

His Earnest unto Game: Spenser's Humor in *The Faerie Queene*

by

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Few scholars have considered Spenser's humor in *The Faerie Queene* a significant index to the author's aim and technique.¹ Indeed, some have concluded that he lacked a sense of humor. Dodge observes, for example, that readers often find Spenser tedious.² Courthope, Spence, and Grierson describe him as a "languid storyteller," "deficient in a sense of humor," "insensible to the humor of others."³ Legouis objects to the narrator's belief that Chaucer's spirit survives in Spenser (IV.ii.34.6-7).⁴ Mackail smiles at the "comedy of life" which he sees in Book III but insists that he is smiling at "unconscious humor."⁵ Of course, these and other evaluations of Spenser may reflect a time-honored view of the author as a "sage and serious poet . . . a better teacher than Scotus and Aquinas," the result of numerous comparisons of Spenser and Milton.⁶ On the other hand, frequent studies of Spenser and Ariosto may also have contributed to scholars' overlooking the possibility that Spenser's brand of humor might widely differ from that of one of his models.⁷ The point is, however, that these observations tend to infer the incompatibility of high purpose and humorous intent, so much so that he who finds humor in the midst of passages heavily weighted with allegorical import currently risks challenging the sincerity of Spenser's convictions.⁸

At the same time, some maintain that Renaissance theories of decorum allowed a serious poet mere pittance in tools and tonal variety, although Tuve clearly points out that ". . . the principle of decorum has more than once been turned by historians of criticism into admonitions no respectable ghost would repeat."⁹ Certainly, statements of the decorum principle by major Renaissance theorists are notably general, not precise, as, for example, Puttenham's commentary upon high, mean,

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¹Josephine Waters Bennett, *The Evolution of The Faerie Queene*, pp. 284-253, argues that the poem is not ". . . the history of a melancholy Puritan moralist struggling to make an epic out of Aristotle's ethics."

²R. E. Neil Dodge (ed.), *The Complete Poetical Works of Spenser*, p. 133. This edition supplies the quotations from Spenser used in this study.

³*Variorum Spenser*, I, 373; 378; 336.

⁴*Ibid.*, IV, 178: "Actually, no one could be more different from Chaucer. Spenser has none of his geniality and humor, no insight into individual character, and little of his cleverness and animation as a storyteller."

⁵*Ibid.*, III, 221: ". . . over and over Book III moves a smile in the reader, but never once in the writer."

⁶Graham Hough, *A Preface to The Faerie Queene*, p. 224. Hough speaks out against those who insist on Spenser's "community of spirit" with Milton.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 9-48.

⁸Cf. R. E. Neil Dodge, "Spenser's Imitations from Ariosto," *PMLA*, XII (1897), 155 ff. Also, Margaret Erskine Nicolson, "Realistic Elements in Spenser's Style," *SP*, XXI (April, 1924), 391.

⁹Rosemund Tuve *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, p. 232.

and base style.¹⁰ Like Wilson, Puttenham specifies figures which he deems appropriate to each level, but both men's distinctions are not always clear, their lists do not always show the same system of classification, and their choices of phrases and figures rarely are restricted to any one style.¹¹ Generally, *high style* means, for them, eloquent amplifications, leisurely similes, and majestic figures, but neither man actually limits poetic technique and tonal variety. Most Renaissance charges of indecorum grow out of an extensive use of the aforementioned devices, and, significantly, Puttenham's criterion for high style is that of "nothing in excesse."¹² Furthermore, in *Of That Which the Latines Call Decorum*, he admits that there are ". . . many other cases whereof no generall rule can be giuen"¹³ In conclusion, he states that rules for the decorum of high style "holdeth not alike" in all cases—an attitude contrary to the views of later historians of criticism.¹⁴

Renaissance manuals also subscribe to rhetorical-poetic theories concerned with the production of tonal variety. Clearly, Renaissance poets frankly endeavored to move their audience, having no apparent delusions about the attention-span of readers or listeners who, according to Sidney, ". . . are childish in the best of things, till they be cradeled in their graues."¹⁵ And in "Of delityng the hearers and stirryng them to laughter," Wilson states that men of dull wit must be "refreshed or finde some swete delite" if exposed to "any tale long tolde," further explaining that the learned have provided these dullards with *much varietee*:

Therefore, sometymes in tellyng a weightie matter, thei bring in some heuy tale, & moue them to be right sory, wherby the hearers are more attentie. But after when thei are wried, either with tediousnesse of the matter, or heuines of the report: some pleasant matter is inuented both to quicken them again & also to keep them from satietie.¹⁶

The Faerie Queene is a *tale long tolde*, obviously brimful of the *varietee* to which Wilson alludes.

