

Spenser's Parody

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A discussion of parody, not to mention one of sympathetic parody, has to start with an attempt at definition, at setting reasonable limits to what threatens to be all-inclusive. If parody at its outermost limits is simply a borrowing or imitation of an earlier work with evident variation which may be more or less mocking, it seems to be another word for that complex of "revisionary ratios" that Harold Bloom sees as characteristic of all art.¹ Bloom's Freudianism affirms that all artists labor under a need to assert their identity by assimilating and overthrowing their predecessors, killing their fathers. As the Beatles almost put it, "There's nothing you can do that isn't done, / Nothing you can sing that isn't sung." If all art is secondary and imitative, and all imitation is parody, then sympathy would seem to be one of the inescapable filial emotions vis-à-vis the parent whom one loves and resents and needs to replace. If you are looking for sympathetic parody, all you need is to find the family romance in the text.

Edmund Spenser, the poet's poet, affords a likely site for such a search, since by temperament and historical moment he consistently and conspicuously flags his relationship to prior texts. I propose, therefore, to look at a few passages in the 1590 *Faerie Queene* and ask how they might usefully be described as parodic.

The opening stanza of the poem illustrates the combination of imitation and variation that we find throughout Spenser's project. The first four lines are an apparently straightforward imitation of the opening of the *Aeneid* as it was known to the Renaissance:

Lo I the man, whose Muse whylome did maske,
 As time her taught, in lowly Shephards weeds,
 Am now enforst a farre vnfitter taske,
 For trumpets sterne to change mine Oaten reeds [...]²

Spenser had indeed taken care to imitate this *rota virgiliana* by previously publishing a pastoral volume under the pseudonym of "new Poet" or "Immerito." In the fifth line, however—which is the turning point of the nine-line Spenserian stanza as it was not, of course, for Virgil—he announces a subject which is not Virgil's "arms and the man" but a version of Ariosto's parody of that subject: "And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds," "Le donne, i cavalier, l'arme, gli amori / le cortesie, l'audaci imprese io canto."³

Here again, Spenser seems to be giving a straightforward version of the prior text: "gentle deeds" can be taken as the deeds natural to knights and ladies, namely courtesies and bold undertakings. The remaining four lines of the stanza provide an elaboration or gloss that will affirm or modify our reading of this as an Ariostan project:

Whose praises hauing slept in silence long,
 Me, all too meane, the sacred Muse areeds
 To blazon broade emongst her learned throng:
 Fierce warres and faithfull loues shall moralize my song.

The verb "moralize" has leapt out at nineteenth-century readers of the poem, since the *Orlando furioso* seemed to them anything but moralistic. And if Spenser's sixth line, "Whose praises hauing slept in silence long," translates Ariosto's promise of "Cosa non detta in prosa mai né in rima [I.2]," this very claim to novelty is itself traditional, like Milton's similar version of Ariosto, "Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme."⁴ Furthermore, Spenser's mention of a "sacred" Muse at the outset of a book of "Holinesse" has led readers to question her identity, whether she is one of the classical nine, the muse of history or epic say, or a new, Judaeo-Christian one—another question that Milton will brood over when he appeals to his own heavenly muse.

This stanza can stand, then, both as a token of Spenser's complex relationship to his sources and as a first instance of what I am propos-

ing as “sympathetic parody.” Thomas H. Cain observed in 1972 that the fifth line turns to Ariosto just at the point where Spenser’s rhyme scheme diverges from Ariosto’s, and that the ninth line summarizes or revises Ariosto’s subject just where Ariosto’s octave is superseded by the Alexandrine of a Spenserian stanza—thereby realizing quite literally the ambition to “overgo Ariosto” attributed to him by his friend Gabriel Harvey.⁵ As a piece of bravura performance, this detail certainly demonstrates the new poet’s claim to mastery of his medium, and it seems at the same time to embody a claim to a nobler subject. Orlando’s madness is a story of “faithful love” gone wrong, and it is only his recovery of sense at the end of Ariosto’s poem that enables him to return to the fierce wars that will bring him his heroic status as well as his death. Spenser’s moralized song is of a knight whose fierce battles culminate in the killing of the dragon and whose faithful love for Una culminates in his betrothal to her once the dragon is dead and her parents’ city liberated. And yet, for most of the Book the knight is holding fast to the shield of Sans Foy and dallying with Duessa; so it can be argued that the promised moral coexists with just as much wandering knight-errantry as Ariosto had provided.

