Tab. IV.

"blotte," "iott," "gobbet," "lumpe": Algorithmic Uncertainty in *The Faerie Queene*

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Midway through the second canto of Book IV, Spenser pauses to inform us that he will complete Chaucer's famously unfinished "Squire's Tale." The temporary digression frames Spenser's own *poiesis* as a filial endeavour, affirming his legitimacy as heir to "Dan *Chaucer*," that "well of English vndefyled" (IV.ii.32.8-9).[1] For good measure, Spenser invokes further Chaucerian precedent—the second stanza of *Anelida and Arcite*—in which the act of rewriting is also a release from the forces of time, "That elde, whych all can frete and byte / And it hath freten many a noble story / Hath nygh deuoured out of our memorye."[2] Where Chaucer stresses time's "byte," Spenser uses "bits" to emphasize not only the effect of hungry invertebrates but the fragmented waste of material decay:

> But wicked Time that all good thoughts doth waste,
> And workes of noblest wits to nought out weare,
> That famous moniment hath quite defaste,
> And robd the world of threasure endlesse deare,
> The which mote haue enriched all vs heare.
> O cursed Eld the cankerworme of writs,
> How may these rimes, so rude as doth appeare,

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[1] All quotations from Spenser's epic follow A.C. Hamilton et al., ed., Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 2nd edition (London: Pearson Education [Longman], 2007).

[2] Geoffrey Chaucer, "Of quene Annelida and false Arcite," *The Workes of Geffray Chaucer* (London: 1542), fo.cc.lxxxvi.

> Hope to endure, sith workes of heauenly wits,
> Are quite deuoured, and brought to nought by little bits?

(IV.ii.33)

Though Spenser here laments the violent fate of unremembered stories, he himself, like both "wicked Time" and the somewhat more diminutive "cankerworme," has rendered Chaucer's "workes" into "little bits," extracted from their original context and grafted into Spenser's poem. The passage, in its echo of Chaucer's *Anelida*, is itself one of these pieces of text. In the next stanza, Spenser modestly figures his continuation of "The Squire's Tale" as an act of both care and theft—"That I thy labours lost may thus reuiue, / And steale from thee the meede of thy due merit" (IV.ii.34.2-3). This rhetorical move continues Spenser's playful comparison between Chaucer's poetic skill and his own, in which Chaucer's "warlike numbers and Heroicke sound" march with mathematical precision across the page, while Spenser's verse follows behind as a disordered assemblage of organic waste (IV.ii.32.7).[3] Yet the transformation of "heauenly wits" into "little bits" enacted by the concluding couplet above also hints at the possibility of renewal, rather than destruction: the residual "bits" are also the compositional material of *The Faerie Queene*, and it is their generative vitality that allows the poem to surpass Chaucer's influence.

While the passage above forms an elaborate, albeit conventional, modesty *topos*, it also, I argue, provides crucial insight into the way *The Faerie Queene* works. Though this may be unsurprising given that Spenser's interjection occurs in a notoriously self-reflexive book invested in, as Lauren Silberman puts it, the "examination of textual process," I turn to the language of "bits" to explore the messier, incremental, and contradictory features of the poem's mechanisms.[4]

Spenser offers a language of poetic "bits" not unlike that of computer programming today, in which a "bit" signifies the smallest possible unit of data.[5] In binary code, a "bit" corresponds to a single digit of 0 or 1, while "bytes" and "megabytes" correspond to eight

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[3] For Spenser's playful, rather than anxious, engagement with Chaucer, see Ayesha Ramachandran, "Allegories of Influence: Spenser, Chaucer and Italian Romance," *MLN* 135 (2020): 1094-1107.

[4] Lauren Silberman, *Transforming Desire: Erotic Knowledge in Books III and IV of the Faerie Queene* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 88. For Silberman, these are moments "in which the text's own procedures are taken apart and presented as part of the story." See also James Nohrnberg, "The Faerie Queene, Book IV," *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, edited by A.C. Hamilton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990): 274-80.

