The Triumph of Mutabilitie

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Edmund Spenser's long, daunting *The Faerie Queen* combines political allegory with some of the most flickering, ambiguous poetry in English.

Reviewed: **Edmund Spenser and the Eighteenth-Century Book** by Hazel Wilkinson and

Spenserian Moments by Gordon Teskey

The Faerie Queene is one of the longest, and by many accounts slowest, poems in the English language but it gets off to a vigorous start, with a clatter of hoofbeats, the glint of armor, and a shiver of unease:

A Gentle Knight was pricking on the plaine,
Ycladd in mightie armes and silver shield,
Wherein old dints of deepe woundes did remaine,
The cruell markes of many' a bloody fielde;
Yet armes till that time did he never wield.
His angry steede did chide his foming bitt,
As much disdayning to the curbe to yield:
Full jolly knight he seemd, and faire did sitt,
As one for knightly giusts and fierce encounters fitt.

A steady iambic beat carries knight and reader smoothly across the first four lines (with a showy assist from "ycladd," an archaic formulation even in 1590, when the poem first appeared in print). The plot thickens at line 5—the armor may be battle-tested, but the knight wearing it isn't. In the closing couplet an anxious energy hovers around the verb "seemd": Are we in safe hands or not?

The answer, as it turns out, is both. The knight—his name is George, as in Saint George, patron of England, though we won't learn that for some time—is a thoroughly decent sort, full of good intentions and, despite his inexperience, eager to serve the fair and virtuous lady who rides into the poem at stanza four. Her name is Una (we don't know that yet, either), and she's the daughter of a king and queen whose realm is menaced by an "infernall feend," a dragon that lays waste to the countryside, forcing the terrified populace into hiding. It's up to the Redcrosse Knight, so called for the emblem on his armored breast and shield, to save the day: slay the dragon, marry Una, and restore the kingdom.

And he does, eventually—some five thousand lines later, which is to say, a bit less than one sixth of the way through the poem—over the course of a three-day battle drenched in gore, dragon guts, and Christological references. Again and again the knight girds himself for combat only to be humiliatingly rebuffed, losing first his horse, then his armor, and finally his red-crossed shield. Twice he falls into a death-like swoon, as Una watches anxiously from afar. At last, on the morning of the third day, miraculously healed of his wounds and naked as the day he was born, the knight rises, takes his sword in hand, and plunges it into the dragon's ravening mouth. The fiend collapses, in a stanza whose slow, ritualistic cadence tolls the passing of an ancient and abiding foe:

Philip Mould Ltd, London/Bridgeman Images

A portrait traditionally considered to be of Edmund Spenser, though disputed by modern scholars, circa 1600

So downe he fell, and forth his life did breath…
So downe he fell, that th' earth him underneath
Did grone…
So downe he fell, as an huge rocky clift,
Whose false foundacion waves have washt away…
So downe he fell, and like an heaped mountaine lay.

But that victory is a long way from the opening stanza—as far off as the end of the world, theologically speaking—and before the knight can attain it, he, we, and Una are made to feel the full weight of that first skeptical "seemd." For the dragon is in some ways the least of the knight's problems. *The Faerie Queene* isn't simply a genre-bending hybrid of classical epic, medieval romance, and English folk mythologies; it's also an allegory, which means that the knights, ladies, monsters, dwarves, satyrs, witches, beasts, and wicked enchanters who roam its pages are on constant double duty.

While these characters are the fictive inhabitants of Spenser's Faerie Land—a fantastical version of Elizabethan England, riven by conflict, seething with imperial ambition, and governed by a dazzlingly powerful and tantalizingly remote female monarch, Gloriana, the titular Faerie Queene—they are also avatars of a shifting array of moral, ethical, spiritual, and psychological forces, their conflicts and conjunctions meant to reflect the ongoing struggles of virtue and vice, faith and falsehood, within society and the individual soul. Every element in the poem has at least two possible meanings—fictive and allegorical, literal and symbolic—but the relation between them is neither stable nor clearly defined: not every action or event points to an obvious moral; some gorgeous ladies or gardens are evil and others simply gorgeous; occasionally a dwarf is just a dwarf.