Spenser also employed many of the conventions of the popular verse romance in a work mainly designed for a sophisticated courtly audience, perhaps often amused in anticipating how the effects thus produced might fall upon less discriminating ears. Lewis has shown that Spenser's Italian models (Boiardo included) used similar conventions with ". . . a smile half of amusement and half of affection."¹⁷ And

¹⁰George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, p. 124: "But generally to haue the stile decent & comely it behooueth the maker or Poet to follow the nature of his subiect, that is if his matter be high and loftie that the stile be so, to, if meane, the stile also to be meane, if base, the stile humble and base accordingly"

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 127.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 128: "But generally the high stile is disgraced and made foolish and ridiculous by all wordes affected, counterfait, and puffed vp, as it were a windball carrying more countenance then matter . . . and sentences that hold too much of the mery & light, of infamous & vnshamefast are to be accounted of the same sort, for such speaches become not Princes, nor great estates, nor them that write of their doings to vtter or report and intermingle with the graue and weightie matters."

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 224.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 228.

¹⁵Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apologie for Poetrie*, p. 40.

¹⁶Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetorique*, p. 159.

¹⁷C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, p. 299.

Hough notes that, while Ariosto mocks both the extravagances of romance conventions and the entire pattern of chivalric thought, Boiardo feels a "genuine homesickness" for the aristocratic social idea when dealing with the conventions of knight-errantry with a sophisticated indulgence.¹⁸ Thus, it is Boiardo, who creates a romantic tale from a mixture of humor and sincere expressions of idealism, and it may be that Spenser, in method, is closer to him than scholars have thought. But Spenser was also acquainted with the tradition of medieval love poems in which a poet protected himself ". . . against the laughter of the vulgar . . . by allowing laughter and cynicism their place inside the poem."¹⁹ For the medievalist, this kind of humor (some of it roughly satiric) implied not that an author intended to mock but that he understood the complexity of life and recognized that the vulgar or lighter point of view was present, at some time, in the minds of all.²⁰ For these and other reasons, Fowler is convinced that Spenser understood the psychology of medieval humor.²¹ Even so, Spenser's purpose in writing *The Faerie Queene* ("to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline") places the poem in the category of Renaissance handbooks for courtiers and probably accounts in part for his apparent determination to insure a balance between study (seriousness of purpose²) and recreation ("honest mirth?"). Undoubtedly, he was aware of the desirability of *earnest* and *game* in the lives of the nobility, *game* being, in fact, one of his favorite terms.²² Thus, to comprehend the nature and extent of Spenser's use of humor in *The Faerie Queene*, one must first consider three aspects of the poem in which, ironically enough, many scholars have detected a seriousness of purpose: *e.g.*, his use of worthy *sententiae*; his coinages and meaningful names; and his passion for acknowledging sources. In these three unlikely areas, it can be seen that Spenser was, at all times, fully conscious of his use of humorous material.

Probably nothing is more disturbing to the modern reader than the Renaissance willingness to disguise outright statements as proverbs and maxims.²³ Temple notes that ". . . the pill was Gilded, but so thin that the Colour and the Taste were too easily discovered."²⁴ Lowell explains that ". . . whenever you come suddenly on the moral, it gives you a shock of unpleasant surprise, a kind of grit, as when one's teeth close on a bit of gravel in a dish of strawberries and cream."²⁵ However, for the Renaissance mind, this practice did not suggest an author's naïveté or reflect any facet of his temperament; instead, it was an indication of *purpose* (to teach and delight), associated with the belief that the pursuit of truth involves the cooperation of all the faculties, as Puttenham shows in his comment upon the interaction of imagination and judgment:

¹⁸Hough, *op. cit.*, pp. 223-234.

¹⁹Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 173.

²¹*Variorum Spenser*, II, 293.

²²C. G. Osgood, *A Concordance to the Poems of Edmund Spenser*, p. 337.