There is a parodic subtext, therefore, to many if not all of Spenser’s claims to overgo and correct his predecessors. We can see it in the first description of the Red Cross Knight, whose understanding of his quest seems dangerously naive:

Vpon a great adventure he was bond,
 That greatest *Gloriana* to him gaue,
 That greatest Glorious Queene of *Faery* lond,
 To winne him worshippe, and her grace to haue,
 Which of all earthly things he most did craue [...]

The plethora of superlatives here captures the uncritical enthusiasm of an inexperienced knight who is simultaneously pricking his horse and trying to rein him in, burning rubber as it were; and it may also hint at a similar excess in the poet’s own conclusion to his proem three stanzas earlier, when he addresses his queen:

[...] O Goddess heauenly bright,
 Mirrour of grace and Maiestie diuine,
 Great Lady of the greatest Isle, whose light
 Like *Phoebus* lampe throughout the world doth shine [...]

We might say that this extravagant praise of the Virgin Queen is the norm for her poets, and as such itself verges on self-parody. If we sense a certain parallelism of knight and narrator at the outset, we shall be the better prepared to respond to other parodic echoes of previous texts.

The first adventure begins with a sudden shower, when "angry *Ioue* an hideous storme of raine / Did poure into his Lemans lap so fast, / That euerie wight to shrowd it did constrain." As a version of the creation myth, the marriage of Earth and Sky, the sweet showers that enable the *Canterbury Tales*, Spenser takes two lines from Virgil's *Georgics* (ii.325-26) which speak of the almighty father descending in fecund showers into the lap of his happy bride, and translates them into what seems to anticipate Freud's notion of a child's primal scene of apparent violence in the marriage bed.⁶ The catalogue of trees that follows when Redcrosse and Una shroud themselves in the Wood of Error is at once another demonstration of the poet's credentials—as Hamilton observes, it echoes similar catalogues in Chaucer and Virgil, and especially Ovid's "story of Orpheus, the archetype of the poet's power to move trees and gather a forest around him." But this catalogue, while it praises the variety and usefulness of God's creation, moves from trees of good omen to those of dubious or evil associations, from the "sayling Pine, the Cedar proud and tall," to the "Mirrhe sweete bleeding in the bitter wound" that gave birth to Adonis, to the trees that end the two final lines of these stanzas, the "Cypresse funerall" and the "Maple seeldom inward sound." Led with delight in this Dark Wood, the knight and his lady come to Errour's cave: the bravura of Spenser's catalogue thus literalizes what seventeenth-century poets recognized as the risk of one's delighted praise of God's delightful creation: "Stumbling on Melons, as I pass, / Insnar'd with Flow'rs, I fall on Grass."⁷ Furthermore, the monster that Redcrosse

discerns by the light of his own virtue is both serpent and female: "But th'other halfe did womans shape retaine, / Most lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine."

This projection of a female shape onto a concept of error looks forward to the particular form of this knight's temptation and fall. The "litle glooming light, much like a shade," that enables Redcrosse to see—or imagine—this monster is both the product of his virtue and the source of his undoing, as his dreams the following night make clear. He rejects the direct appeal to his own desire but is quick to believe a vision of his lady in the arms of another squire, and is soon on the path to Sans Foy and Duessa. We seem not to be so far removed, then, from the erotic wanderings of Ariosto's knights: what is different is the moralizing of the song. Spenser has taken the knight-errantry of romance epic and charged it with the language of moral error rather than confused or wilful wandering. In Una's words, from her point of view as symbolizing or embodying the "oneness" of truth, Error is "A monster vile, whom God and man does hate." The confusion of number or case in this sentence suggests that Error hates God and man, and we hate Error. The hatred is evident, on the parts of both knight and lady, but what they hate is still the fallen human condition of wandering in a dark wood.