The turbulence of the poem—the sense that the ground of interpretation is shifting beneath our feet—isn't simply a matter of allegory; it's also a product of history. Spenser was born into a newly Protestant realm during the brief reign of Edward VI, following Henry VIII's protracted and intensely politicized break with Rome. He spent his early childhood under the revanchist Catholic regime of Queen Mary, came of age during the heated conflicts between Church of England moderates and Puritan reformers under the Protestant Elizabeth, and lived most of his adult life in the stubbornly Catholic outposts of colonial Ireland. *The Faerie Queene* boldly inserted itself into the controversies of its time, offering pointed and often pained commentary on matters global and local, spiritual and mundane. As the "Letter of the Authors," appended to the unfinished three-volume first edition of 1590, declares, "The generall end…of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline."

The chief object of its fashioning was the imagined royal reader to whom it was optimistically dedicated: "The most high, mightie, and magnificent Empresse, Renowned for pietie, vertue, and all gratious government, ELIZABETH." The temerity of that gesture is hard to overstate; in 1590 Spenser was a midranking bureaucratic functionary of the colonial state and the author of a well-received but anonymously published collection of pastoral verse, *The Shepheardes Calender*, printed more than a decade earlier in 1579. Although he aspired to friendship with aristocratic tastemakers like Philip Sidney and Walter Raleigh, his own origins were decidedly middle class, and his closest connection to the intellectual elite was his friend Gabriel Harvey, a Cambridge academic with a talent for making enemies and alienating people. It's the mingled force of Spenser's anxiety and ambition we feel in the poem's opening stanza, accounting for its daring and its doubt.

As for the Redcrosse Knight, however eager he is to play the lead in a chivalric romance, he is woefully unprepared to serve as the allegorical embodiment of a militant and reformed English Protestantism. For much of book 1, he is less the champion of holiness than its unwitting foil. He gets off to a strong start by slaying the monster Errour but promptly makes a monstrous error of his own, choosing to take the word of a deceitful

enchanter over that of his beloved Una. Believing she has betrayed him, he abandons her for a dissolute and increasingly disastrous career of freelance knight errantry.

The climax of the book thus comes not, as we might have expected, when the knight confronts the dragon but when he discovers the truth of his allegorical being. Overcome by the giant Orgoglio, a grotesque embodiment of his own swollen pride, he is rescued from a humiliating imprisonment by Una, with the assistance of a young Prince Arthur. Subjected to a stern regimen of fasting and prayer, he dwindles to a negative image of himself, hollowed out by guilt and shame—until he is ready for the influx of grace. At this point in the poem, the veil between fiction and allegory becomes nearly transparent, as an old man named Contemplation reveals to the knight his name and his calling, as the patron saint of England and one of God's elect. Spenser's protagonist and his reader are on the same page at last.

But rather than greet the good news of his salvation with gratitude or joy, the knight recoils from it, first out of a predictable if misplaced sense of unworthiness and then, more interestingly, out of a lingering attachment to the poem he thought he was in—that is, the poem about a knight, a lady, a dragon, and a heroic quest. Over the space of a single stanza, the voice of the bewildered, newly baptized knight alternates with that of the visionary old man, until the two blend in a shared and deeply ambivalent revelation of the transience of all creation, the world of the poem and the poem that is the world:

"Unworthy wretch," (quoth he) "of so great grace,
How dare I thinke such glory to attaine?"
"These, that have it attaynd, were in like cace,
As wretched men, and lived in like paine."
"But deeds of armes must I at last be faine
And Ladies love to leave, so dearely bought?"
"What need of armes, where peace doth ay remaine,"
(Said he) "and bitter battailes all are fought?
As for loose loves they'are vaine, and vanish into nought."