²³Grace Frank, "Proverbs in Medieval Literature," *MLN*, LVIII (November, 1943), 508-515.

²⁴*Variorum Spenser*, I, 314.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 312.

. . . and of this sorte of phantasie are all good Poets, notable Captaines stratagematique, all cunning artificers and enginers, all Legislators Polititiens & Counsellours of estate, in whose exercise the inuentiue part is most employed and is to the sound & true iudgement of man most needful.²⁶

The Renaissance author, unlike the modern, saw no competition between direct and indirect methods, between explicit statement and ellipsis, between proverb and metaphor. He did not consider direct methods naïve, or indirect ones sophisticated, believing, instead, that both must cooperate in the communication of a truth. In the best of Renaissance writers, this cooperation of methods is often most subtle.²⁷ Thus, once a reader appreciates that the *sententiae* in *The Faerie Queene* represent far more than the naïve expressions of a "sober poet," he will be prepared to detect the tonal variety in the narrator's use of a seemingly inexhaustible supply of proverbs and aphorisms.

Although Spenser's narrator can be, and often is, profoundly earnest, at times he also wishes his statements to be at odds with the narrative. For example, when he remarks, ". . . so dainty, they say, maketh derth" (I.ii.27.9), he refers not to a shamefast heroine whose gentle modesty makes her esteemed, but to Fidessa in the very act of duping the Red-crosse Knight. Similarly, when he asserts, "T'adore thing so divine as beauty were but right" (III.vii.11.9), he infers not the just actions of a noble character, but those of a witch who "thought her to adore" fair Florimell. Here, despite allegorical implications associated with the power of beauty, the witch's intentions are most unlikely, as Spenser and his narrator know—thus, the latter's veiled excuse couched in the form of a sententious remark. In his comment, "Hard is to teach an old horse amble trew" (III.viii.26.3), he again invests a commonplace with humor, referring to the lecherous carle who attacks Florimell in the boat. There is conscious humor, as well, in his statement, "Sweete is the love that comes alone with willingness" (IV.v.25.9), concerned as it is with a feud over *false* Florimell, who, because she is a sprite, is incapable of loving a mortal. In the Radigund-Artegall conflict, the narrator's ironic use of *sententiae* becomes apparent when he remarks, "No fayrer conquest then that with goodwill is gayned" (V.v.7.9), since it is clear to the reader that the "conquest" is certainly not "gayned" by means of Artegall's "goodwill," but by his pity. Nor is it, for that mater, exactly "fair," because Radigund uses femininity as her chief weapon in all of her encounters with men. Similarly, when Sir Calidore, disguised in shepherd's weeds, sets out to woo Pastorella, the narrator evokes humor in his use of *sententiae* by emphasizing the irony in the spectacle of a knight engaged in humble, rural "battle" (IV.ix.37.9).

Other characters, in addition to the narrator, make use of this device. For example, the sentiment that honor is the only fit reward for knightly deeds is ridiculous when coming from the mouth of Braggadocchio

²⁶Puttenham, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²⁷See Tuve's discussion of Book I of *The Faerie Queene*, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-60. Also, Smith's study of "Sententious Theory in Spenser's Legend of Friendship," *Variorum Spenser*, IV, 327-333.

(III.x.29). Trompart parodies the serious speeches of Una and the Palmer, warning Malbecco of the dangers lurking in the woods: ". . . therefore advise ye well, / Before ye enterprise that way to wend: / One may his journey bring too soone to evill end" (III.x.40.7-9). Were one to extend this catalogue, the basic principle would remain the same, further illustrating that Spenser does not always expect his *sententiae*, to be taken in earnest, but often as indications ". . . of how the best of sayings may be perverted to the worst of meanings."²⁸ Trained in Renaissance rhetorical-poetic theories, he constantly seeks delicate and witty modifications of sententious thought. Thus, the reader who unreflectingly accepts all of Spenser's *sententiae* at their solemn face value may find himself the butt of the poet's humor.