I think it helps to speak of two kinds of parody here, and also of two objects of such parody. The first is the parody we have been discussing, the echoes of Ariosto's echo of Virgil. Romance takes its start from the aftermath of Troy's fall and the wanderings of its survivors; chivalric romance is a distant or oblique look at a nation's and more immediately a patron's origins in a line which will eventually be started when Bradamante or Britomart finds her destined husband and stops wandering. Ariosto may seem, then, to be differing from Virgil in emphasizing the number of knights and ladies, the number of threads in his tapestry; but his goal is finally the same. It was Virgil who combined and transformed the two strands of Homeric epic, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, arms and the man, and rewrote the homecoming of Odysseus to the search for a new home and wife—and nation—by

Aeneas. So it was Virgil's rewriting of the Homeric story that constituted the original parody, in the terms I have been positing.

The word "parody" or *παρωδία* is used by Aristotle to denote a poem in which serious words are cited in a new context, as burlesque, and this word comes (I am informed by Messrs. Liddell and Scott) from *παρωδός*, singing indirectly, obscurely hinting. So parody with a long *o* or omega is a parallel ode, singing another version of an existing song. I'd like to invoke another unscientific or folk etymology of my own, however, which seems metaphorically apt when we consider how parodies actually function. This is parody with a short *o* or omicron, as in the Greek word *πάροδος*, a byway or passage, a coming forward, as when a chorus enters and sings before the action of a play gets under way. This word, derived not from *ὠδή*, ode, but from *ὁδός*, path or journey, suggests a parallel path or action, the road not taken by one's prior text. When we speak of sympathetic parody, we are indicating our awareness that at heart the parody is taking an alternative route toward much the same fundamental point that the thing parodied had reached. Ariosto's knights and ladies may be far more boisterous and unpredictable than Virgil's, but at the end of the poem we see Bradamante marrying Ruggiero and founding the Este dynasty, just as Aeneas and Lavinia had founded the Roman line, and as Odysseus had returned to his own family; and we see Orlando no longer furious but now pointed toward his own tragic end, like Turnus or Achilles. One could say the same, I think, about a more obviously satirical parody like *The Rape of the Lock*, where Belinda's airy world is destroyed as surely as Troy had been, but where she is urged to adapt to her loss and look forward to her new life—including marriage—in her own smaller but no less precious world.

Spenser's poem does not only talk the talk of verbal parody, it also walks the walk along the plot lines I am proposing here. In the first Book, Redcrosse's resistance to temptation irrevocably sets him on a route toward temptation and fall, and we are shown the parallel story of Fradubio, a lusty squire who never thinks of resisting his girlfriend Fraelissa but falls prey to Duesza none the less: in Book I, all roads

lead to our re-enactment of the Fall, and to our need for rescue. And Spenser's architecture of the larger poem similarly emphasizes parallel structures, so that in Book II the elfin knight Guyon must run a complementary course, similar to that of Redcrosse but mysteriously opposite as well, the course of temperance rather than holiness: "we, where ye haue left your marke, / Must now anew begin, like race to ronne" (II.i.32). At times Book II seems a virtual parody of the preceding book, since the steadfast Una is now referred to as the "Errant damozell" and Guyon must conclude his mission by liberating a young knight from a Bower of Bliss that echoes Redcrosse's state at the end of Book I, "swimming in that sea of blisfull ioy" (I.xii.41) he had attained by winning Una—although in moral terms it more nearly resembles Duessa's dungeon from which Arthur had to rescue Redcrosse. The parallelisms and contrasts between the first two books of the poem have been the subject of extended debate by mid-twentieth-century Spenserians: is the contrast between Holiness and Temperance a contrast between the orders of Grace and Nature, for example, as Woodhouse famously claimed?⁸ What seems more interesting to readers today is the dreamlike echoing that we find everywhere in the poem, what Nohrnberg calls the "analogies" of the poem⁹ and what I am calling the poem's sympathetic parodies—sympathetic, perhaps, in the sense in which we speak of sympathetic vibrations, echoes that reverberate and deepen meaning.