The idea that men are wretches and salvation an unearned gift is Reformation orthodoxy, but it poses a profound threat to the knight's fictive being: What is the point of epic or romance, heroic achievements or grand passions, in the unsparing light of eternity? A more moderate believer, or a less daring poet, might look for an out—a *via media* for Protestant poetics—but Spenser doesn't flinch; with the dragon unkilled and most of *The Faerie Queene* yet to come, he makes his elaborate artifice bow to the apocalyptic truth that must end it.

Why bother going on at all, then, and at such enormous length? It's a question that bedevils *The Faerie Queene* and the history of its reception. In *Edmund Spenser and the Eighteenth-Century Book*, Hazel Wilkinson argues that *The Faerie Queene* was the original unread classic: the emblematic textual commodity of an age in which book ownership expanded from the domain of aristocrats and scholars to become a bourgeois expression of taste. As the philosopher David Hume dryly remarked in his 1759 *History of England*, "Spenser maintains his place upon the shelves of our English classics; but he is seldom seen on the table."

By the end of the seventeenth century, Wilkinson suggests, *The Faerie Queene*'s topical references were out of date or merely incomprehensible, while its allegorical density and pseudo-archaic diction had come to seem wholly obsolete. Joseph Addison wrote in his 1694 verse "An Account of the Greatest English Poets":

Old Spenser…*warm'd with Poetick Rage,*
In Antick Tales amus'd a Barb'rous Age;…

But now the Mystick Tale, that pleas'd of Yore,
Can Charm an understanding Age no more;
The long-spun Allegories fulsom grow,
While the dull Moral lies too plain below.

Addison later confessed to Alexander Pope that he hadn't actually read *The Faerie Queene* when he wrote those lines, but he didn't need to read it to know how to condescend to it.

When Addison finally got around to reading the poem more than a decade later, he was startled by what he found in it: not only an allegory—which he continued to find tedious—but an atmosphere and a style, what he called the "Fairy Way of Writing." Wilkinson's project traces that Spenserian affect—at once stately and fanciful, imperially grand and appealingly gothic—across the whole of eighteenth-century English culture, from poetry and fiction to architecture, theater, political propaganda, sculpture, painting, and landscape gardening. She finds traces of *The Faerie Queene*'s influence everywhere, but strikingly little evidence of sustained engagement with the text, even by those who claimed the strongest affinity with it. John Gay's *Shepherd's Week*, written in Spenserian stanzas in 1714, "was one of the most successful Spenserian pastorals of the century," Wilkinson notes, "but in 1726 Gay told Swift that he had still only got through 'half Spenser's Fairy Queen.'" Popular verse miscellanies extracted the poem's most vivid episodes, with little regard for moral content or narrative context; Queen Caroline commissioned a thatched hut for the royal gardens at Richmond, dubbing it "Merlin's Cave" and populating it with waxwork figures modeled on Spenserian characters—although, tellingly, there was no consensus on which characters they were supposed to be.

Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The Redcrosse Knight defeating Errour; illustration by William Kent, from the 1751 edition of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*

Even as Spensermania spread, printed editions of *The Faerie Queene* remained prohibitively expensive and came encumbered with increasingly dense editorial apparatuses and scholarly commentaries. The two annotated editions of *The Faerie Queene* printed in 1759, one by John Upton and the other by Ralph Church, hardly sold; the market for *The Faerie Queene* was dominated by secondhand books, and even those did not come cheap. Not until John Bell's 109-volume series *The Poets of Great Britain*, launched in 1777, could a copy of *The Faerie Queene* be had for sixpence—inexpensive enough for a school-aged Leigh Hunt to purchase with pocket money. A copycat series by Robert Anderson contained the first edition of *The Faerie Queene* exported to America, where, according to family legend, it became the first book the young Nathaniel Hawthorne purchased with his own money. Wilkinson tracks the progress of Anderson's highly portable Spenser among the close-knit members of the Wordsworth ménage: John Wordsworth took his copies of Spenser to sea before loaning them to his brother William, while sister Dorothy borrowed Coleridge's set to read while cooking dinner, walking in the Lake District, and mending William's waistcoat. "Publishers' series brought Spenser out of the antiquarian study, or the aristocratic closet," Wilkinson writes, "and into the kitchen, the living room, and even onto coaches and ships."

