

## BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

## 42.I

Stapleton, M. L. *Spenser's Ovidian Poetics*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2009. 271 pp. ISBN 978-0-87413-080-5. \$60.00 cloth.

With *Spenser's Ovidian Poetics*, M. L. Stapleton presents scholars of Elizabethan literature with the most comprehensive and informed study to date of Spenser's career-long intertextual engagement with the Roman libertine and exile—an engagement integral to late sixteenth-century poetry in general and the Spenserian corpus in particular. Stapleton's book, however, offers more than the straightforward doubling of a single-author study, to which narrow intertextual criticism is prone, for he discusses Spenser and Ovid according to a deft triangulation with the Roman poet's Elizabethan translators. As a result, *Spenser's Ovidian Poetics* provides valuable discussions of lesser-known figures such as Thomas Churchyard, George Turberville, and Isabella Whitney, and should appeal beyond Spenserian circles as a helpful new account of Elizabethan classicism and translation, complementing work by Colin Burrow, Raphael Lyne, and others.

Faced with the daunting task of organizing three labyrinthine topics at once—the progress of Spenser's career, Spenser's place within the wider Ovidian vogue of the late sixteenth century, and the patterns of imitation and emulation adapted by late Renaissance humanists and poets—Stapleton organizes his book effectively into a series of smaller intertextual case-studies. Following a valuable introduction providing a condensed account of criticism on Spenser's Ovidianism from Hughes and Upton, through the early twentieth-century philologists (whom he discusses generously and deploys thoughtfully), and including recent work by Burrow and Syrithe Pugh, Stapleton devotes a series of chapters to Spenser's various engagements with individual texts from the Ovidian corpus, complementing each investigation with discussion of a different Elizabethan translator. Hence, for example, as we learn what use Spenser makes of Ovid's *Tristia* in *The Shepheardes Calender*, we simultaneously discover affinities between the professional and poetic careers of Spenser and Churchyard (who was, after all, the only

other poet to receive a lifetime pension from the queen, and like Spenser a staunch defender of brutal colonial policies in Ireland). Stapleton, however, does not limit his analysis to the lesser translators, but offers suggestive new readings of Arthur Golding's *Metamorphoses* and Christopher Marlowe's *All Ovids Elegies*, endeavoring to clarify Spenser's negotiations between Ovid's Latin and these influential vernacular translations.

While Stapleton thus prevents the tunnel-vision of less rigorous intertextual analysis, his critical attention occasionally wanders from Spenser's engagement with Ovid, with the result that quite a few passages in the text seem to be primarily about one poet but not the other, or squarely concerned with an intermediary translator. Hence, while the book provides a wider cultural field-of-vision, Stapleton can lose the focus promised in his title, and digressive catalogues of Churchyard's many works, or anachronistic excursions on Jacobean and Restoration translators and imitators prove a distraction to readers intent on watching Spenser read and adapt Ovid.

Yet there is plenty of value in Spenser's *Ovidian Poetics* for Spenserians. In particular, Stapleton contributes learnedly and provocatively to the ongoing critical debate over Spenser's notion of a literary career, insofar as that career engages with classical and early-modern models for imitation and emulation. For while the old narrative of the Spenserian corpus as comprehensively Virgilian has mercifully faded, Spenser's uses for Ovid (rather than "debt" to Ovid) continue to evade critical consensus. While Stapleton admires Pugh's recent claims for an Ovidian Spenser's "subtle disapproval of the imperial program of the queen whose favor his poetry struggles so hard to cultivate," he questions the implicit assumption that Spenser's Ovidianism is primarily political in nature, arguing instead for an "aesthetic as well as . . . political and gender-oriented" account of the "interchange between the writers." While it may seem old-fashioned thus to privilege the aesthetic over the ideological, at its best *Spenser's Ovidian Poetics* serves as a useful corrective to overzealous critical efforts to railroad the poet's Ovidian allusions solely or primarily onto the trendier lines of inquiry.

Stapleton's incisive reorientation of the development of Spenser's engagement with the Ovidian corpus complements his wider intervention in the ongoing critical debate. For Stapleton, Spenser's Ovidianism is

apparent throughout the poet's career, from *SC* forward, and like Pugh, Laura J. Getty, and other recent critics, Stapleton remains dissatisfied with intertextual criticism that "focuses almost exclusively on the *Metamorphoses* and excludes other parts of [Ovid's] corpus," but *Spenser's Ovidian Poetics* proceeds a step further: arguing (uniquely) that the young Spenser of *SC* emulates Ovid's late poems of exile, while the poems of Spenser's maturity—in particular *The Faerie Queene* and the *Fowre Hymnes*—call instead for a retrospective fixation on Ovid's early elegies, the *Ars Amatoria* and the *Amores*. Spenser's allusions, in other words, evolve into the converse of Ovid's career trajectory, with *FQ* intersecting the *Metamorphoses* at the center of the superimposed careers (though it does not help Stapleton's claims that his chapter on "Anamorphic and Metamorphic Patterning in Spenser" proves the least developed of the six in the study). While this striking intertextual realignment seems forced at times, ultimately Stapleton's revised account of Spenser's treatment of Ovid should prove a salutary corrective to critically convenient accounts of Spenser graduating from Virgil to Ovid in Book III of *FQ*, for instance, or of Spenser ascribing early and always to humanist precepts that the young laureate begin with bug-fables and pastoral, aiming in due course for epic and heaven.

Further attractions of *Spenser's Ovidian Poetics* include an exhaustive bibliography, extensive annotations, and a full index. Stapleton's study provides a learned, wide-ranging, and at times provocative new perspective on arguably the richest intertextual engagement in the Elizabethan period.