[5] *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, "bit, n.4."

and sixty-four "bits," respectively.[6] In brief: when strung together, a sequence of "bits" will form a code which, when processed by a computer, translates into intelligible data (files, photographs, videos, etc.). In their 1999 essay "Deformance and Interpretation," Lisa Samuels and Jerome McGann suggest that such computational analogies allow us to interrogate "the elemental forms of meaning" that often remain invisible even to scholars, ranging from "the rules for character formation," to "the structural forms of words, phrases, and higher morphemic and phonemic units."[7] Together, they assert, these elements "comprise the operating system of language, the basis that drives and supports the front-end software" (35). McGann expands this analogy in *Radiant Textuality*, where he suggests that attending to "the constructed character of textuality" will productively shift our conception of texts from "vehicles of meaning" to "sets of instantiated rules and algorithms for generating and controlling themselves and for constructing further sets of transmissional possibilities."[8] If McGann's analogy risks sounding decisively *un*poetic, he clarifies that the "semantic materials" used to construct a work are neither predetermined nor essentialized "units of atomized meaning," but rather the "instantiated instructions for playing a certain language game" (150). Whereas "algorithm" has historically referred to either numerical counting or mathematical calculation, computational algorithms today are more adaptive and expansive, producing an impression of creative autonomy.[9] Likewise, McGann explains that a human-authored text generates interpretive possibilities because its rules "are being repeatedly reread (i.e., executed), whether the reader is conscious of this or not" (138). A poem may accord with an underlying rationale, but its language is also slippery and evasive, its interpretation almost impossible to fully control.

For Spenser's poem, the algorithmic logic of input and output might be theorized at the level of both form and narrative. The Spenserian stanza (*ababbcbcc*) can be read as a computational rule. In this conceptual model, whatever Spenser desires to write must conform to the conditions of rhyme and meter in what Jeff Dolven has termed "a kind of

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[6] In a wonderful play on words that recalls Spenser's own substitution of "bite" and "bit," the "nibble" or "nybl" is equivalent to half a "byte," or four "bits."

[7] Lisa Samuels and Jerome McGann, "Deformance and Interpretation," *New Literary History* 30.1 (Winter 1999), 35.

[8] Jerome McGann, *Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 2; 138.

[9] *OED* "algorithm," n.1. For an informative discussion of the ways that artificial intelligence has shifted the possibilities of computational algorithms, making them seem more creative and self-generating, see Avery Slater, "Automating Origination: Perspectives from the Humanities," *The Oxford Handbook of Ethics and AI*, edited by Markus D. Dubber, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 521-537.

architecture for thinking" (the first line must rhyme with the third, the second with the fourth, fifth, and seventh, and so on).[10] Even the poem's narrative structure, as a "continued Allegory, or darke conceit," might be read as a code that regularly resolves its composite narrative particulars into a coherent whole.[11] It is thus common in Spenser scholarship to identify in Spenser's poem certain fundamental "narrative unit[s]," to borrow from William Empson, by which it achieves formal and narratological coherence.[12] Any one of these "units"—be it a line, stanza, or moment—could be considered "bits" in today's sense, with the poem's various underlying patterns acting as an organizational code.[13] In coding, however, bits are expected to run awry, and programmers will ensure that their codes include *different* codes specifically designed for error detection and correction. The "cyclic redundancy check" method, for example, involves including "a certain number of check bits" so a given system can "ascertain with a certain degree of probability that an error occurred in transmission."[14] If left unchecked, an errant "bit" can have dire consequences for a code's message, just as a poem might be "brought to naught" by forces beyond its control including, as Spenser worries in his Letter to Raleigh, readerly "misconstructions" (714). In what follows, I examine the role of uncertainty and inconsistency in the House of Holiness by tracing how the textual and material "bits" extracted from Redcrosse might offer insight into the poem's own algorithmic mechanisms.

I.

As one of the culminating episodes of Book I, Redcrosse's rehabilitation in the House of Holiness is an important moment for *The Faerie Queene*'s readers, both within the poem and outside of it. The episode frames the knight's spiritual healing within a larger revelation of "The wondrous workmanship of Gods owne mould" (I.x.42.6) and the Neoplatonist mechanisms of Spenser's poetics, which he describes in "An Hymne in

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[10] Jeff Dolven, "Spenser's Metrics." In *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser*, edited by Richard A. McCabe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 392.