Well, *some* kitchens and coaches: the Wordsworths were hardly a typical family, any more than Hunt and Hawthorne were typical schoolboys. On the contrary, the eighteenth-century fad for Spenser that Wilkinson so ably documents seems to have cemented his reputation as a poet who was *not* to be read, or, at least, not at any length, his "qualities…best savoured through fragmentary or occasional reading rather than by close study." Thus James Russell Lowell advised would-be admirers of *The Faerie Queene* not to spend more than an hour or two with the poem, "long enough to sweeten the perceptions, not so long as to cloy them."

By the start of the twentieth century, *The Faerie Queene* had been abandoned to academics, who, in T.S. Eliot's sardonic judgment, deserved it: "Who, except scholars…or others who have deliberately studied themselves into the right appreciation, can now read through the whole of *The Faerie Queene*?" Virginia Woolf was blunter still. To those eager to cultivate an appreciation for Spenser, she counseled, "The first essential is, of course, not to read *The Faerie Queene*."

Wilkinson's book helps make sense of that apparently nonsensical dictum. In the period of its greatest cultural influence, she shows, *The Faerie Queene* thrived as much on ostentatious allusion and strategic avoidance as on readerly attention. But as Gordon Teskey demonstrates in a new collection of essays, those willing to look past the poem's daunting reputation and its bristling armature of scholarly impedimenta might discover a lifelong—indeed, life-sustaining—obsession. Teskey is best known as a Miltonist, and his writing on *The Faerie Queene* has an appealing whiff of the extracurricular. These are occasional pieces, written over the course of a three-decade-long infatuation with a poet whose defects and limitations are fully evident to him.

In fact, Teskey likes Spenser for many of the reasons that others have taken against him: because he is both dogmatic and self-contradictory, fiercely opinionated and flagrantly inconsistent; because the grandly unified plan he announces for *The Faerie Queene* (an epic in twelve books, on the Homeric and Virgilian model) is so conspicuously at odds with the fragmentary and digressive text he actually produced (an epic-cum-romance-cum-philosophical-treatise in first three, then six, then six-and-a-bit books, on no model whatsoever); because his poetic gift is so intense and erratic, blazing forth in some lines only to collapse into dullness in others. Teskey calls his book *Spenserian Moments*, and it is the fleeting, flickering, variable quality of the poet's genius that he cherishes. This is what, in his view, most distinguishes Spenser from Milton:

Spenser is ideologically incoherent and subversive, whereas Milton is not; Spenser is uncertain, tentative, and exploratory, whereas Milton never is; Spenser is distractible, whereas Milton is not; Spenser surprises himself by thinking new things, which Milton never does; above all, Spenser's poem moves forward in pulsatile moments, whereas Milton's poems are architectonic structures. Milton's poems take time to read, of course, but they stand out of time, rigidly sublime and immobile, like mountains without weather. This is never so with *The Faerie Queene*. There is plenty of weather in it.

To those who regard *The Faerie Queene* as an impossible ordeal, Teskey points out that Spenser seems to have found it that way, too. His original plan for the poem, hazily outlined in the "Letter of the Authors," consisted of a dozen interrelated allegorical quests, each starring a knight or cohort of knights tasked with embodying and defending a particular virtue. Along the way, the knights would receive assistance and encouragement from the young Prince Arthur, whose own quest to find and marry Gloriana would be completed in the poem's final episode. It's Arthur, then, and the idealized England for which he stands, that is the ultimate object of the poem's fashioning.

In Arthur, Spenser writes, "I labour to pourtraict…the image of a brave knight, perfected in the twelve private morall vertues"—and, he adds, in a rush of alarming optimism, if that poem is received well, he will write another, devoted to Arthur's reign as king and illustrating the twelve "polliticke vertues." Perhaps mercifully, that vision never came to pass. Not only did Spenser fail to write his imagined sequel, he published only half of the proposed twelve books—the Legends of Holiness, Temperance, Chastity, Friendship, Justice, and Courtesy—before his death in 1599. And over the course of those six books, the design of the whole fades increasingly from view.

