a procedure of their own making, one which leads them as much as they lead it.

I would like to close by examining a scene from the tapestry in which the poetry gleams just like the arras, in which words become the shining metal in the arras in the castle of Busirane, and considering further the connection between tapestry and poem. In his poetic description of Neptune on the waves, the water glitters like gold:

> His seahorses did seeme to snort amayne,
> And from their nosethrilles blow the brynie streame,
> That made the sparckling waues to smoke agayne,

[13] Jeff Dolven, "The Method of Spenser's Stanza," *Spenser Studies* 19 (2004): 17-25 (23).

> And flame with gold, but the white fomy creame,
> Did shine with siluer, and shoot forth his beame.
>
> (III.xi.41.1-5)

Spenser's evocation of the gleaming gold woven into the arras conjures the materiality of tapestry, echoing his description of the tapestry's effect on the viewer. Is this passage meant to daze the reader's senses just as the arras in the castle of Busirane dazes Britomart's? This tapestry only exists in language, but it shines; it is Spenser's tapestry of words which is woven with gold language: "sparckling," "flame," "gold," "shine," "silver," "beame." Spenser sonically weaves together fixed and variable words to highlight the glittering surface of the tapestry/poem; the rhyme established by the formal pattern combines with Spenser's own variation of like sounds. For example, though "flame" is not part of the end rhyme scheme, it off-rhymes with "streame," "creame," and "beame," furthering the link between words evoking the sparkling waves that the end-rhyme has established. Similarly, the words "fomy" and "seeme," continue the thread of "m" sounds. Spenser's language becomes like a bright arras, a mirror, a reflective surface that takes on the visuality he describes through sound. As if to remove any doubt about Spenser's intentions in weaving together tapestry and poetry, Spenser refers twice to what is "writ" in the tapestry (III xi 30.1, III xi 39.9). As Hamilton points out, "writ" can mean "drawn," and in this case it can imply it being "drawn, i.e., woven" (*FQ* 393). Spenser's use of "writ," with its connection to drawing, and writing words in particular, is noteworthy when we account for what Sponsler describes as the relationship between writing and weaving in this period, when words often accompanied or were woven into or painted onto tapestries (*Lydgate's Tapestry* 22)—much like the words (such as "*Be bolde, be bolde*") that Spenser also describes as having been "writ" (III.xi.54.2-3). Like everything depicted in the arras, he implies that his own poetic description is "lively writ" (III.xi.39.9).

Returning to Eisendrath's analysis, by associating the craft of weaving to the craft of poetry, Spenser introduces the idea that his poetic weaving is capable not only of the same liveliness but also of the same "insidious" influence of Ovidian tapestry (*Art and Objectivity* 136). Eisendrath highlights Spenser's ambivalent treatment of this dangerous aesthetic immersion; he revels in it while rejecting it (*Art and Objectivity* 135). So beauty and anxiety intermingle in this poetic description, which Spenser introduces by

connecting his poem with the arras and its gleaming "snares" (III.xi.28.8). Spenser links his poetry to the danger implied by the tapestry in the castle of Busirane, its resemblance to the snare of the snake. This calls to mind the anxiety of poetic composition, similar to that expressed in the proem to Book III. The intricacy of Spenser's work here is dazzling, but what does it mean to be overwhelmed by this vivid depiction of the "snares" of desire (III.xi.28.8) and the ensuing violence of the Ovidian narratives that the tapestry depicts? It is a gendered violence, like the labor of weaving and the language of mirrors that Spenser uses to address his queen. He describes Phoebus as both literally "enwoven" in the tapestry and figuratively "enwouen" by desire (III.xi.36.2). Both Britomart and the poem's reader view this tapestry; this raises the question of the danger of the reader, ostensibly intended to learn from and imitate a pattern/mirror of virtue in *The Faerie Queene*, to be both enwoven in and ensnared by the poem. Is this tapestry, with its reflective surface that is likened to a "[snare]" (III xi 28.8), a "cautionary" mirror for the subject, like the cautionary mirrors offered to rulers in the period?[14] Wells comments that "Spenser's method is to portray good 'by paragone / Of evill'," a mirror reflecting a virtue by means of its opposite (*Cult of Elizabeth* 93). Spenser layers both an aesthetic commentary on art and weaving with moral commentary for those seeking to imitate a pattern of virtue.