On the other hand, scholars have often noted Spenser's fondness for meaningful names, but few have realized, in this connection, his enthusiasm for courtly intellectual games. Draper, however, has observed that, while *The Faerie Queene* lacks the names most commonly associated with popular romances, it contains, nevertheless, an abundance of classical coinages. Furthermore, he points out that names like Cymochles, Eumnestes, Turpine, Corceca, and Eurypulus lend an esoteric air to the poem, assuming that only the learned of Spenser's day might have comprehended the full significance of the involved Latin and Greek roots.²⁹ He suggests, therefore, that Spenser may have believed ". . . there is nothing more pleasing than a knowledge of what the profane vulgar may read, but cannot grasp."³⁰ In this respect, Heiatt notes Spenser's subtle distinction between *Aié* and *Atin*; the *deceit* declared in *Malengin*; or the appropriateness of *Georgos* to the Redcrosse Knight.³¹ Whatever Spenser's motive, he plays humorously with names, as revealed in the following instances: *Fidessa* (ironically, false religion in the poem) is derived from *fides*, or *faith*; *Philemon* (the false friend) is derived from the Greek word for *love*; and *Phaedria* is derived from the Greek word for *gay*, "used on the comic stage in connection with a young man sowing wild oats."³² Furthermore, Satyrane (natural morality) proves himself to be no satyr when he belies the conventional meaning of his name in protecting Una's honor. Serena, also, is not serene, her adventures being among the most melodramatic in the poem. In addition, Spenser coins names in the midst of passages otherwise close to classical source, yet these effects are generally lost upon modern readers mainly ignorant of the authorities. However, Spenser's contemporaries would have taken much delight in a sudden discovery of these coinages.³³ With humorous intentions, he also carefully refrains from identifying a character until he has described its physical appearance, a method enabling him to reveal the character's name at the very moment in the nar-

²⁸*Variorum Spenser*, quoting Upton, II, 246.

²⁹J. W. Draper, "Classical Coinage in *The Faerie Queene*," *PMLA*, XLVII (March, 1932), 97-108.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 108.

³¹A. K. Heiatt, "Spenser's *Atin* from 'Attine'?" *MLN*, LXXII (April, 1957), 249-251; Burton Mulligan, "Spenser's *Malengin* and the Rogue-Book Hooker," *PQ*, XIX (March, 1953), 146-148.

³²Draper, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 97.

rative when identification is highly pertinent—and humorous. For example, he first identifies Malecasta by name when, thinking Britomart to be a man, she plots her entrance into the latter's bed chamber (III.i.57); and he first names Serena when she wanders happily into gentle fields wherein lurks the Blatant Beast to destroy her serenity (VI.iii.23). Spenser's conscious use of this ancient device for arousing reader curiosity is particularly evident in the later books of the poem.

The Renaissance respect for worthy sources, like its enthusiasm for meaningful names, may also elude the modern reader, especially when authors make light of the convention, since one tends to forget that the Renaissance viewed authorities as a means of enlightenment and amusement. Thus, Hughes finds Spenser's canto on ancient British history (II.x) an entertaining digression, suggesting that Spenser's use of sources, in some cases, may be a sophisticated method for producing humor.³⁴ However, when the poet is concerned with literary, mythological, or historical sources, he omits, adds, changes, combines, or accurately reproduces his material as it suits his purposes, establishing no uniform pattern.³⁵ For example, it is difficult to believe that the narrator is serious in declaring that he will tell of Chrysogone "As it in antique bookes is mentioned" (III.vi.6.3), since the mythology which then unfolds is purely of Spenser's own fabrication.³⁶ For that matter, even when the tales consists of a combination of well known sources, Spenser permits the narrator to burlesque romance conventions by citing twice as many authorities for episodes that are the least credible. Specifically, his tale of Merlin contains not only an unusual amount of allusions to vague authorities, but also an unexpected address to the reader, impossible to accept as Spenser's solemn pronouncement:

And if thou ever happen that same way
To traveill, go to see that dreadful place:
It is an hideous hollow cave (they say)
Under a rock

(III.iii.8.1-4)

Next, the narrator instructs the reader to place an ear to the cave entrance to hear a ghastly sound that will "stonn [his] feeble braines." Here, Spenser's lighter vein implies not so much his lack of serious purpose as perhaps his amusement over the peril of the excessively documented romance. But to observe how the poet frequently turns his earnestness unto game, one must reconsider other instances of overlooked humor in the poem, namely in his depictions of evil characters, his battle-tournament sequences, his use of the swoon, and his manipulation of coincidence.