So, for that matter, does Arthur himself, who mixes with an ever-proliferating cast of characters and wanders out of the poem for ever-longer stretches. As the structure of the poem grows more diffuse, an atmosphere of disillusionment inevitably sets in. The shift from the three-book version of 1590 to the six-book version of 1596 strikes many readers as an anticlimax, or even a reversal: book 4, the Legend of Friendship, focuses far more on rivalry and resentment than on companionship and care; book 5, the Legend of Justice, offers a notoriously grim rendering of Spenser's role in Elizabeth's inept and brutal colonial government in Ireland; and the sixth and final book, the Legend of Courtesy, ends with the escape of the terrifying, twittering Blatant Beast, a monstrous incarnation of public opinion whose thousand tongues drip poison and whose saw-edged teeth force the poet into a bitterly defensive crouch: "Therefore do you, my rimes, keep better measure,/And seeke to please; that now is counted wisemens threasure," reads the closing couplet.

If it weren't for an odd fluke of literary history, that would have been the end—the poet died in penury three years later, having fled an anticolonial insurgency that set fire to his Irish estate and ended his political career. But in 1609, ten years after Spenser's death, the publisher Matthew Lownes produced a deluxe folio edition of *The Faerie Queene*, in which the disenchanted conclusion of book 6 was followed by an unexpected postscript: "Two Cantos of Mutabilitie," which, we are told, "both for Forme and Matter, appeare to be parcell of some following Booke of the *Faerie Queene*, under the Legend of *Constancie*." Lownes doesn't explain—and to this day no one knows—how he came to acquire these two additional cantos (in reality, two cantos and the two-stanza beginning of a third, a fragment trailed by a fragment), or on whose authority they were added to *The Faerie Queene* or assigned to a hypothetical Legend of Constancy. But in some sense, no explanation is needed. The Mutabilitie Cantos justify themselves: they are, by near universal agreement, the ideal ending to *The Faerie Queene* and, in Teskey's view, the best poetry Spenser ever wrote.

Their perfection inheres in imperfection: the ragged coda to an unfinished epic, a disappointing career, and a life cut short, they offer a reflection on the inevitable failure of any earthly project. The fable of the proud titaness Mutabilitie, whose cleverly crafted legal case against the Olympian gods is thwarted by the judgment of Nature

itself, prompts the poet to meditate on the potency and transience of his art. Mutabilitie argues on her own behalf: that all things change, from the names of the supposedly eternal gods to the motions of the planets, so that "within this wide great *Universe*,/Nothing doth firme and permanent appeare"—not the heavens themselves, or the imaginary beings with which we wishfully populate them.

It's a contention that brings *The Faerie Queene*—that great Protestant poem—to the brink of atheism, and although Nature's verdict sternly refutes it in the lines that follow, the poet himself can't seem to set it aside. "When I bethinke me on that speech whyleare,/Of *Mutability*, and well it weigh," he admits in the poem's penultimate stanza, "Me seemes, that though she all unworthy were/Of the Heav'ns Rule; yet very sooth to say,/In all things else she beares the greatest sway." The next and final stanza offers not a logical response to this stark revelation of human frailty but a movingly equivocal plea to one day see otherwise, resting in the confidence of eternity: "O that great Sabbaoth God, graunt me that Saboaths sight." Poetry can "confer a visionary firmness on the fleeting world of experience," Teskey observes, but these lines amount to a confession of poetic incapacity, even a prayer for poetic annihilation: "All things burn."