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## BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

## 42.2

King, John N., ed. *Tudor Books and Readers: Materiality and the Construction of Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010. Xvii + 270 pp. ISBN 978-0-521-51494-1. \$99.00 hardback.

*Tudor Books and Readers* tries to combine two of the most interesting recent developments in early modern literary studies: the “New Bibliography” (also known as the “New Boredom,” in David Kastan’s memorable phrase), which analyzes the cultural significance of the seemingly mundane details of book publication, and the concomitant surge of interest in material culture and the “everyday.” As the eminent John King writes in his introduction, this anthology seeks to investigate “connections between the physical construction of books and their reception by readers during the era of the Tudor monarchs (1485–1603)” (1). In other words, King wants to contribute to literary studies by emphasizing how the materiality of books contributes to their meaning, and to book studies by emphasizing how the particular details of book construction, such as how many reams of paper get used, contribute to a greater understanding of early modern culture. To these ends King collects eleven essays, including one by the late Douglas A. Brooks, that originated in a Huntington Library Conference on “The Consumption of Books during the Tudor Era,” plus a prologue by Lotte Hellinga that is “largely derived” (15) from her introduction catalogue of fifteenth century books in the British Library. Ultimately, while the scholarship displayed in these essays is uniformly impeccable, as is the writing, I think that literary scholars might find these essays tend to concern either physical construction or reception, but rarely both at the same time.

Joseph A. Dane and Alexandra Gillespie, for example, in their co-written article, “The Myth of the Cheap Quarto,” demonstrate, as their title suggests, that “cheap” and “quarto” do not necessarily go together, and their complication of our understanding of what a “quarto” signified is balanced by Steven K. Galbraith’s essay on the tripartite division among folios: economy (saves paper); luxury (does not save paper); necessity (due to amount of text). But while both of these essays display a wonky grasp

of detail (we learn, for example, that the 1593 folio of the *Arcadia* used 122 sheets of paper [51]), the authors do not really ask about the cultural or interpretive resonances of their findings. It’s good to know that “the makers and the consumers of Tudor books encountered all manner of books in quarto formats” (42), but I’m not sure how this fact alters our understanding of, say, *The Shepheardes Calender* or any other book published in quarto.

Galbraith tells us that “Spenser’s 1609 *Faerie Queene* was a folio of utter frugality. By shifting from quarto to a folio Lownes [the printer] greatly reduced his production costs” (57), but how the nature of the folio edition changes our understanding of Spenser’s epic remains unasked. Similarly, Robert Harding’s “Authorial and Editorial Influence on Luxury” may “not be intended to be a general survey of Tudor luxury bookbinding,” but that is what we get (125).

On the other side of the ledger, Cyndia Clegg’s otherwise excellent and informative “Print in the time of Parliament: 1560–1601” does not really address material culture, but provides an important corrective to the mistaken notion that “government restraints on speaking and printing” led to an attenuated political culture in which only the “parliamentary class” took part (141, 142). Clegg, with her characteristic grasp of primary sources and early modern politics, disproves this canard by demonstrating how there was actually “a lively relationship between print and parliament during the reign of Elizabeth I” (158), but her analysis is much more about politics than materiality. Some of the essays seem almost willful in their avoidance of larger questions. For example, while I enjoyed Andrew Cambers’s essay on Margaret Hoby’s reading practices and marginalia, could someone whose diary covers the period 1599–1605 have really remained entirely oblivious to the outside political world? Could someone be so focused on the state of her soul that she did not notice the death of a queen? And when Cambers writes that communal reading in the Hoby household “reached new heights when [Margaret] was afflicted by the temptations of the devil” (218), what were these temptations? Despair? We do not know, because Cambers does not tell us.

The two best essays in this volume broaden their reach to include wider concerns, and interestingly, they both are about the same massive text: Elizabeth Evanden, “Closing the Books: The Problematic Printing of John Foxes Histories of Henry VII and Henry VIII in his *Book*

of *Martyrs*,” and John N. King’s “Reading the Woodcuts in John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*.”

In a tour de force of investigation, Evanden shows how much of the book’s form results from “practical exigencies” and “unforeseen crises [that] arose as [the book] was being printed” (68). While “a great deal of material in the *Book of Martyrs* appears out of sequence” because it had just come into Foxe’s hands—“At one point, Foxe brazenly declared . . . ‘better I judge it out of order than out of the book’” (69)—Foxe and Day, the printer, really tried to keep pre-Reformation material from Books 7 and 8 (which begins with the reign of Henry VIII), and to keep material from these books from leaching into Books 9 to 12. But because Foxe kept coming up with new material, the pagination, the signature numbers, and the layout kept changing, and Day had to resort to all sorts of means to literally keep the book together. “Closing the Books” wonderfully shows how seemingly mundane concerns (e.g., the printer’s paper supply) can have momentous effects: “the very content of Foxe’s work was determined not only by authorial and editorial dictate but also by the logistical demands of the printing press” (90).