If Book I opens by suggesting a moral divergence from the material of chivalric romance in the Ariostan mode, it relies for this moralizing on a specifically Protestant mindset in its reader. When we are informed that the aged hermit who has invited Redcrosse and Una to his cell "told of Saintes and Popes, and euermore / He strowd an *Aue-Mary* after and before [I.i.35]," we know he must be up to no good. And Duessa is repeatedly characterized in terms that similarly echo Protestant rhetoric: masquerading as Fidessa, she descends from a Western, post-schismatic faith, and Redcrosse's fornication with her is what preachers in the English church have warned us against lest we be tempted by the gaudiness of Romish trappings. Both in the lan-

guage of religious controversy, with its markers signifying confessional loyalties, and in its enactment of the dominant metaphors of this language, the story of Redcrosse is of a young knight who is seduced into betraying the oneness of Truth and falling into a doubleness that is embodied both by duplicitous figures and by his own division "into double parts" (I.ii.9). There is no doubt that Duessa is bad; but readers may still feel uncomfortable with the passionate loathing that she awakens. Spenser's analogizing or parodistic mode makes us aware that if an irrational horror of female otherness informs Redcrosse's first view of Errour it also informs negative views of Duessa as well—both when Fradubio speaks of her "neather parts" which he could not see but imagined to be "more foule and hideous, / Then womans shape man would beleue to bee" (I.ii.41), and when Una herself strips her rival before Redcrosse's disenchanted eyes (I.viii.45-50).

It seems, then, that Spenser's parody of the stereotypes of religious difference reveals at least a hint of sympathy where we would least expect to find it. Perhaps he is like the John Donne that recent critics have come to see,¹⁰ aware of a complex and conflicted relationship to the Old Religion of his ancestors and reflecting this conflict in the unfinished business of his story. Duessa and Archimago retain the power to interrupt the celebration of Redcrosse's betrothal to Una; though they are refuted, they are only bound temporarily and it is clear that what is repressed will return. Reformation, in the imaginative world of Spenser's poem, is only a stage in a continuing cycle of forming, deforming, and reforming. The victory of the knight of Holiness generates a need for a knight of Temperance.

As Spenser's poem unfolds, his relationship to Ariosto's mode of chivalric romance becomes increasingly sympathetic, as the limitations of his moralized song become more complex. I wish to comment more fully on two instances of Spenser's parody of Ariosto's opening stanzas. The first comes at the beginning of Book III, where Guyon is unseated by a mysterious stranger who, we are told, is Britomart, the possessor of an enchanted spear. He is so humiliated by this defeat

that it is up to his Palmer and Prince Arthur to calm the champion of Temperance by suggesting that it was his horse's fault, or the fault of a "page, / That had his furnitures not firmly tyde." Thus although we are told that the reconciliation between the two knights is "knitt, / Through goodly temperaunce, and affection chaste," we can see that the temperance is achieved by means of a diplomatic duplicity. The narrator continues:

O goodly vsage of those antique times,
 In which the sword was seruaunt vnto right;
 When not for malice and contentious crymes,
 But all for prayse, and prooffe of manly might,
 The martiall brood accustomed to fight:
 Then honour was the meed of victory,
 And yet the vanquished had no despight:
 Let later age that noble vse enuy,
 Vyle rancor to avoid, and cruel surquedry. (III.i.13)¹¹

The first lines of this stanza echo Ariosto's "Oh gran bontà de' cavalieri antiqui!" (I.22) which opens a stanza translated by Harington (1591) as follows:

O auncient knights of true and noble hart:
 They rivals were, one faith they liv'd not under;
 Beside they felt their bodies shrewdly smart
 Of blowes late given, and yet (behold a wonder)
 Through thicke and thin, suspition set apart,
 Like friends they ride and parted not a sunder
 Untill the horse with double spurring drivd
 Unto a way parted in two arriued.¹²