As ever, Spenser's genius inheres in self-contradiction. To reconsider Mutabilitie's claim, if only to reject it yet again, might be taken as proof of its legitimacy: our very minds change in the exercise of judgment, momentously, casually, or without our recognizing it. The Reformation itself was evidence of that, however hard its proponents tried to brand it as a return to an unaltered originary truth, and the particularly wayward course it took in England suggested that no profession of faith, whether public or private, could be taken as absolutely final. Only death puts an end to our indecision. The posthumous addition of the Mutabilitie Cantos to the poem suggests that, for *The Faerie Queene*, even death doesn't always do the trick. The author dies—but the poem goes on.

"Without being insensible to the defects of The Faerie Queene," the poet Robert Southey wrote to a friend in 1811, "I am never tired of reading it." Teskey never tires either. Some of his fixations are widely shared: the "Letter of the Authors," for example, and the Mutabilitie Cantos, which together elicit his most persuasive insights into the indeterminacy of poetic form and the limits of scholarly certainty. Other preoccupations feel more particular and idiosyncratic: for instance, a moment from canto 11 of book 1, in which the Redcrosse Knight finally faces his dragon foe. The battle itself is among the most famous set pieces in *The Faerie Queene*, and deservedly so, a sublime and cinematic display of epic grandeur that is also an all-out theological assault on the delusions of epic.

What interests Teskey, though, is a throat-clearing stanza just before the battle begins, in which the poem's narrator tells us not to expect him to exert himself to his greatest efforts; he is saving those for another battle, between the amassed forces of the Faerie Queene and an unnamed pagan king, leader of a "Sarazin" army with whose blood the fields of Britain will be soaked, and another poetic project, "A worke of labour long, and endlesse prayse." It's a strange moment for many reasons, not least of which is that it gestures to a narrative that appears nowhere in any version of *The Faerie Queene*, not even in the hypothetical twelve- or twenty-four-book poems hinted at in the 1590 "Letter of the Authors."

Perhaps for that reason, I don't know of any critic who has devoted much time to it: it's a red herring, one of the poem's many tantalizing—or, depending on your point of view, tedious—loose ends. But Teskey returns to this stanza multiple times over the course of his book, picking it up and puzzling over it, arriving at a different conclusion each time. In an early essay on Spenser's debts to other poets, he sees it as a token or relic of Spenser's attachment to the great sixteenth-century Italian epics of Boiardo, Ariosto, and Tasso, with their grand culminating clashes of Christian and pagan forces. He imagines Spenser "haunted" by the possibility of drawing his own unruly poem to such a satisfying climax and settling, temporarily, for something less.

In the very next chapter, however, Teskey reminds us of the reference only to suggest that the main difference between Spenser and his Italian precursors is how untroubled the English poet is by the errancy of his design: "He doesn't need to pull himself up for a great siege of Paris or of Jerusalem; he doesn't strive to escape the gravitational tug of romance for the higher sphere of epic." A chapter further on, he quotes the stanza again in its entirety, and argues that it represents a longing for moral certainty and poetic purpose Spenser could neither shake nor satisfy—an aspiration perpetually deferred and mattering most, perhaps, for that reason. A chapter later and the stanza is back, this time (perplexingly, to my mind) as proof of the essentially secular and earthbound character of Spenser's poetic ambition, even in the midst of his poem's most overtly religious book, the Legend of Holiness.

One of the virtues of a book comprising essays written over the course of three decades is that we see how a writer and reader changes his mind, while also returning, almost in spite of himself, to the same persistent problems. The problem of the stanza about the Faerie Queene and the pagan king is that it doesn't belong to the poem in which it appears—it belongs to the poem Spenser didn't finish, or perhaps to one he never began. In that sense, Teskey's lingering preoccupation with it mirrors his preoccupation with the 1590 "Letter of the Authors" and the Mutabilitie Cantos: what he loves in *The Faerie Queene* are the constant reminders that the project of the poem—the *thinking* of the poem, as he calls it—remains unfinished, open to speculation, improvisation, and doubt. As he puts it:

A poetic project like *The Faerie Queene* cannot be viewed by its author as an object, as a shorter poem might be. It is a path on which he has set out, a way of life, an environing world that becomes indistinguishable from the poet's life and also indistinguishable from his mind.

It started as an aspiration, and it stays that way.

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