[11] Edmund Spenser, "Letter to Raleigh," *The Faerie Queene*, edited by A.C. Hamilton et al., 2nd edition (London: Pearson Education [Longman], 2007), 714.

[12] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 2nd edition (London: Chatto and Windus, 1949), 33.

[13] See Jeff Dolven, "The Method of Spenser's Stanza," *Spenser Studies* 19 (2004): 17-25, and Gordon Teskey, *Spenserian Moments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

[14] See Henry S. Warren Jr., *Hacker's Delight*, 2nd edition (New Jersey: Addison-Wesley Press, 2013), chapters 14 and 15.

Honour of Beautie" as "ma[d]e" from a "perfect mould."[15] This idea of a poetic "mould" from which *The Faerie Queene* is shaped creates an impression of inevitability, unity, and, as Namratha Rao has recently observed, "systematicity" that lends coherence and meaning to even the most confusing moments of Spenser's poem.[16] If, for Spenser, reading the poem also involves learning how to read it *properly* (such that, as Catherine Nicholson contends, he "persistently identifies hermeneutic skill with heroic action"), the canto's final lesson in *Contemplation* seems to suggest that we, alongside Redcrosse, will overcome the perils of error, falsehood, and misinterpretation by learning to "redd aright" (I.x.67.3).[17]

Before achieving his full hermeneutic potential, the "diseased" and "blamefull" Redcrosse must, after the spiritual and physical "corruption" of the preceding cantos, be "pluck'd" and "purg'd" by a team of allegorical surgeons (I.x.26-27). What follows is at first glance a conventional, if not unimaginative, allegory: the "Leach" summoned for the knight is really the virtue *Patience*, "apply[ing] relief" in the form of both "salues and med'cines" and "wordes of wondrous might" (I.x.24.4-6).[18] The regimen provides Redcrosse with the strength not just to heal, but to "endur[e]," which gives meaning to his suffering and allows for his eventual transcendence, "repentance, and / the way to heauenly blesse" (I.x.24.9; I.x.*argument*). The ideal bodily and cosmic order represented by the knight's "[w]Holiness" is achieved surgically by the extraction of "Inward corruption, and infected sin" that "festring sore did ranckle yett within" (I.x.25.2-4):

> In ashes and sackcloth he did array
>   His daintie corse, proud humors to abate,
>   And dieted with fasting euery day,
>   The swelling of his woundes to mitigate,
>   And made him pray both earely and eke late:
>   And euer as superfluous flesh did rott
>   *Amendment* readie still at hand did wayt,
>   To pluck it out with pincers fyrie whott,
> That soone in him was lefte no one corrupted iott.

(I.x.26)

Despite the poem's insistence that "soone in him was lefte no one corrupted iott," the following stanza reveals that this sense of unity and order is difficult to maintain: "bitter *Penaunce*" must "with an yron whip…disple euery day," and "sad *Repentance*" must "The filthy blottes of sin…wash away" (I.x.27.1-2, 5-7). The ostensibly extracted "iott[s]"—an ambiguous mixture of both spiritual "sin" and diseased "flesh"—return as "drops" and "blottes" which are just as "corrupted" as before. On one level, the problem of persistent matter is conducive to the allegorical structure of the canto: spiritual doubt and despair are not easily overcome. Yet the scene repeatedly draws attention to these residual pieces that "behind remained still" (I.x.25.3), threatening to undermine the relationship between the passage's allegorical meaning and the material it describes.