King’s magnificent essay, “Reading the Woodcuts in John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*,” focuses on the “tight interrelationship between text and woodcuts, which constitute an integral part of Foxe’s collection as a whole” (191). However, the best parts of this essay come when King brings the reader, or more accurately, the annotator, into the equation. The banderol (the little balloon used to indicate speech) in many of the illustrations are blank, which “invites filling in by readers” (202), and King provides several examples of people adding their own contributions to Foxe’s text. For example, the depiction of the particularly sadistic execution of William Gardiner, an Englishman living (and dying) in Portugal, inspired readers to put their own last words into Gardiner’s mouth, and even add their own contribution to the illustration:

The following inscription [appears in a copy of the 1576 edition]: “Lord rec[e]aue my sole’ . . . This speech is altogether appropriate, but it does not occur in the narrative, which recounts the victim’s recitation of the Latin version of Psalm 43 as a prayer for vindication against injustice. The inscription instead invokes a prayer uttered by St Stephen as a mob stoned him to death . . . An inscription in another copy assigns quite different wording to Gardiner: “I Suffer for the Truth.” The person who inscribed this other banderol appears to be the same one who has intensified the pathos of this scene by adding pen strokes to enhance the spurting of blood from the stumps of his hands. In other copies, early readers attributed to Gardiner a strident attack in the manner of an Old Testament prophet:

“O you wicked People,” and a painfully pathetic appeal, “Pitty, Pitty.” (204)

If not precisely the kind of “open source” text along the lines of Wikipedia today, King demonstrates how at least some early modern readers made these texts meaningful by adding their own thoughts and emendations to the manuscript, making the *Book of Martyrs* as nearly as much their own as Foxe and Day’s.

All told, *Tudor Books and Readers* promises at times a bit more than it delivers. While almost all the essays evince a total immersion in the details of the book trade or reading practices, I would have preferred that more go one step further and speculate on what it all might mean rather than staying so determinedly in the weeds. Even so, readers will learn a lot from this book, and I hope it will provide the foundation for more studies that will combine the rigor of book studies with the broader interpretive and cultural questions asked by literary critics.

Peter C. Herman’s most recent books are *A Short History of Early Modern England*, *Destabilizing Milton: “Paradise Lost” and the Poetics of Incertitude*, and an anthology co-edited with Elizabeth Sauer, *The New Milton Criticism*. He teaches at San Diego State University.

ABSTRACTS OF CONFERENCE ACTIVITIES

The following papers and roundtables were given at the 2012 MLA Conference, January 5-8, in Seattle, Washington

STRUCTURES OF EXPERIENCE  
IN THE FAERIE QUEENE

42.3

Richard Lee, U of California, Berkeley. "A little well is lent, that gaineth more withal:' Politicizing Pity in Books V and VI of *The Faerie Queene*."

A key thematic element of the 1596 *FQ* is Spenser's insistent politicization of pity, according to which the passion's ethical status appears to fluctuate amidst dramatizations of the necessity of inoculation against merciful forbearance in Book V and of the chivalric imperative to compassionate leniency in Book VI. These antithetical perspectives, however, ultimately give way to the conclusion that pity should not be conceived as inherently naïve or virtuous, since the prudence of pity's exercise must be judged according to its efficacy in delimited political contexts. Thus, the characterization of pity in Book V suggests that however just the enactment of merciless force may be, there nevertheless occur moments when displays of clemency become necessary. Analogously, the thoroughly depraved social realm posited throughout Book VI dictates the conditions in which pity ceases to be of any pragmatic utility, even as the inclination to mercy continues to constitute a signal manifestation of courtesy. The dialectical coupling of Books V and VI demonstrates how, for the mature Spenser, pity must always be judged according to the specific demands of highly fraught socio-political contexts.

42.4

Christine Barrett, Harvard U. "Beating Up Little Old Ladies: Humor, Allegory, and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*."

It is a truth seldom spoken: Spenser's *FQ* is seriously funny. Beyond the numerous overtly comic interludes and puns, there are also subtly wry moments requiring the reader to suspend the allegorical reading program

of the epic to participate in the joke. One example of this suspension comes when Guyon declares (a rather self-satisfied) triumph over the dangerous Occasion, only to have Pyrochles's squire Atin rebuke him for fighting with "a silly weake old woman" (II.iv.45.5). Within the poem, the joke is on Atin, who fails to read the danger Occasion truly poses, but the allegory stretches threadbare, and the reader cannot help thinking there is perhaps something absurd, or at least deflating, about Guyon claiming victory over a little old lady.

Using this episode as a case study, I propose that the apparent interruptions and subversions posed by this kind of winking humor are in fact integral to Spenser's allegorical project: they foreground the poem's artifice, remind the reader of the dangerous pleasures of misreading, and impose limits on the seductive power of the poem's images. Humor functions as both ethically instructive and powerfully iconoclastic—an oft-overlooked aspect of "sage and serious" Spenser's poetics deserving critical attention.

EARLY MODERN POSSIBLE WORLDS

42.5

Debapriya Sarkar, Rutgers U. "As might best be:' Poetics of Possibility in *The Faerie Queene*."

In this paper, I argue that fictional ontology is uniquely predicated on theories of possibility. Edmund Spenser's epic-romance constructs a "poetics of possibility" that rejects precepts and prescription—"what should be"—to theorize how poetry generates knowledge through the conceptualization of a best possible world, one that "might best be." Spenser uses possible worlds as conceptual units and as inhabitable spaces to speculate about unverifiable and fabricated entities. But he also suggests that possible worlds enable us to understand the concept of the possible and the act of speculation itself.

Spenser's fictional world, or Fairyland, provides ontological form to what Giorgio Agamben terms "the possibility of privation." Fairyland represents Spenser's

belief that actuality is not the teleological fulfillment or destruction of potentiality but a realization and exhaustion of its impotentiality. In an ever-expanding world that is never fully knowable, the epistemic status of fictional worlds and real ones are not completely distinguishable, and Fairyland's existence cannot be apprehended through epistemologies that privilege historical fact or empirical verification. Engaging with travel literature and scientific speculation, Spenser privileges the capacity to speculate over actual discovery. While Fairyland's potentiality models the existence of possible worlds, the allegorical narrative populates these worlds and extends this generative potentiality into the narrative process itself. In order to formalize this speculative methodology of worldmaking in the narrative world of the poem, Spenser turns to the technique that mobilizes reference: his "continued allegory." The figures in the allegorical narrative actualize potential ways of being and knowing as they always anticipate but never achieve completion. In their incompleteness, they demonstrate how poetry creates a philosophy of possibility by privileging the counterfactual.

