

Parody, Sympathy and Self A Response to Donald Cheney*

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In his seminal essay on parody Mikhail Bakhtin asserted that “the literary and artistic consciousness of the Romans could not imagine a serious form without its comic equivalent. The serious, straightforward form was perceived as only a fragment, only half of a whole; the fulness of the whole was achieved only upon adding the comic *contrepartie* of this form.”¹ This constituted a very significant moment in the modern theorizing of the mode. A relationship that had often been regarded as confrontational—as though parody were synonymous with satire—was presented as not merely sympathetic but directly complementary, as fulfilment rather than negation. The irony, however, was that neo-classical criticism had long been aware of the point although it expressed it in somewhat different terminology. Pope provides a good example. Commenting in the second book of *The Dunciad* (1742) on the passage beginning “As what a Dutchman plumps into the lakes” (405-08), Scriblerus notes that,

it is a common and foolish mistake, that a ludicrous parody of a grave and celebrated passage is a ridicule to that passage. The reader therefore, if he will, may call this a parody of the author’s own similitude in the *Essay on Man*, Ep. iv: *As the small pebble, etc.* but will anybody therefore suspect the one to be a ridicule of the other? A ridicule indeed there is in every parody; but when the image is transferred from one subject to another, and the subject is not a *poem burlesqued* (which Scriblerus hopes the reader will distinguish from a *burlesque poem*) there the ridicule falls not on the thing *imitated*, but *imitating*.²

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

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debcheney01201.htm>>.

This is not necessarily the impression one might gain from a casual reading of the *OED* which defines parody as “a composition in prose or verse in which the characteristic turns of thought and phrase in an author or class of authors are imitated in such a way as to make them appear ridiculous, especially by applying them to ludicrously inappropriate subjects.” On closer inspection, however, this is far from saying that the purpose of parody is to debunk its original. Parody is rhetorically well armed to deliver the effect of ridicule, but that is merely one of its effects. As Gerard Genette has argued, the relationship between hypotext (source) and hypertext (imitation) may range from the hostile to the indulgent.³ In the *Poetics*, Aristotle recognised ‘parodia’ as a separate genre originating with Hegemon, but also recognised its ambivalent relationship to epic by ascribing the *Margites* to Homer (1448a-b). Scriblerus was joking in earnest when he represented *The Dunciad* as Pope’s third ‘Homeric’ work (after the translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*) and the *Margites* as Homer’s *Dunciad*.⁴ Throughout ancient criticism the term ‘parodia’ was applied to diverse techniques of quotation and imitation whether the intention was satiric or not.⁵ Intertextuality was always involved but serving many different purposes. Indicative of this attitude is the definition of ‘parodia’ supplied in Lewis and Short’s *Latin Dictionary*: “(counter-song), a reply retaining nearly the same words or the same turn, a parody.” Viewed in terms of ‘reply’ or response, literary criticism is now, perhaps, the most vibrant form of parody, constantly quoting, contextualizing and recontextualizing “nearly the same words” from a variety of conflicting viewpoints.

Lewis and Short lend weight to Bakhtin’s speculations, but the weakness in his position was the creation of too absolute a dichotomy between the ‘serious’ and the ‘parodic,’ between Virgil and the ‘numerous parodies of Virgil’ that he believed to have been rejected or suppressed by the dour keepers of the canon “upon whom the transmission of this heritage depended.” By positing a ‘serious’ mode constituted by “straightforward genres and direct discourses, discourses with no conditions attached” he occluded the actual polyva-

lence of the genres concerned.⁶ He missed the parody within, the self and self-reflexive parody producing a variety of meta-discursive effects. The protracted controversy as to whether Eumolpus's poem on the civil war, inserted into Petronius's *Satyricon* (119-24), does or does not perform a parodic critique of Lucan's *Pharsalia* is merely one case in point. An even better example is the emergence of Aeneas from Virgil's underworld, carrying the vision of Rome's imperial destiny, through the gate of ivory, expressly identified by the narrator as the gate of false dreams (VI.893-98). Under certain circumstances mock-epic may be integral to epic, a vital 'condition' attached to its discourse. By the Renaissance it was well understood that an epic might, with perfect decorum, display "a mixture of styles as modulations on a basic style, which is supposed to be grand."⁷ Scriblerus's caution is therefore well taken: the genre we now term 'mock-epic' is generally sympathetic, rather than antipathetic, to that we term 'epic.' In view of the fact that mock-epic is largely dependent upon epic for its effect, this is hardly surprising. To a reader unfamiliar with the conventions, topoi and language of epic, the mock-epic joke must inevitably fall flat. The relationship between the two genres is rather symbiotic than oppositional, and the benefits are by no means entirely one way. A recent translator reminds us that in creating the *Orlando Innamorato* Boiardo was "the first to see the potential for humour and humanization in the deep discrepancy between the Arthurian themes of love and magic and the stolid righteousness of traditional Carolingian characters."⁸ Again and again he throws his heroes into comic relief yet, as Graham Hough notes, "his admiration for the virtues of chivalry is whole-hearted and perfectly genuine."⁹ So genuine that Ariosto fashioned the *Orlando Furioso* out of the same materials.