As a proverbial expression of absence, the "iott" or "jot" was used to represent the smallest quantity imaginable—equivalent to, as John Florio suggests in his *Worlde of Wordes* (1598), "a whit, a mite, a crum," "a drop, a drizzle," "a pins head," and "a trifle, a thing of nothing."[19] The "iott," however, also signified a small pen mark or piece of a letter; in Florio's terms, "a tittle in writing" (727). The morphemic potential contained within Spenser's "iott" reminds us that we are reading printed text. Moreover, the inky language of "drops" and "blottes"—though ostensibly of "blood" and "sin"—extends the metafictional significance of the "iott" beyond its initial alexandrine. The term "blotte" is particularly evocative of the processes of writing and even printing: in Thomas Elyot's Latin-English *Dictionarie* (1538), for instance, "Litura" is "a blottynge or stryke through that, whiche is writen" and "Obliteratio" the "scrapynge or blottynge oute of a worde."[20] Moreover, in "extirp[ing]" the "cause and root of all his ill," the allegory foregrounds how root words generate wordplay so central to Spenser's own poetic patterning. Root, in its mutation as "rott" (sixteenth-century orthographic variations of "root" included both "roott" and "rott"), gestures towards its role as a morpheme, "a base from which words are formed by means of affixation or other modification" (I.x.26.6).[21] Rhetorically, the term both invokes and performs *traductio*, which George Puttenham describes as "when

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[19] John Florio, *Worlde of Wordes,* ed. Hermann W. Haller (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 273; 278; 453; 108; 727. See also *OED* "jot," n.1.

[20] Thomas Elyot, *The Dictionarie of syr Thomas Eiyot knyght* (London: 1538), Pii^v.

[21] *OED*, "Root, n.1." This earliest recorded use of this definition is 1530.

ye turn and translace a word into many sundry shapes," and Henry Peacham characterizes as "an vnprofitable and wearysome repetition of all one word, or an irksome rehearsall and often doublyng of one matter."²² This "irksome…doublyng" also produces new poetic "matter"—that is, words and meaning—through the proliferation of alternate spellings and additional suffixes or prefixes. As Bethany Dubow explains in her analysis of the "organic character" of Spenser's verse, Spenser's repeated return to polyptoton is "an expression of the mutability and generativity of [his] linguistic forms," forming unruly "networks of alliteration" beyond stanzaic divisions.²³ Indeed, over the course of the five stanzas describing Redcrosse's mortification, words seem to divide and multiply, reappearing lines later in new forms: "corruption" (I.x.25.2) shortens to "corrupted" (I.x.26.9), "streightway" (I.x.23.6) narrows into "streight" (I.x.25.9), "diet" (I.x.25.9) lengthens into "dieted" (I.x.26.3), "sinfull" (I.x.23.3) contracts into "sin" (I.x.25.2), "yet" (I.x.25.1) expands ever so slightly into "yett" (I.x.25.4), and so on. The effect is claustrophobic, as if the repeated root words are themselves reluctant to sustain the narrative's progression. When read as metafictional reflections on the materiality of the text, the irregular and disorderly "iott[s]"—in both their material and morphemic senses—suggest not the controlled forms of binary code or the algorithmic patterning of a "perfect mould," but instead the inherent vitality of Spenser's language as it mutates, regresses, and expands, generating further, potentially unpredictable poetic connections.²⁴

Traditionally, algorithms are designed to produce a specific result that can be achieved only insofar as its rules are maintained. An errant "bit" indicates a lapse that must be corrected and controlled, just as Redcrosse's proliferating "corruption" must be eradicated by dutiful surgeons. In his seminal reading of the purgation of Redcrosse, David Lee Miller suggests that the episode at once produces and defers a fantasy of somatic wholeness which functions synecdochally as Spenser's own desire for "wholeness" within his poem, that is, for "perfection in terms of access to a spiritual body replete with truth."²⁵ By this logic, the poem is a system always working towards its own

²² Puttenham, George, *The Art of English Poesy,* ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 288; Peacham, Henry, *The Garden of Eloquence* (London, 1577), Iiiiᵛ; Fiiiʳ, *EEBO*: http://myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fbooks%2Fgarden-eloquence-conteyning-figures-grammer%2Fdocview%2F2264193459%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14771.
²³ Bethany Dubow, "Toadstool Poetics: Alliteration in *The Faerie Queene*," *Spenser Studies* 36 (2022), 119.
²⁴ Dubow's emphasis on the language "toadstool" rather than "honeycomb" to describe Spenser's verse patterns is also helpful here: the term "mould" suggests at once orderly pattern and unruly fungal growth.
²⁵ David Lee Miller, *The Poem's Two Bodies: The Poetics of the 1590 Faerie Queene* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 71.