Writing in 1897 on "Spenser's Imitations from Ariosto,"¹³ Neil Dodge cited this borrowing, where Spenser provides moral generalizations in lieu of Ariosto's comic specifics, as showing that "The conclusion is clear. When Spenser read the *Orlando furioso* he read it in the light of his own serene idealism." But in fact this citation of an Ariostan marker clearly indicates that Spenser is moving into the comically mixed motives of Ariosto's world. This is shown, first, by Guyon's intemperate response to Britomart's brusque victory over

him—and it is all the more emphatic if we remember that at a comparable moment in Book II Guyon is urged by Archimago to fight Redcrosse but veers away lest he attack the Red Cross, “The sacred badge of my Redeemers death” (II.i.27). What is more, this citation of Ariosto is immediately followed by an episode in which Florimell passes across the landscape pursued by a “griesly foster”—whereupon Guyon and Arthur pursue the damsel, Timias pursues the Foster, and Britomart, “whose constant mind, / Would not so lightly follow beauties chace, / Ne reckt of Ladies Loue, did stay behynd.” This both imitates the Ariostan incident and doubles the fun of it. In Ariosto, Rinaldo and Ferrau have been fighting a duel over Angelica when they notice that she has escaped on her palfrey, whereupon they agree to share a single horse and capture her before they continue the contest to enjoy her. If we have been reading Spenser carefully, we will have noticed that Guyon and Arthur are sharing Arthur’s horse (Guyon has lost his own, Brigadore), Spumadore, the “fomy steed” of stanza 5; they share a common passion in their pursuit of Florimell, “in hope to win thereby / Most goodly meede, the fairest Dame alieue”—something we might not have expected either of Arthur, with his search for Gloriana, or of the Guyon whose presumably less erotic commitment to the Fairy Queen made him proof against Mammon’s offer of Philotime in II.vii.50. Timias’s pursuit of the Foster is marginally more chivalrous, probably, a pursuit of the honor that his name betokens. But Britomart’s indifference to the pursuit seems the product less of her chastity than of the fact that she is looking for a man, not a woman. In short, this is a parody of Ariosto that overgoes him in comic effect, and one that prepares us for a treatment of “chastity” that makes it anything but a matter of just saying no.

Finally, if we return to the opening stanzas of the *Furioso*, we can find a statement of Ariosto’s programme that Spenser moves more explicitly toward with each successive book. Stanzas one and two deal respectively with versions of the Virgilian subject, arms and the man. In the first stanza, the poet promises to tell of all the courtesies and bold undertakings that took place when the Moors had crossed over

from Africa and threatened Charlemagne in their determination to avenge the death of Troiano, father of their leader Agramante. The second stanza promises to tell at the same time the story of Orlando, "Cosa non detta in prosa mai né in rima," who was driven by love to madness, though he had been held so wise a man previously—if, the poet continues, she who has had virtually the same effect on me lets me finish what I have promised. Thus Orlando's madness is paralleled by the poet's.

Spenser had begun his poem with a version of the Virgilian *ille ego, qui quondam ...* formula, lines possibly by the poet but rejected today by editors who feel that they violate the tradition of epic anonymity;¹⁴ lines which personalize the poem and affirm the poet's position in and over it. Ariosto's comic affirmation of his own love-madness is a variation on this authorial presence, and follows perhaps in the grand Italian tradition of poets writing under the influence of their Beatrice, Laura, or Fiammetta. It is only toward the end of the sixth Book, the end of the second installment in 1596 that had brought the poem to the midpoint of its promised twelve-book structure, that Spenser audaciously introduces his own pastoral persona, Colin Clout, into the action of the Book of Courtesy, and apologizes to his Queen for intruding a "minime" or short note of song to his own Elizabeth. Calidore's glimpse of his poet conjuring up the Graces brings the *rota virgiliana* full circle.