POE AND HAWTHORNE:  
SHADES OF THE GOTHIC

## 42.6

Price McMurray, Texas Wesleyan U. "There's No Text like Home: Poe, Hawthorne, and the Internalization of Quest Romance."

While we routinely read *Mosses from an Old Manse* as an index to Hawthorne's complex position within and against American Transcendentalism, his pointed evocation of Poe in tales that might be said to comment on Emersonian idealism is far less frequently remarked. This is not entirely surprising, for Poe's hostility toward the "Frogpondians" and his Gothic pessimism make it difficult for us to imagine that he is in any way like Emerson. Yet the effect of Hawthorne's triangulations in stories like "The Birth-mark," "Egotism; or, The Bosom Serpent," and "The Christmas Banquet" is to suggest a sort of homology between competing Platonisms.

At the same time, we might infer, if not Hawthorne's allegiance with Poe, at least an awareness of shared agendas. A fiction concerned with the problem of how we might know and represent other subjectivities would, "The Christmas Banquet" plainly suggests, have something in common with a fiction of special (Gothic) effects. Moreover, it might have a shared genealogy. Such at any rate is what I argue in this paper, reading "Egotism; or, The Bosom Serpent" as a complex rescripting of "The Fall of the House of Usher"—

and both stories as examples of what Harold Bloom calls the "internalization of quest romance."

If Hawthorne's odd tale of a man possessed by a snake is a cruel restyling—at once sentimental and almost pornographic—of Salemite Jones Very's "mission," it is also shrewdly diagnostic. Noting in Very a ready-made amalgam of Emerson and Poe, the tale also finds a remote but precise origin for this case of "consciousness in Concord" in Spenser's Protestant knight errant. The hint for this genealogy may well have been in "Usher," too, where the coincidental parallels with "The Mad Tryst of Sir Lancelot Canning" evoke the world of quest romance and stage intertextuality as an effect (or experience) of the uncanny. "Lancelot Canning" is no Spenser, of course, "The Mad Tryst" being nearly pure metanarrative—and there is clearly no way to slay the dragon of incestuous desire (or literary influence) in "Usher." But if Hawthorne reverses Poe by contriving a happy ending for "Egotism," his gesture of reducing the dragon of romance to pure trope is complexly freighted.

Inasmuch as Roderick's restoration to sanity brings the tale to a necessary close, the internalization of quest romance would seem to lead to a representational dead end, the (noumenal) self being ever beyond the reach of language (or available only to mad allegories of the sort Roderick inflicts on the townspeople). So, too, if the tale updates Spenserian chastity for the 19th-century drawing room by celebrating the sanative power of the "ideal of gentle womanhood," it is more persuasive in the ways it underscores the latent eroticism—masochistic and implicitly feminizing—in a Gothic poetics of terror.

## Lectures

### Telling Time: Temporality in The Faerie Queene

Hugh MacClean Memorial Lecture, International Spenser Society  
7 January 2012

Linda Gregerson

42.7

1

In Book 11 of the *Confessions*, Augustine attempts to contemplate the mystery of time and, in particular, the temporal embeddedness that makes human beings particularly unqualified to comprehend eternity. Time is motion: the human mind cannot comprehend eternity directly because, says Augustine, it cannot *hold still* (*Confessions* 11.11).[1] So the mystery of eternity, and He who dwells in it, can only be imagined in opposition to that which it is not: to temporality. But time, though it is our only native element, proves almost as difficult to comprehend as does eternity. The future cannot properly be said to exist because it does not exist yet, and the past *no longer* exists. “As for the present,” writes Augustine, “if it were always present and never moved on to become the past, it would not be time but eternity. If, therefore, the present is time only by reason of the fact that it moves on to become the past, how can we say that even the present is, when the reason why it *is* is that it is *not to be*?” (*Confessions* 11.14). The present has no duration, then, no dimensions proper to itself. It is thinner than the razor’s edge. And yet it is full, is indeed the only fullness we shall ever in this life have. It can only be summoned by feel. “Suppose,” says Augustine,

that I am going to recite a psalm that I know. Before I begin, my faculty of expectation is engaged by the whole of it. But once I have begun, as much of the psalm as I have removed from the province of expectation and relegated to the past now engages

my memory, and the scope of the action which I am performing is divided between the two faculties of memory and expectation, the one looking back to the part which I have already recited, the other looking forward to the part which I have still to recite. But my faculty of attention is present all the while, and through it passes what was the future in the process of becoming the past. As the process continues, the province of memory is extended in proportion as that of expectation is reduced, until the whole of my expectation is absorbed. . . . What is true of the whole psalm is also true of all its parts and of each syllable. It is true of any longer action in which I may be engaged and of which the recitation of the psalm may only be a small part. It is true of a man’s whole life, of which all his actions are parts. It is true of the whole history of mankind, of which each man’s life is a part.