completion, and Spenser's material "bits" are ideologically necessary only insofar as they represent what must be expelled. But the poem also often works against its own closure so that, as Patricia Parker elucidates, "'Meaning' is deferred in order to leave room for the crucial act of reading, which does not necessarily lead to a single end."[26] In this vein, the poem's "bits" might count as products of its dilatory mode, further frustrating the "potentially compulsive teleology" of interpretive certainty (100). Yet, in my reading, these bits do not so much refuse closure as allow for interpretive possibility. The residual matter of "iott[s]" and "blottes," then, share an affinity to what Namratha Rao has termed "narrative waste" as "that which fails to be resolved" ("Ground Plots" 220). For Rao, this "waste" neither affirms nor disrupts narrative order and allegorical meaning, but instead serves as evidence of process and thinking, of an "invention that endeavours to show its indebtedness to, and implication in, what is other than itself" (249).[27] While such "bits"—both material and textual—certainly convey a sense of hesitancy regarding totalizing narratives, they also, as my analysis now turns to show, allow Spenser to represent the elements of *The Faerie Queene*'s creation that remain beyond his control.

II.

Moments before what can only be described as a major surgical procedure, we are told that *Patience* applies both "salues and med'cines" and "wordes of wondrous might" to heal Redcrosse (I.x.24.5-6). Though topical remedies ultimately fail, the repetitive return to monosyllabic rhymes in subsequent passages describing the knight's body—his "sin," "skin," "rott," "iott," "drops," and "blottes"—evokes the ritual, diurnal rhythms of not simply prayer, but meditation (I.x.25-27). In the late sixteenth century, individual lines and words formed the center of intimate forms of prayer. *The Book of Common Prayer*, for instance, instructs its readers on how to perform the "Morning prayer dayly throughout the yeere" by explaining that "At the beginning both of Morning prayer, and likewise of Euening prayer, the minister shall reade with a loud voice some one of these

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[26] Patricia Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 99.

[27] Rao uses the term "waste" to think critically about how scholars typically interpret elements of the poem that do not at first affirm its dominant meaning, or in her words "the resolution of narrative poetry into abstraction" (220). Rao's point is that although critics generally treat the relationship between the poem's meaning and its particulars as one of opposition achieved via "suppressions, concealments, [and] assimilations," Spenser is himself wary of such methodologies.

sentences of the Scriptures that followe."[28] These "said sentences"—which were chosen by the reader—were both individual and repeated, and thus formed the basic units of "dayly" devotion in a quasi-mathematical formula for spiritual practice: as Ramie Targoff explains, prayer manuals valued the "reiterable" over the "complex," and "pre-meditation" over "spontaneity."[29] Though centered on petition, this approach encouraged a contemplative attention to words themselves. If Redcrosse is "made [to] pray both earely and eke late" by his surgeons (I.x.26.5), the scene itself performs a reiterative process of meditation for its reader that culminates (at least allegorically) in yet another lesson on how to read.

I refer here to the episode's final stanzas, in which Redcrosse is led by *Mercie* to the "litle Hermitage" of "heuenly *Contemplation*" (I.x.46.4-5,8). Alongside the "aged holy man" *Contemplation*—for whom "God and goodnes was his meditation" (I.x.46.9)—Redcrosse prepares to receive the truth about both himself and the world around him in an ascent not unlike that described by John Dee in his *Preface* to Euclid's *Elements*: through "Numbryng," Dee explains, the "zelous Philosopher" may climb the "Mountayne of Contemplation."[30] By making that which is "lower"—the "multitude of any corporall thynges seen, or felt"—"numerable," Dee (influenced, of course, by Plato's *Timaeus*) suggests that the soul will be brought "by degrees, by litle and litle" to divine truth (*iᵛ). Redcrosse, too, can only achieve true understanding once he has considered what seems to be the divinity of pattern and mathematical order:

> Shortly therein so perfect he became,
> That from the first vnto the last degree,
> His mortall life he learned had to frame
> In holy righteousnesse, without rebuke or blame.