³⁴*Variorum Spenser*, II, 301

³⁵Cf. C. W. Lemmi, "Monster-Spawning Nile-Mud in Spenser," *MLN*, XLI (April, 1926), 234-238; Lemmi, "The Serpent and the Eagle in Spenser and Shelley" *MLN*, L (March, 1935), 165-168; Roscoe E. Parker, "Let Gryll Be Gryll," *PQ*, XVI (April, 1937) 218-219; J. L. Livesay, "An Immediate Source for *The Faerie Queene*, Book V, Proem," *MLN*, LIX (November, 1944) 469-472; J. C. Maxwell, "Guyon, Phaedria, and the Palmer," *RES*, V (October, 1954), 388-390; C. A. Harper, *The Sources of the British Chronicle History in Spenser's Faerie Queene*, pp. 172-185.

³⁶*Variorum Spenser*, III, 248.

In his descriptions of evil characters, Spenser reveals a strong sense of the ludicrous, although often he has been censured for these humorous effects. It is difficult to believe, however, that he was totally unaware of the relative humor to be found in strange juxtapositions and extravagant deformities, especially since Wilson includes *deformitee* in a list of humorous devices recommended to the orator and poet,³⁷ and Sidney points out that men "laugh at deformed creatures."³⁸ Nevertheless, Cory concludes that Spenser goaded himself into "rhetorical excess," the result being passages that "sink into the grotesque."³⁹ On the other hand, some scholars maintain that Spenser's evil characters should be *consistently* terrible, in spite of the fact that Renaissance standards promote variety.⁴⁰ Again, one refers to Sidney, who explains that ". . . those things which in themselves are horrible, as cruell battailes, vnnatural Monsters, are made in poeticall imitation delightful."⁴¹ Actually, Spenser's representations of evil are always extremely complex, as, for example, his celebrated disrobing of Duessa, revealing a creature at once terrible, grotesque, obscene, unnatural, and odious (I.ix.46ff). No single adjective will suffice. Yet, some scholars argue that the alternating passages of the serious and the comic in the poem are Spenser's means of producing "comic relief." However, this view is greatly oversimplified, for Spenser usually depicts evil in its many guises as the dreadful, repulsive, filthy, stupid, awkward, ridiculous, and sinful thing that it is—thus, a mixture of the serious and the comic. For example, his account of the battle between the Redcrosse Knight and the dragon contains grave allegorical implications associating the monster with Satan. Nevertheless, one suddenly realizes that this particular beast makes all of the dragons of the earlier romances seem like runts. His tremendous body, "flaggy wings," blazing eyes, brazen scales, "cruel rending claws," and huge, long tail convince Wells that ". . . every part is glorified and gains . . . something very nearly approaching wonder."⁴² It may be true, but one also suspects that Spenser is toying with the reader, here, leading him to assume that this awesome manner is to be sustained in the monster's subsequent actions. However, the fellow turns out to be an amazingly stupid actor! At the start of the conflict, he cannot decide to fly or run, so he charges, "halfe flying and halfe footing in his haste" (I.xi.8.2). In his movements, he resembles an oversized puppy as he bounds ". . . on the brused gras, / As for the joyaunce of his newcome guest" (3-4). Although his tail is three furlongs in length and capable of delivering a fatal whiplash, he uses it only to "brush" both knight and horse to ground (9). Although he grasps them in his mammoth wings, he has not the sense to release them from great heights so as to bring about their immediate destruction (18). Ultimately, he determines with rashness to swallow the knight in a single action, but, upon opening

³⁷Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

³⁸Sidney, *op. cit.*, p. 66: "We laugh at deformed creatures, wherein certainly we cannot delight."

³⁹*Variorum Spenser*, I, 294.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, I, 363, quoting Spence.

⁴¹Sidney, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁴²Whitney Wells, "Spenser's Dragon," *MLN*, XLI (March, 1926), 143-157.

his gaping mouth, he exposes his most vulnerable parts to the sword (53). Here, Spenser's discrepancy between the preliminary description of the dragon and the later account of the monster's stupid actions seems intentional as the basis for his humor within the episode.