(*Confessions* 11.28)

In his effort to capture the dimensionless plenitude of the present, Augustine invokes the recitation, from memory, of a psalm. It is no accident that the example is drawn from verse rather than prose. When he attempts to capture something about the nature of time by means of measurement, by *telling time*, Augustine invokes the motion of the heavenly bodies and the divisions we number according to their circuits: years, months, days, and hours. He invokes the humbler rotations of the potter’s wheel. He invokes, repeatedly, what he takes to be the foundational units of language: syllables long and short, the metrical foot, the poetic line. We do not measure a poem by pages, says Augustine, for that would be to measure in terms of space (*Confessions* 11.26). Time and space are not so easily distinguished, of course, as Augustine’s own figures of motion and stillness acknowledge. Furthermore, and of particular interest to the present

discussion, poems-on-the-page and poems-on-the-voice have a long, intimate, and sometimes convoluted relationship. But Augustine's thought experiment—his effort to sequester temporality for the purposes of contemplation—suggests a remarkable proposition about poetry itself: that words and memory, words and expectation, are more acutely visible in poetry than in other linguistic modes. Put radically, it is to poetry that Augustine turns when he wishes to contemplate the reciprocal constitution of language and (human) time.

Poetry is apt for memory. This has often been observed, usually with reference to poetry's repeating sonic patterns. In Augustine's case study, the recitation of the psalm, it is necessary that the verse be already familiar, already awarded a recurrent place in consciousness. Its syllables pass through the mind and through the voice in the manner of a sacramental return, or the rotation of a potter's wheel. The future again becoming the past again through the portal of the human. It is in this way and this way only that we contrive to turn our face to the eternal. Of the past, writes Augustine, all we can say of it is that it, too, is an aspect of the present, the present of the past, which we call memory. And the future, or all that can be said to exist of it, which is the present of the future, we call that expectation. So three kinds of time: the present of the past, the present of the present, and the present of the future. And all of these are qualities of attention.

Attention as a felt faculty—the future becoming the past again, by means of which we infer our own existence in the radical transience we call the present—is the particular genius of Spenserian poetics, especially the poetics that govern the epical, allegorical, post- and-anti-Petrarchan, neo-antiquarian chivalric romance we call *The Faerie Queene*. The apprehension the poem is designed to induce is by its nature fugitive, the cusp between expectation and remembrance, the sense of having sensed the thing in the instant before its disappearance, or of being about to sense it again. For Spenser, the cognitive "capture" that matters is a quality of feeling—I saw her, I was there—and, on this side of eternity, is utterly at odds with fixity: try to hold the moment still and you denature it; the plenitude of radical transience resolves to "nought but pressed gras" (*FQ* I.ix.15).

If the present, as Augustine so carefully explains, is interstitial, its apprehension must be so too. And the poet who makes this apprehension the governing object of his poem must devise a method that does not, itself, belie the quest. Full frontal is not an option. Full frontal is the moment embalmed. Spenser's foundational proposition in *FQ*—the method he devises for inciting in himself and in his readers, recurrently, the apprehension of being-in-the-present-tense—involves the cultivation of oppositional momentums. Take, for example, the oppositional

timing of narrative and prosody. Were one to set about writing an expansive twelve-book historical fiction, "clowdily enwrapped in Allegoricall deuises," (Letter to Raleigh 168) [2] one could scarcely imagine a more recalcitrant, more Procrustean vehicle than the nine-line stanza Spenser devised for *FQ*. Its fixed dimensions, its end-stopped hexameter, and its interlocking rhymes, far more constraining in English than are the rhymes of Ariosto and Tasso in Italian, would seem to be inimical to the limber speedings-up and slowings-down that narrative momentum requires. And, indeed, although the stanza sometimes tames the narrative to a coincident cadence, as in the allegorical pageants,[3] it most often works at odds with other forms of pacing in the poem, establishing a kind of cognitive syncopation. Rising action and deliquescence, deferral and derailment, urgency and lassitude play out against a grid of syllables and accents, metrical feet, poetic lines, stanzas and cantos and books: devices all for construing even the unknown narrative future as a species of proportioned expectation, and that which was the future as a measurable past. All in an effort to invoke—to summon—that dimensionless in-between, the fugitive, mortal present tense, which is only because it is not to be, but which—and this is the point—is not yet wholly lost.

## 2

When the narrator of cantos that "appeare to be parcell of some following Booke of the Faerie Queene" (*FQ* VII.vi.title)[4] introduces the allegorical figure of Mutabilitie, he describes her as an enemy to Nature, one who has perverted Nature's "good estate," broken Nature's laws, turned blessing to curse and life to death. And yet, in the ongoing course of narrative action, when Mutabilitie submits her claims against the Jovian dispensation, she appeals to Nature as her judge. Has she simply, disastrously, miscalculated her own interests? Or forgotten, somehow, her own origins? Admittedly, Mutabilitie has a knack for undermining herself: the very "evidence" she marshals on her own behalf in the trial scene, the orderly procession of seasons, months, and hours, suggests a structural stability that belies her claims for perpetual change. And the fungible four elements as she describes them—earth, water, air, and fire perpetually "chang'd . . . Into themselues" (*FQ* VII.vii.25)—uncannily anticipate, albeit by means of a grammatical ambiguity, the sentence that will be passed against her. But the slippage between Nature-as-enemy and Nature-as-arbiter is something else. It marks a fracture line, not in Mutabilitie's prideful aspirations or in Mutabilitie's forensic calculation, but in the poet/narrator's allegorical proposition.

When Spenser begins the Cantos of Mutabilitie in



the form of a lament, he conjures a model of Nature—Nature in her first estate—before the advent of change. But this model, a false one, quickly proves untenable. The world worth having, Nature not denatured, has mutability running in its veins. Her very form is mutable, now male, now female, its indeterminacy secured by variable report and by a veil with a substantial pedigree:

That some do say was so by skill deuized,  
To hide the terror of her vncouth hew,  
From mortall eyes that should be sore agrized;  
For that her face did like a Lion shew,  
That eye of wight could not indure to view:  
But others tell that it so beautious was,  
And round about such beames of splendor threw,  
That it the Sunne a thousand times did pass,  
Ne could be seene, but like an image in a glass.