(I.x.45.6-9)

The verb "to frame," which suggests both discipline and material construction, recalls Spenser's notoriously obscure description of the Castle of Alma in Book II. The "arithmological stanza," as Alastair Fowler names it, represents the Castle—and by

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[28] Church of England, *The Book of Common Prayer, and Administration of the Sacraments, and Other Rits and Ceremonies in the Church of Englande* (London, 1595), Aiʳ.

[29] Ramie Targoff, *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 5-6.

[30] John Dee, "Mathematicall Preface," *The elements of geometrie of the most auncient philosopher Euclide of Megara,* translated by Henry Billingsley (London, 1570), *iᵛ.

extension the temperate human body—as a numerological fantasy of geometrical precision, whose "frame" of regular, Euclidean shapes are perfectly "proportioned" to form a harmonious, "goodly diapase" (II.ix.22.1,7-9).[31] To ascend beyond the corrupt, sensory world of material bodies, Redcrosse seems to have been "perfect[ed]" by successive, Alma-like units or "degree[s]." Moreover, the language of "frame" and, later, "scale" that marks the knight's progress with *Contemplation* ("That hill they scale with all their powre" [I.x.47.7]) echoes Spenser's own descriptions of poetic composition: in *The Shepheardes Calendar*, as Richard Mallette observes, the term "frame" represents "Restraint...with regard to the poet's shaping and organizing of his material... like a craftsman with his tools."[32] Yet, as we know, Redcrosse must ultimately "turne againe / Backe to the world," and when he protests, he is met with *Contemplation*'s simple response, "that may not be" (I.x.63.1-5). Redcrosse fails to recognize what the reader has just learned: that to push beyond uneven, irregular, and "darke...earthly thinges" in search of a transcendental order of "things diuine" is not always the way to "redd aright" either the world around him or the mechanics of Spenser's poem (I.x.67.9).[33] The narrative movement from doubt to certainty promised by the knight's ascent is one that "turne[s] againe" back on itself, resisting readerly impulses to subsume what seems erroneous into the teleological abstractions of signification. Certainly, with a "carcas long vnfed," the figure of *Contemplation* is himself more like the pieces of Redcrosse's bodily matter that cannot be fully expelled or destroyed, despite the emaciated fantasy of spiritual disembodiment he appears to seek (I.x.48.7). The irregular, material, and ultimately uncertain "little bits" emerge as essential, rather than disruptive, to the formation of Spenser's poetic code.

III.

By way of a conclusion, I want to gesture towards two further misshapen forms in Faery Land: the "gobbet" and the "lump." If "endlesse error" poses the first allegorical threat to Redcrosse's quest, the "great lumps of flesh and gobbets raw" of her "filthie

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[31] Alastair Fowler, *Spenser and the Numbers of Time* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 260.

[32] Richard Mallette, "Spenser's Portrait of the Artist in *The Shepheardes Calendar* and *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 19.1 (Winter, 1979), 26.

[33] See Bethany Dubow's discussion of Colin Clout's self-reflexive lines "I was wont to seeke the honey Bee, / Working her formall rowmes in Wexen frame" in the December eclogue of *The Shepheardes Calendar* (1579). Dubow reads Spenser's "grieslie Todestoole growne" as "an invitation to trace the poetics of *The Faerie Queene*" that do *not* ascribe to such Neoplatonic ideals of "honey-comb order" ("Toadstool" 95).