Similarly, in the pageant of the Seven Deadly Sins, it is obvious that he produces ridiculously discordant effects within the "six unequal beasts" guided by Satan (I.iv.18.37). Here, the ass travels with the hog, the goat with the camel, the wolf with the lion, each team composed of "ludicrously assymetrical beasts with absurd gaits,"⁴³ a method reminiscent of the poet's other representations of evil characters whose strange qualities he exaggerates until they verge upon the ridiculous: e.g., Até with her preposterous two-sidedness (IV.i.27); Disdain, "stalking like a stately crane" (IV.viii.42); Grantorto, who "gaped like a gulfe when he did gerne" (V.xii.15); Geryoneo, whose teeth resemble "a rancke of piles, that pitched are awry" (V.xi.9.9); and the Blatant Beast's bizarre tongues (VI.xii.26). It is foolhardy, here, to accuse Spenser of rhetorical excesses, for clearly these are examples of his humor in incongruity.

Spenser's battle-tournament sequences, however, have not always been favorably received, probably because scholars have often failed to appreciate the humor therein. Dodge is convinced that Spenser was not interested in these passages.⁴⁴ Lewis thinks they reveal Spenser's incompetency as a poet.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, there is a surprising amount of intentional humor in these accounts, especially in those passages in which the narrator burlesques the conventions of the earlier romances when a tournament or battle was an occasion for an incredibly tedious account of completely irrelevant circumstances, such as a catalogue, for example, of the names of trumpeters, or an itemized list of the number and contents of banquet fare. It is with much delight, therefore, that one observes Spenser's narrator methodically (and knowingly) dismissing the paraphernalia of the tournament in connection with the "spousals" of Florimell:

To tell the glorie of the feast that day,
The goodly service, the devicefull sights,
The bridegromes state, the brides most rich aray,
The pride of ladies, and the worth of knights,
The royall banquets, and the rare delights
Were work fit for an herauld, not for me.
(V.iii.3.1-5)⁴⁶

Whether the narrator considers the task suited to himself or not, he next behaves like "an herauld" and offers a catalogue of the names of obscure knights (V.iii.5), thus, revealing the trick of *occupatio*. Furthermore, he rarely misses an opportunity in these battle sequences to parody the thrashing and hewing of the older romances, often playing hyperbole against understatement, as when strokes thick as hail merely "daunt" Cambell and cause him "somewhat to relent" (VI.iii.25); or when Errour

⁴³*Variorum Spenser*, I, 217, quoting Padelford.

⁴⁴R. E. Neil Dodge (ed.), *The Complete Poetical Works of Spenser*, p. 133.

⁴⁵Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 347.

⁴⁶See also, I.xii.14; III.i.32; III.i.42; IV.v.12; V.xi.9; V.x.14.

vomits her deadly black poison with gobbets raw that "stunk vildly," merely to "annoy" the Redcrosse Knight (I.i.20-25); or when the knight's mighty blows serve only to make the dragon "impatient" (I.xi.25); or when the narrator describes a puddle of contagion evil enough to cause a man to be "nigh awhaped" (V.xi.32).

As for Spenser's "battle strategy," frequently in asides the narrator calls attention to a well worn motif. For example, when Lust uses Amoret as a shield (IV.vii.26), the narrator observes, "And if it chaunst (as needs it must in fight)." Similarly, after explaining the shifting relationships, the result of the quarrels of Paridell, Florimell, Blandamour Braggadocchio, Cambell, and Triamond, the narrator concludes:

It often fals, (as here it earst befell)
That mortall foes doe turne to faithfull frends,
And friends profest are chaunged to foemen fell.
(IV.iv.1.1-3)

These, and other similar examples, are the narrator's means of apologizing for Spenser's having subjected the reader to the tiresome romance conventions. However, the ancient formula to which Spenser most frequently resorts is that of the hero's bidding his time until his adversary has become tired with lively hacking, thrusting, and slashing (IV.iii.26; V.v.6; VI.vii.46; VI.viii.14). Upon at least two occasions, the narrator apologizes openly to the reader for having repeated a formula. First, when Artegall yields to Grantorto:

So did the Faerie knight himselfe abeare,
And stouped oft, his head from shame to shield;
No shame to stoupe, ones head more high to reare,
And, much to gaine, a litle for to yield:
*So stoutest knights doen oftentimes in field.*⁴⁷
(V.xii.19.1-5)

Later, in the account of the struggle between Pastorella and the Captain of the Thieves (in which Spenser slightly varies the formula), the narrator makes a second straightforward apology:

She thought it best, for shadow, to pretend
Some shew of favour, by him gracing small,
That she thereby mote either freely wend,
Or at more ease continue there his thrall:
A little well is lent, that gaineth more withall.
(VI.xi.6.5-9)

In connection with these passages of conflicts and battles, the device of the chase, which Spenser uses to separate his characters, plays an important part in developing his humor. For example, the narrator senses that the reader who observes the circumstances of Amoret's flight will probably recall similar circumstances surrounding the earlier account of Florimell's flight. Thus, when Timias, Lust, and Amoret are separated (as previously had been Arthur, Florimell, Timias, and the Forester), the narrator remarks, "It so befell, *as oft it fals in chace*" (IV.vii.24.1-2).

⁴⁷The italics here and in the next three quotations are the present author's.

However, his most ingenious apology occurs in Book VI, when he attempts to gloss over the fact that the encounter between Arthur and the giant, Disdain, closely resembles the earlier clash between Arthur and the giant, Orgoglio, in Book I. Here, unostentatiously, he attempts to prepare the reader for a repeat performance by reminding him that Disdain is ". . . sib to great Orgoglio, which was slain / By Arthure, when as Unas knight he did maintaine" (VI.vii.41.8-9). These representative passages show that Spenser was aware of romance clichés and was conscious, at the same time, of elements of humor therein for his own strategic management of battle sequences.

At the same time, there are other examples of Spenser's humor in these passages not so directly related to romance conventions. Occasionally, in the middle of the narrative, Spenser inserts lines which produce bathos, as, for example, those in the episode wherein Britomart strikes Scudamore with such force

That to the ground she smote both horse and man:
Whence neither greatly hasted to arise,
But on their common harmes together did devise.
(IV.vi.10.7-9)

Or, later, when Britomart meets Radigund in spirited contests:

Ne either sought the others strokes to shun,
But through great fury both their skill forgot,
And practicke use in armes: ne spared not
Their dainty parts, which Nature and created
So faire and tender, without staine or spot,
For other uses
(V.vii.29.3-8)

Similarly, in the course of an encounter with Radigund, Artegall delivers her such a bold stroke that ". . . had she it not warded warily, / It had depriv'd her mother of a daughter" (V.iv.41.6-7). Again, when the Souldan is mutilated with iron hooks, the narrator explains, "So was this Souldan rapt and all to-rent, / That of his shape appear'd no little monument" (V.viii.18.8-9). Furthermore, when Artegall strikes Grantorto, "He lightly reft his head, to ease him of his paine" (V.xii.23.8-9). Finally, Calepine demonstrates a special technique for fighting bears:

. . . catching up in hand a ragged stone,
Which lay thereby (so Fortune him did ayde)
Upon him ran, and thrust it all attone
Into his gaping throte, that made him grone
And gasp for breath, that he nigh choked was,
Being unable to digest that bone.
(VI.iv.21.2-7)

The humor in these and other similar passages ranges widely from the lines which frankly sport with jingling words ("And sternely with strong hand it from his handling kept" VI.v.21.1), to those with subtle punning, as when the head of the incontinent Forester falls ". . . backward on the continent" (III.v.25.7).

However, Spenser's most interesting use of combat humor involves his employment of the swoon and epic simile. Characteristically, his combatants clash with such force that one (or both) must be granted time in which to swoon. During this period while they are unconscious, the narrator steps in to deliver a lively epic simile, usually concerned with the cruel battles in the natural world. The simile ended, Spenser returns to the swooning knights, now gazing about in "amaze."⁴⁸ Thus, his contrast between the narrator's animated delivery of the simile and the near paralytic condition of the two knights establishes his grounds for the humor in the scene. However Green considers this pattern a sign of artistic failure,⁴⁹ apparently ignoring the swoon as Spenser's means of introducing the narrator's digression, the effect of which is close to that produced by a present-day television commercial, interrupting the flow of narrative to hawk a commodity or sell a point of view. Moreover, the swoon is used differently in other circumstances in the poem. Especially amusing is its effect when, for the benefit of Arthur (and the reader), it is introduced to curtail Una's tiresome account of her tribulations (I.vii.52.1). There are, as well, the melodramatic antics of Paridell, the "learned lover," whose bag of tricks for the seduction of young ladies includes the swoon: "He sigh'd, he sobd, he swownd, he perdy dyde, / And cast himselfe on ground her besyde" (III.x.7.4-5).⁵⁰ Again, the old lecher, Malbecco, swoons in fright at the approach of Paridell (III.x.37.7). Finally, there is the scene in which Arthur purposely lies down to swoon (VI.vii.19), not in the sun, but in the shade. As Spenser handles this device, the swoon permits digressions, arouses reader sympathy, excuses failure, or conveys the aesthetics of a given situation, usually with humorous intentions and effects.