(*FQ* VII.vii.6)

Surface logic makes terror and beauty the touchstones of alternate hypotheses: if one accounts for the veiling of the face, the other must be false. But, as is so often the case with Spenserian attributes, the qualities behind the veil evade the strictures of either/or. Linked by their exorbitance, terror and beauty function additively, equally mysterious, equally unbearable to human sight: both/and. The image of an image in a glass, reminiscent of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians,[5] links Nature's face to other forms of the terrible beauty we call the transcendent, and is directly followed by a more extended, and explicit, biblical analogy:

That well may seemen true: for, well I weene  
That this same day, when she on Arlo sat,  
Her garment was so bright and wondrous sheene,  
That my fraile wit cannot deuize to what  
It to compare, nor finde like stuffe to that,  
As those three sacred Saints, thought else most wise,  
Yet on mount Thabor quite their wits forgat,  
When they their glorious Lord in strange disguise  
Transfigur'd sawe; his garments so did daze their eyes.

(*FQ* VII.vii.7)

The brightness too great to be seen is covered and conveyed by a garment too bright to be described, which is to say, too great for all comparison: the poet cannot "finde like stuffe." And yet, of course, in this very insufficiency, which links him to the disciples on Mount Tabor, he finds the likeness he requires. Regarding that likeness, the transfiguration of Christ, the Geneva Bible provides the following gloss: "Christ shewed them his glorie that they might not thinke that he suffred through infirmitie but that he offered vp him self willingly to dye" (Matthew 17:2).[6] The transfiguration, according to this reading, was itself a hermeneutic gloss, a help to the faithful in expectation of the Passion, so that when the mortal moment came they might

know it for what it was: not a weakness but a strength, not an end but a beginning, not the triumph of death but the rupturing of history by eternity. Which cannot be gazed on directly.

In the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, the seat prepared for Nature the adjudicator, in all her beauty and her terror, is hedged about, like Nature's face, with doubleness: what was "the best and fairest" has become "most ill" (*FQ* VII.vi.37). "[W]ere it not ill fitting for this file," writes the poet, I would tell you the story of Arlo Hill (*FQ* VII.vi.37) and, in the space thus opened up by the ever-resourceful subjunctive mood, he proceeds to do precisely that. Arlo Hill is one of those wonderful Spenserian sites where the floating world of mythic place is rudely reconfigured by the pull of the actual—actual hills, actual rivers, actual Ireland—and where unstable temporalities compete for imaginative sway. "O Clio," writes the poet, "lend Calliope thy quill" (*FQ* VII vi 37), which is to say, apparently, that the muse of history must retire for a while in deference to the muse of epic poetry. The time-frame governed by Calliope, "whylome," is one quite congenial to the subjunctive mood. "At some indefinite time in the past," is how we generally construe it, though the word was also used in the sixteenth century to refer to the future: "Therefore I purpose," writes Henry Bradshaw, "all such ydlenes whylom to refuse" (qtd in "whilom" A3.).[7] "Whylome" is a floater, not quite commensurate with Clio's chronicles; it captures epic's double allegiance to genealogy and futurity, memory and expectation: witness the epic prophecies that read like history to epic's contemporary audience.[8] "Whylome," writes the poet, "when IRELAND flourished in fame / Of wealths and goodnesse" (*FQ* VII.vi.38), Arlo was the fairest hill in the land. And then came Faunus' trespass and Diana's curse.

The Diana/Cynthia who features in the interpolated pre-history of Arlo Hill is another of the resonantly redundant but not-entirely-coincident figures who are so central to Spenser's method in *FQ*. [9] The goddess who curses the landscape is not, not quite, the goddess whom *Mutabilitie* has tried to depose in the frame narrative. And yet there is real sympathy, and a world of shared tradition, between the luminous body that lights our way by night and the maidenly body that refuses to be seen. Cynthia's gates are guarded by the allegorical figure of Tyme, and though she sits on a throne, she never "stands," that is to say, stands still (*FQ* VII.vi.8). Let us think of her, then, as sister to Augustine's present tense. Faunus wants to hold her in his gaze, for which the punishment is both unnatural fixity and unnatural scattering or "spilling." Faunus betrays his stolen gazing with a burst of laughter, an uncontrolled somatic "breaking forth," [10] and then is captured, or "taken," "[I] ike darred Larke" (VII.vi.47). To dare: to daze, paralyze,

or render helpless with the sight of something. The phrase derives from a method of capturing larks by showing them a hobby, or small falcon, “that the larks’ eyes being ever upon the hoby, should not see the net that is laid on their heads.” (qtd. in “dare v<sup>2</sup>” def. 5).[11] Faunus, caught like a bird in a bush, is threatened with gelding, then subjected to a farcical version of Acteon’s fate, the tearing-apart-by-hounds that in the Ovidian prototype displaces gelding and in the Spenserian reenactment comes to nothing but exhaustion. And a curse.