parbreake" are a visceral instantiation of the material "bits" of Spenser's poetics (I.iii.23.9; I.i.20.3,9).[34] Etymologically, "lumpe" derives from the Old English verb *(ge)limpan*, "to happen," and the term allows the poem to materialize the illogical properties of accident itself.[35] It is fitting, then, that the "lumpish corse" of Maleger is a constant threat to the Castle of Alma (II.xi.42.6). Allegorically, his attack signals not simply that the body is at risk of disease but that the Castle's composite geometrical shapes are always in danger of collapsing back into "imperfect, mortall" material stuff (II.ix.22.4). To attend to "malign" as an overlooked etymological root of Maleger, being a conjunction of mal-, *malus* or evil, and -*gnus*, the base of *gignere* (to beget, produce, devise), also points us to one of his greatest threats: the ability of his "monstrous rablement" to breed endlessly and almost imperceptibly around the Castle's "euery side" (II.xi.8.1; II.xi.5.4).[36] The growing expanse of Maleger's troops, like the brood of Errour, occur at the limits of the representable: being "So huge and infinite" (II.xi.5.6), Maleger's "monstrous swarme" refuses both the organizing principles of number and the totalizing impulses of reading (II.xi.34.4).[37] This immeasurability and propensity to "redoubl[e] backe agayne" makes Maleger (II.xi.43.5), like the spectral "iott," nearly impossible to eradicate from both the Castle's perimeter and the poem: "That could do harme, yet could not harmed bee, / That could not die…That was most strong in most infirmitee" (II.xi.40.6-8). If the properties of Errour and Maleger encourage suspicion of "bits," however, the "iott," "blotte," and "drop"—all equally approximate and unpredictable—suggest that moral error and interpretive uncertainty should not be conflated.

Both the gobbet and the lump offer curious and unpredictable analogues to the mathematical certainty of the computational algorithm, and each is suggestive of the poetic fecundity of accident and chance. Indeed, if we think of the poem as an algorithm,

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[34] Rachel Stenner has noted the many references to ink and printing in this scene, reading Errour as "a violently grotesque printing press." Joseph Campana, by contrast, makes a distinction between the "abject generation" of the monstrous Errour and the "technological function" of machines, both equally horrific. See Rachel Stenner, *The Typographic Imaginary in Early Modern English Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 147 and Joseph Campana, *The Pain of Reformation: Spenser, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Masculinity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 97.

[35] *OED*, "lump, n.1."

[36] See Philip Rollinson, "Maleger," *The Spenser Encyclopedia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 449-450. Rollinson includes several etymological roots, but "malign" is not one of them: "*male+regere* (to rule badly or wrongly)," "*mal+gerens* (evil bearing or behaving)," or "*male+aeger*" meaning "diseased" (450).

[37] On the poem's various "swarme[s]," see Elizabeth Jane Bellamy, "Spenser's Open," *Spenser Studies* 22 (2007): 227-241. The dehumanizing reduction of beings to "bits" should also be noted in relation to the anti-Irish rhetoric of Maleger's characterization. See, for example, Christopher Burlinson, *Allegory, Space and the Material World in the Writings of Edmund Spenser* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 137-139 and Richard McCabe, *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment: Elizabethan Ireland and the Poetics of Difference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 129.

as I have explored here, we can locate the logic of its "bits" not only in the seemingly regular forms of stanza and line, but also in the irregular assemblages of matter scattered throughout. In attending to these moments, we might better understand the way the poem gives the impression of an almost systematic kind of self-generation—not simply through the measured progression of its "warlike numbers," *ad infinitum*—but also through the rotten, decomposing pieces of Redcrosse's body, the torn and chewed fragments of Chaucerian texts, and the alliterative morphemes that multiply in excess of narrative movement. If Spenser clearly worries about readerly "misconstructions," he also allows for moments in his poem where the totalizing impulses of signification can be suspended. As I have suggested, there is something meditative, and even transcendental, about the way in which Spenser repeatedly returns to these residual "bits." This rhythmic returning forms its own uneven pattern scattered across the poem, producing the somewhat algorithmic properties of "iott[s]," "drops," "blottes," "gobbets," and "lumpe[s]" as units of both matter and verse. Though they are impossible to predict with algorithmic certainty, such instances of regression and excess may offer insight into the ways *The Faerie Queene* indulges in fleeting moments of incoherence, when neither narrative order nor authorial control seem essential to its production.