That this is an Ariostan moment is shown not only by the verbal parallel that I have cited from the opening of the *Furioso*, but by a structural parallel as well. Ariosto's poem of 46 cantos is divided into two parts, and Harington's 1591 translation made the division explicit with a note at the end of canto 23: "Here end the first xxiii bookes of Ariosto." Canto 24 begins with a brief autobiographical note: to those who will rebuke him for blaming the madness of Orlando when he suffers from the same fault, the poet replies that he is enjoying a brief moment of lucidity in his own love, so that he can see more clearly that love is madness, though he is not yet himself cured. This parallelism of self-reference at crucial points in the two halves of each poet's

work can hardly be a coincidence. And in fact Sonnet 33 of the *Amoretti* makes the connection explicit:

Great wrong I doe, I can it not deny,
 to that most sacred Empresse my dear dred,
 not finishing her Queene of faëry,
 that mote enlarge her living prayes dead:
 But lodwick, this of grace to me aread:
 doe ye not thinck th'accomplishment of it
 sufficient worke for one mans simple head,
 all were it as the rest but rudely writ [...]¹⁵

Editors have taken this Lodwick to be Spenser's friend Lodowick Briskett; but it can equally—and simultaneously—be the Ludovico Ariosto who imagines his friend reproaching him in the same way. What we see here, I think, is a kind of sympathetic parody that is at the heart of romance: the author emerges as engaging the matter of a prior epic poem, and he figures finally as the central figure in that revision or re-formation of the old story. Writing of Boiardo, Charles Ross has spoken of the "derangement" of epic in the romance, inventing a term inspired by Fredric Jameson's comments on the relation of the two forms.¹⁶ Ross's term is useful to the extent that it suggests the deranged quality of narration, based on the conventions of dream visions, for its sense of a dreamer who ranges through an imaginary space and time where the same story keeps appearing with variations and inversions. I think that some such movement from an earlier form to its deforming and reforming by a later poet is what we find when we look at sympathetic parody.

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NOTES

- ¹Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: OUP, 1975).
- ²Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton, rev. ed. with text ed. Hiroshi Yamashita and Toshiyuki Suzuki (London: Longman, 2001), I, proem.1.
- ³Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando furioso*, ed. Emilio Bigi (Milano: Rusconi, 1982), I.1.
- ⁴See Ernst Robert Curtius, *Latin Literature and the European Middle Ages*, translated by Willard R. Trask (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1953) 85-86.
- ⁵"Spenser and the Renaissance Orpheus," *UTQ* 41 (1972): 24-47.
- ⁶The Virgilian passage goes on to celebrate the earth's rebirth in springtime, in a passage that may be one of many possible sources for Chaucer's opening lines. Spenser's choice of three negative terms—"angry," "hideous," and "shrowd"—in as many lines marks a decisive break with Virgil's tone. Hamilton suggests that the "hideous storme" leads to Errour's "hideous taile." Cf. W. E. H. Rudat, "Spenser's 'Angry loue': Virgilian Allusion in the First Canto of *The Faerie Queene*," *JRMMRA* 3 (1983): 89-98.
- ⁷Marvell, "The Garden," lines 39-40. *The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*, ed. H. M. Margoliouth, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1952) 49.
- ⁸A. S. P. Woodhouse, "Nature and Grace in *The Faerie Queene*," *ELH* 16 (1949): 194-228.
- ⁹James Nohrnberg, *The Analogy of The Faerie Queene* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976).
- ¹⁰Most notably, John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981).
- ¹¹I discussed this passage briefly in *Spenser's Image of Nature: Wild Man and Shepherd in The Faerie Queene* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1966) 83-87, and return to it in a different context in a forthcoming essay, "Spenser's Undergoing of Ariosto."
- ¹²*Ludovico Ariosto's Orlando Furioso: Translated into English heroical verse by Sir John Harrington*, ed. Robert McNulty (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1972).
- ¹³*PMLA* 12 (1897): 172.
- ¹⁴In fact, the lines (included in Renaissance editions of the poem) were withdrawn by Virgil's literary executor, Varius, although they were recognized as the poet's by Donatus and Servius. Like the passage on Helen in ll. 567-88, they may represent an early version that was subsequently repudiated by Virgil, who famously urged that the entire poem be burned.
- ¹⁵*The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. William A. Oram et al. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989).
- ¹⁶"Boiardo and the Derangement of Epic," *Renaissance Papers* (1988): 77-97.