The curse is on the landscape, whose sweet waters and fair forests are made the haunt of wolves and thieves. That curse continues “to this day” (*FQ* VII.vi.55). If predatory looking was the sin, the punishment, displaced upon the place, is chronic predation. Chronic, and oddly untethered to chronological time, for the temporalities of Clio and Calliope cannot be made to align. Does the fateful encounter of Faunus and Diana take place before or after the trial of Mutabilitie? Nothing allows us to know for certain. In the narrative sequence of the poem, the interpolated prehistory of Arlo Hill means that we encounter the seat of Nature’s judgment as a place that has already been or, by the time of reading, will already have been fatally changed. And yet the place is redolent with all that is best and fairest:

And all the earth far vnderneath her feete  
Was dight with flowres, that voluntary grew  
Out of the ground, and sent forth odours sweet . . .  
And Mole himself, to honour her the more,  
Did deck himself in freshest faire attire . . .

(*FQ* VII.vii.10-11)

Marking the arrival of embodied Nature, Arlo Hill itself becomes a type, or epitome, of nature, occluding the curse that has or will have, has *and* will have, made the place “most ill.” The site is an especially fertile one for non-coincident redundancy. The Nature that sits in judgment is and is not the nature that spreads a living carpet for her feet. The curse that targets Arlo Hill for special desecration is and is not the more general curse with which the cantos of Mutabilitie began:

O pittious worke of MVTABILITIE!  
By which, we all are subiect to that curse,  
And death in stead of life haue sucked from our Nurse.

(*FQ* VII.vi.6)

The sweeter vision preserves the liveliness of mutability—the flowers grow; the mountains change their “gray attire to green”—and contrives for a moment to “forget” mutability’s mortal sting.

In this it anticipates the healing euphony of Nature’s juridical pronouncement:

I well consider all that ye haue sayd,  
And find that all things stedfastnes doe hate

And changed be: yet being rightly wayd  
They are not changed from their first estate;  
But by their change their being do dilate:  
And turning to themselues at length againe,  
Do worke their owne perfection so by fate,  
That ouer them Change doth not rule and raigne;  
But they raigne ouer change, and doe their states  
maintaine.

(*FQ* VII.vii.58)

Fixity is no friend to nature. If mutability implies death, as the temporarily occluded curse portends, fixity is death itself. Nature cannot banish Mutabilitie; she can only make, has already made, Mutabilitie incorporate. In this way, her spoken judgment enacts a narrative manifestation—a working-out-in-time—of the logic that structures the very allegory that contains it. Like a host of other Spenserian antitypes, personified Mutabilitie is set in motion to illustrate—unfold to the light—an eponymous virtue, in this case, Constancy. That virtue is initially misrecognized as freedom-from-change. It is discovered to be, not fixity, but hope, the constancy of spirit required to sustain Time’s subjects in the face of change. This is why Nature appears for a moment—the smallest part of a moment—without her veil.

3

Spenser’s enthusiasm for quantitative meters in English had waned before he set to work on *FQ*, [12] but his understanding of verse as a living passage through temporal stays or frameworks endured. In English, the accentual-syllabic iamb is far more accessible to the ear than is the largely notional alternation of “short” and “long.” [13] The general accord of syntax with groupings of five iambic feet enables the ear to hear what the eye sees on the page as lineation. A pattern of rhyme—ABABBCBCC, for example—can underscore those divisions and also the regular accruals that make for a nine-line stanza. An extra foot in the ninth line pleasantly destabilizes the final couplet and marks more fully the rounding-off of stanza. Hearing and seeing conspire to form a system of simultaneous memory-and-expectation. It makes no difference that one sense or another may be operating in a virtual realm at any given time: Spenser wrote his poem for the page as well as the voice, as have poets ever since. The poem is a hybrid of auditory and visual markings-of-time. Twelve promised books; twelve cantos apiece; four dozen stanzas, more or less, to the canto; a patterned nine lines to the stanza. All the more stunning, then, when the timepiece halts “vnperfite.”

The narrator of the conjecturally eighth canto of the conjecturally seventh book of *FQ* is not altogether consoled

by plot resolution. He has heard Nature's judgment—those stunningly brief two stanzas—but is haunted by Mutabilitie's "Large Euidence" (*FQ* VII.vii.argument). Evenly divided between despair and hope, he allots a single stanza to each. The former "makes [him] loath this state of life," so utterly dependent upon the vicissitudes of time (*FQ* VII.viii.1). The latter prompts him to turn beyond time altogether, toward "the pillours of Eternity" (*FQ* VII.viii.2). Or rather, it prompts him to think like Augustine, through time and the ever-evanescent present tense, toward that which time, in its chronic evanescence, portends.

It is change under the aegis of despair that haunts the Cantos of Mutabilitie: not change per se, but change for the worse. When Nature, who is both the site of the insurgency and its judge, determines to be at peace with Change and call her "daughter" (*FQ* VII.vii.59), she speaks in such a manner that all the assembled creatures on Arlo Hill, while "looking in her face," behold a "chearefull view" (*FQ* VII.vii.57). The narrator appears to have "forgotten" both her terror and her veil. Embodied Nature, who has submitted to Mutabilitie's long catalogue of elements and seasons, has assumed a human face. In this she echoes and anticipates another, transfiguring acceptance of mortality. "Willingly to dye," as per the Genevan gloss, does not quite capture what is at stake here, but willingly to live is to be the portal through which the ever-diminishing future becomes the ever-expanding past. A Nature willing to be reconciled to change gives heart and a share of dignity to humans willing to follow her example. And for a moment before her vanishing, "whither no man whist" (*FQ* VII.vii.59), a terrible judge is imagined to be both accessible and benign.