Spenser's use of coincidence also produces humor, although scholars are prone to emphasize only its function in conveying profound themes. Arthos thinks it is closely associated with fate throughout the poem.⁵¹ Renwick explains how it raises the question of mutability.⁵² Hawkins thinks it related to the power of Providence.⁵³ Williams believes it is Spenser's device for probing the subject of Divine Grace.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, there are times in which it is obviously the springboard for Spenser's illustrations of worldly humor. Is there not, for example, humor of a conscious type in the narrator's comments upon the ingenious twists of Spenser's plot? The sudden arrival of a band of Britons bearing armor especially suited to Britomart at the very moment when it is badly needed prompts this observation: "It fortun'd (so time their turne did fitt)" in III.iii.58.3. Again, the narrator intrudes upon the scene with

⁴⁸Zaidee E. Green, "Swooning in *The Faerie Queene*," *SP*, XXXIV (April, 1937), 126-133.

⁴⁹Zaidee E. Green, "Observations on the Epic Similes in *The Faerie Queene*," *PQ*, XIV (July, 1935), 217-228.

⁵⁰Green, "Swooning in *The Faerie Queene*," pp. 126-133.

⁵¹John Arthos, *On the Poetry of Spenser and the Form of Romances*, p. 86.

⁵²W. L. Renwick, "Philosophy," in *Spenser's Critics: Changing Currents in Literary Taste*, p. 160.

⁵³Sherman Hawkins, "Mutabilitie and the Cycle of the Months," in *Form and Convention in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser*, pp. 76-102.

⁵⁴Kathleen Williams, "Courtesy and Pastoral in *The Faerie Queene*, Book VI," *RES*, XXIII (November, 1962), 342.

the comment, "As good fortune fell" (V.xii.4.3), when Artegall and Talus "happen" to find a ship waiting to transport them to the land of Grantorto. In Book VI, as the reader (with the narrator's help) is made aware of the use of coincidence, he becomes conscious of an emerging theme of Divine Grace, closely associated with "Courtesie." Yet, here, too, there are passages in which the narrator is amused by Spenser's extravagant use of the device. For example, when the Salvage man arrives at the crucial moment to rescue Calepine, the narrator observes, "Such chaunces oft exceed all humaine thought" (VI.iii.51.8). It is clear, at least, that the narrator has no illusions about the number of "miraculous rescues" which a patient reader will tolerate in the course of a *tale long tolde*. Furthermore, the Calepine-Matilde episode in Book VI may be considered in terms of Spenser's use of coincidence. Herein, Calepine "happens" to find an infant, before he "happens" to meet Matilde, who "happens" to need such a child (VI.iv.22.40). Thereafter, the lamentable dame lives up to her title in her dramatic recounting of her trials, during which insufferable interlude, Calepine is made incredibly uncomfortable by the infant in his arms. His plight greatly amuses the narrator who refers to the child as Calepine's "lovely little spoile" when the screaming infant is most offensive to the knight. Thus, when Calepine finally hands over the child to Matilde, there is undeniable relief and humor in his remark, "Lo! how good fortune doth to you present / This little babe, of sweete and lovely face" (VI.iv.35.3-4)!

Although this present investigation has by no means exhausted the subject of Spenser's humor in *The Faerie Queene*, it has made clear that the poet's consistent mingling of *earnest* and *game* is perhaps a significant aspect of his aim and technique throughout the long epic. The numerous examples of discordant harmony in the work reveal his sense of the compatibility of serious purpose and humor wherein, in Spenser's own words, ". . . discord oft in musick makes the sweeter lay" (III.ii.15.9). Spenser's idea of harmonious complexity must lie, therefore, somewhere within his determination to "turne his earnest unto game," an attitude which invites a more sympathetic consideration of his use of humor in the poem.

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