

Highways and Byways: A Response to Donald Cheney*

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Professor Donald Cheney has done lovers of literature a kindness. He has coined the term “sympathetic parody” to describe how Edmund Spenser replays, in *The Faerie Queene*, the plots and aims of Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, and indeed the plots and aims of that same *Faerie Queene*. Such a coinage is especially welcome in a time when terms like “irony” and “parody” are too often rolled like tanks out of the munitions roundhouse to level all distinctions among invective, rail-lery, merry wit, self-deprecation, sly doubt, genial smiling, and old bulky physicalistic burlesque. The term—and what I think is the rich and subtle insight behind it—repays a good deal of pondering, as there surely is a laughter that affirms its object, a laughter that is a mischievous cousin of love itself.

And there is no finer poet to illustrate such an insight than Spenser. He is the self-deprecator *par excellence*, Hobgoblin run away with the garland from Apollo, pretending to tell stories about dragons and dragonets and knights a-pricking, with gore enough sometimes to turn the paddlewheel at a millrace; yet his humble pose, now and then deliberately lumbering (“Yet never did he dread,” says he in a climactic line so bad that only a great poet could get away with it, “but ever was y-drad,” I.i.2.9), is at heart a laughing affirmation of his own poetic skill and of the Christianity he has set his mind and pen to celebrate. The faith that claims that the last shall be first, that finds its Savior as an unknown carpenter in the outback of an outback, may well play the Hobgoblin unseating the Olympian deities.

*Reference: Donald Cheney, “Spenser’s Parody,” *Connotations* 12.1 (2002/2003): 1-13.

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Spenser surely learned the laughter, though not necessarily the humility, from Ariosto, and may well have learned the sympathy too. Ariosto's treatment of Dante in *Orlando Furioso* borders on wicked burlesque, yet, in the end, the great evil for Ariosto is exactly the same as it was for Dante, ingratitude—the smallhearted thanklessness that caused Satan to fall like lightning from the sky is the same that now causes his, Ariosto's, beloved lady to spurn his erotic advances! We smile, we know that Ariosto is not entirely in earnest about the lady, yet we suspect that he is in earnest, insofar as he can ever be in earnest about anything, when it comes to gratitude. Spenser saw in Ariosto the type of parodist that Professor Cheney sees in Spenser: the poet who wishes to arrive finally at the same place where his predecessor stands—though by taking a few delightful detours. Cheney cannily points out that, for all the humorous and outrageous revisions of Virgil that Ariosto indulges, “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” (6). Dante takes the high road, and Ariosto takes the low road, and Ariosto is in Scotland—and Spain, and Ethiopia, and Bulgaria, and Frisia, and the far-flung isle of Ebuda—before him.

What we make of the subtleties of self-deprecation, canny revision, the irony that cuts and the irony that heals, is another matter. Donald Cheney has ventured into that treacherous land where critical pratfalls abound—the land of the Humor to be Explained. There is nothing for it; if that is where Spenser wants his most cunning readers to go, then go they must, and let them add faith unto their force, and be not faint. And here precisely, in the twilight of quiet laughter, is where he or I or any reader of Spenser can go astray. For example, Cheney notes as self-parody the wonderful moment near the beginning of Book Two, when Spenser says that Una has acquired the honorific nickname, “The Errant Damozell” (7; cf. *FQ* II.i.19.8). What on earth can Spenser be doing here, associating the chaste Una, as it seems, with that coily female monstress Error, with her double parts

and her labyrinthine tail? But the apparent contradiction compels us to look again, and more deeply, at the meaning of Error, and at the meaning of wandering. The man who is wrapped in “Errours endlesse traine” (I.i.18.9) in one sense wanders everywhere, just as the tail of the monster is all bound up in inextricable knots, but is at the same time caught, stuck, motionless, exactly as if he were locked in a maze. For example, the unshriven knights of the Cistercian *Quest of the Holy Grail* are always on the go, nowhere; but singlehearted Galahad never swerves from his goal and thus is impossible to locate and catch up with. Una too never ceases in her own quest to find Redcross Knight after he has abandoned her. She seeks him everywhere, never resting. In this regard she is wholly unlike the spiritually errant Redcross and the Babylonian harlot Duessa, who are always finding some reason or other to sit down in the middle of nowhere and do nothing, and who do not even make love with any passion (cf. I.vii.3-4).

Thus the true and steadfast Una may go with good angels—I almost wrote “with a will”—anywhere in the world: her heart is ever fixed upon her love; and thus Redcross Knight, before his repentance, may wander anywhere in the world and not really escape one inch from that black hole of a central cave called Error.

The daring re-use of the word “error” in Una’s nickname, then, is not so much a self-parody as it is a surprise for the too confident reader: it is the reader’s experience of the poem and not the poem itself that is being gently nudged. For there never can be an end to the mysteries of faith and hope and love, and when we think we see all there is to see of them, the poet shows us that we have mistaken ourselves quite. The same thing, I think, happens when Lucifera, the Sataness of Book One, strives, it seems illogically, to outshine herself, “as enuying her selfe, that too exceeding shone” (I.iv.8.9). We register her immediately in our book under Pride, and we see the comic self-contradiction inherent in her attempt to place herself higher than her own parentage, higher than the highest, even higher than anything that might be higher than the highest! But then, as Redcross wakes on the morning of his battle with the great Dragon, Una—Una of all

people, Una who represents the Truth, and the True Church, which is to say a truly Protestant and Calvinist-friendly Church—Una urges Redcross in these proud words:

The sparke of noble courage now awake,
 And striue your excellent selfe to excell;
 That shall ye euermore renowned make,
 Aboue all knights on earth, that batteill vndertake. (I.xi.2.6-9)

How can this be? Are we baptizing the House of Pride? But it can be; it must be. “I can do all things,” says Saint Paul, “by Christ which strengtheneth me” (Phil. 4:13), for the works of the Christian are the works of Christ: “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me” (Gal. 2:20). Just when we thought it was safe to go outside in Faery Land, just when we knew, or thought we knew, that excelling oneself is simply not done, along comes Spenser with the tidings that excelling oneself is precisely the aim of the Christian life: in humility to put on Christ, and in that new man to shine forth those excellences that are not ours by right, but that through the work of Christ within us become ours by grace.

It is this spiraling, this re-examination of terms, this ever deepening view, that characterizes Spenser’s poetry. Nor is this dizzying playfulness to be divorced from his desire to see more and more deeply into the truths of the Christian faith, and to present them in such a way that the reader will be forced, at times with a slapstick bump on the noggin, to open his eyes again and peer again and try to see what the poet has seen. We almost lack the words to describe the warm humor of such an enterprise—it may be rather like the flash in the eye of Christ as he compared the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed. But there it is in Spenser; you do not walk twenty feet without it. Professor Cheney justly sees that this is so, and has given us the term “sympathetic parody” for starters. I suspect he knows that he will have to revisit his own term, too—because Spenser’s humor is rather like Una, and will be out and about, searching far from the well-beaten highway for the never-changing object of its love.

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