*FQ*, in its extravagance, its overabundance, its formal and generic and philosophical over-commitment, affords unusually fertile ground on which to explore poetry's aptitude for cognitive capture by oppositional means: the being-in-the-moment I have called the present tense. But this discussion might also pass for *ars poetica*: what I see writ large in Spenser's magnificent poem I take to be true, in foundational terms, of all poems worth the name. Even in poems whose working parts are very much simpler than those of *FQ*, the method is oppositional: phrasing now allied with now at odds with metrical foot, duration of image now allied with now at odds with duration of line, concordances of sound now allied with now at odds with concordances of sense. Divided obligation—to syllable weight and syntax, cadence and sense, "mouth feel" and abstraction, boundedness and subversion—is the essence of poetic form. And by a wonderful paradox, division of this sort produces distillation. The poet has too much to do: even as s/he is tending to metric or the logic of a figure or the echo of like vowel sounds, something equally urgent suffers neglect. And

seems, when all goes well, to have somehow fended for itself. I think this is what the ancients meant when they talked about the muse: the thing that comes in under the radar, the thing that seems to have resolved itself while we were shoring up another part of the edifice. The gift is the poem, by which I mean the quality of attention the poem demands and generates: I was there, I will have been there, this won't have been entirely lost on me. And I was not alone.

In its penchant for demanding more than we have to give, and for healing the very deficit it exposes, the poem puts reader and poet on parallel footing. Like the poet, the reader has too much to do. Like the reader, the poet makes way through the poem by a combination of will and something-that-seems-to-be-other-than-will. What Augustine found in the psalm—a timepiece in which the faculty of attention might be witnessed in its constituent parts—both poet and reader may find line by line on the page. The plenitude too fleeting to be felt except in relation to that which it was or will have been, that plenitude we have heretofore referred to as the present tense, we might as well call presence.

The poem is a timepiece, an instrument for parsing time by means of measured cadences. Short or long, simple or convoluted, the timepiece we call a poem is designed to heighten the feeling of being-in-the-present-tense, which does not last, the better to summon the yet-more-evanescent thought of lastingness. In Shakespeare's sonnet sequence, the paradox is configured, for a time, as procreation. In *FQ*, it is configured, for a very brief time and in a fragment "vnperfite," as Christian revelation. It is configured, more chronically, as the ravishment of imperfection itself: Mutabilitie's "louely face" makes Jove forget his wrath even as she challenges his rule (*FQ* 7.6.31). It is not fixity that human beings hope for when we turn to Christian revelation, or to children, or to poems; it is the continuing incarnation of that which we love precisely because it is fleeting. We want "our perishing earth" in all its perishing beauty.[14] We want it whole, and we want it in all its partiality, and in our partiality for it. A poem "vnperfite," whose untimely cutting-off is merely a final instance of its aggravated derailments and auto-interruptions, is built to parse the perishing.

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## NOTES:

[1] Citations in the text that follows will be drawn from the English-language version of R. S. Pine-Coffin. Saint Augustine. *Confessions*. 1961. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1986. Print.

[2] “A Letter of the Authors expounding his whole intention in the course of this worke . . .,” commonly known as the Letter to Raleigh, *The Works of Edmund Spenser*, ed. Greenlaw et al. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1932-57. Vol. 1, 168. Print. 11 Vols.

[3] Any number of examples might be adduced: Lucifera’s progress in *FQ* I.iv; The Masque of Cupid in *FQ* III.xii; the procession of elements, seasons, and months in *FQ* VII.vii. Allotting a fixed number of stanzas to each of the allegorical figures who constitute these pageants, Spenser contrives, at least on a surface level, a temporary concordance between prosodic and narrative pacing.

[4] The status of this speculation has been the subject of much debate. The Mutibilitie Cantos first appeared in the 1609 folio edition of *FQ*, ten years after the poet’s death and six years after the death of William Ponsonby, the publisher with whom Spenser had worked so closely during his lifetime. This and subsequent citations from *FQ* are drawn from *The Works of Edmund Spenser*, ed. Greenlaw et al.

[5] “For now we see throughe a glasse darkely, but then shal we face to face” (Geneva Bible, 1 Corinthinans 13:12). A. C. Hamilton (*The Faerie Queene*, ed. Hamilton. 2nd ed. London: Pearson/Longman, 2007, 702n) construes the image as referring to a different moment in Paul’s epistles (II Corinthians 3:18), but Paul is speaking in that later passage of seeing under the dispensation of Grace, when the veil of the Law has been taken away. Spenser is speaking here of the seeing that *requires* a veil. “Through a glass darkly” is, of course, a notoriously ambiguous figure: the Greek word, “esoptron,” may refer to either a mirror or a lens. Modern translators often opt for “clarification” (“For now we see in a mirror dimly,” RSV), though the better-known Geneva (and Authorized) version arguably does a better job of capturing the genuine mystery of the original, which is to say, the genuine incommensurateness of temporal and eternal perspectives.

[6] *Geneva Bible*. 1560. Facsimile rpt. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969. Print.

[7] “Whilom A.3.” *OED*. 2nd ed. 1989. Print.

[8] Anchises’ prophecy in *The Aeneid*, Book 6, and Merlin’s chronicle in *FQ* Book III are prime examples.

[9] As the scene itself, of prohibited seeing, is a resonantly redundant but tonally oppositional version of Calidore’s vision on Mount Acidale (*FQ* VI.x.5-29).

[10] “He could him not containe,” writes the poet (VII.

vi.46).

[11] “Dare v<sup>2</sup>.” *OED*. Print.

[12] See Derek Attridge, *Well-Weighted Syllables: Elizabethan Verse in Classical Metres*. London: Cambridge UP, 1974 and Jeff Dolven, “Spenser’s Metrics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser*, ed. Richard A. McCabe (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 385-402. Print.

[13] Attridge, 76. Cited in Dolven, 396.

[14] Wallace Stevens. *Collected Poems*. New York: Knopf, 1968, 68. Print.