Weaving and poetry become metaphors for the power of Spenser's complicated notion of love, both in its positive and negative iterations. Similarly, Spenser emphasizes the power of poetry/weaving even while emphasizing what Eisendrath refers to as the corrupting influence of its opposite, the potential for poetry to lead readers to suspend their proper judgment (*Art of Objectivity* 137). As Linda Gregerson points out, this potential for danger relates to political concerns in Elizabethan England after the Reformation. The "verbal image" often posed as much a concern as the visual; like images, words "were suspect of waylaying the human imagination," of being idols (*Reformation of the Subject* 3). Spenser introduces the idea that poetry is potentially beautiful or dangerous depending on the patterns informing it. This speaks to the political stakes of Spenser's project, his creating a pattern of virtue informed by the model of the sovereign, and his creating a formal pattern for himself. Spenser can claim that his poem offers a

[14] Linda Gregerson, *The Reformation of the Subject: Spenser, Milton, and the English Protestant Epic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 6.

mirror of virtue, since it is informed by the pattern established by Elizabeth I. Yet it is politically dangerous to portray her virtue when the same craft that creates this mirror may mislead readers.

Is there a similar danger in the idea of moral exempla in general? The depiction of the pattern may so dazzle that readers forget to look inward rather than outward to follow it, making Elizabeth I an idol rather than an exemplar. What is at stake in the idea of moral imitation in Spenser's project? Colin Burrow writes about the complexity of poetic imitation in relation to the question of machine-generated poetry:

> Do poems aim to delight? To instruct? To outrage? To rhyme? To do to Horace what Horace did to Alcaeus? To mimic the deconstruction of consciousness? To perform a radical transformation of the conventions of the genre epigram? To take your breath away? These possible goals are not only multiple but in many cases incommensurable.[15]

The intricacy of composition complicates the question of poetic imitation. We see this complexity in Spenser's riff on Ovid in his poetic depiction of the tapestry, which revels in the Ovidian surface while presenting it as an entrancing warning to the viewer (*Art and Objectivity* 135). Spenser uses Ovid to stage a moral question in a poem whose goal is to hold up a mirror, a moral pattern for Elizabeth's subjects to imitate. Moral imitation, like poetic imitation, is fraught with complications. What does it mean for Elizabeth I's subjects to imitate her? If the courtly subject wishes to imitate the sovereign, they are faced with a similar problem to that described by Spenser when he acknowledges his presumption in attempting to depict the queen in the first place ("so high to stretch mine humble quill" [III proem 3.3]). What does it mean for Spenser's poem to delight and instruct such an audience? Both formally and politically, Spenser's investment in patterning provides complicated and ambivalent guidance.

As with the many mirrors for Elizabeth, the intricate weaving of *The Faerie Queene* asks readers to be cognizant of many layers simultaneously, both reflecting the patterns that have informed it and offering itself as a pattern for others. An algorithmic reading of Spenser invites an analysis that attends to the balance between pattern and variation, as well as its formal and political stakes, with regard both to the output of Spenser's tapestry

[15] Colin Burrow, *Imitating Authors: Plato to Futurity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 416.

and to the patterns that have shaped it, both poetic patterns and patterns of conduct. In highlighting these patterns, Spenser leads readers back to his own process. We glimpse this process through a web of reflective surfaces. *The Faerie Queene* is like the mirror in which Britomart first sees her beloved: "like to the world it selfe," it seems "a world of glas" (III.ii.19.9).