An equivalent 'mixing' of styles may be seen in *Paradise Lost*. Dryden famously alleged that Milton had made the Devil his 'hero' instead of Adam but failed to notice how that 'heroism' is deliberately and repeatedly offset by descent into the grotesque. Few epic heroes are to be found "squat like a toad" by a lady's ear (IV.800).¹⁰ Satan's value system aligns him to those, both ancient and modern, who are

alleged to have ignored “that which justly gives heroic name / To person or to poem” (IX.40-41) in favour of,

Wars, hitherto the only argument
 Heroic deemed, chief mastery to dissect
 With long and tedious havoc fabled knights
 In battles feigned; [...]. (IX.28-31)

According to this account, ‘mock’ epic is discovered at the heart of the epic tradition, parody at the very centre of the heroic. One reader’s hero is another reader’s Hudibras. It might, therefore, be more accurate to say that Milton made Satan the hero of the great mock-epic contained within his ‘higher argument.’ Yet the result, according to Dryden, was a lack of containment that transformed *Paradise Lost* into a travesty of heroic romance, one in which the ‘giant’ foils the knight and drives him “out of his stronghold, to wander through the world with his lady errant.”¹¹ Similarly, the attempt to describe celestial matters in terrestrial terms—and on the part of one “not sedulous by nature to indite / Wars” (IV.27-28)—produces a rich vein of irony in the description of the war in heaven.

In commenting upon the form of *The Dunciad*, Scriblerus was drawing upon a long tradition. In the prose preface to the first of his *Silvae* Statius lists Homer’s *Batrachomyomachia* and Virgil’s *Culex* as playful preludes to the *Iliad* and *Aeneid*. “Nor,” he remarks, “is there any of the great poets who has not made prelude to his works in lighter vein” [“nec quisquam est inlustrium poetarum qui non aliquid operibus suis stilo remissiore praeluserit”].¹² As the Homeric translations, and even the surviving fragment of the *Brutus*, serve to remind us, Statius’s remark is also highly applicable to Pope, whose early mastery of mock-epic by no means signalled an antipathy to epic nor diminished his personal aspirations in the heroic mode. Such ‘parody’ as *The Rape of the Lock* affords is very much in the nature of a highly complex, intertextual game played for the benefit of sophisticated, classically educated readers. So far as the classical models are concerned the attitude is rather ludic than satirical. In the case of *The Dunciad* the point is emphasised by Scriblerus’s choice of example.

This is not merely an instance of Pope ‘parodying’ Pope, but an instance of Pope parodying Pope on the very issue of self and self-love:

Self-love but serves the virtuous mind to wake,
As the small pebble stirs the peaceful lake;
The centre moved, a circle straight succeeds,
Another still, and still another spreads. (*Essay on Man* IV.363-66)

As what a Dutchman plumps into the lakes,
One circle first, and then a second makes:
What Dulness dropped among her sons impressed
Like motion from one circle to the rest. (*Dunciad* II.405-08)

It is doubtful how many of Pope’s readers would have made the connection if the annotator had not pointed it out. But his intervention is highly appropriate in that it raises more general thematic associations between *An Essay* and *The Dunciad*. Dullness, we learn, is no less self-centred than social benevolence. “See all in *self*,” counsils the “gloomy clerk” of *Dunciad* IV, “and but for self be born” (480). It is no mere coincidence that Cibber, the prime object, or subject, of ridicule in the edition of 1742, was the author of a celebrated autobiography. In one sense Pope is indeed parodying himself but by so doing demonstrating how far he rises about *dull* solipsism. The fact that he can laugh at himself implies that he is not laughable. The joke is at his own expense yet highly sympathetic to a man, and a work, that had been mercilessly pilloried by others. By contrast, as Scriblerus proceeds to say, when “Old Edward’s armour beams on Cibber’s breast” the satire “falls neither on old king Edward, nor his armour, but on his *armour-bearer* only.” Parody, he concludes, judiciously discriminating between literary benefits and personal injuries, “has always a good effect in a mock-epic poem.”¹³

Amongst Pope’s most illustrious predecessors in the vein of mock-epic was Edmund Spenser, translator of the *Culex* (as *Virgils Gnat*) and creator of *Muiopotmos: or, The Fate of the Butterflie*. But Spenserian parody was by no means confined to the shorter poems. In a recent article in *Connotations*, Donald Cheney calls attention to the rich vein of parody to be found even within *The Faerie Queene*, a phenomenon

facilitated by the highly ‘mimetic’ nature of the text since ‘parody,’ as we have seen, embraces a wide range of allusive and imitative techniques. “If you are looking for sympathetic parody,” Cheney suggests, “all you need is to find the family romance in the text”—and particularly so where an author is keen to fight off the ‘anxiety of influence’ while simultaneously staking his claim to be part of the tradition that produces such ‘anxiety.’¹⁴ As an instance of ‘sympathetic parody,’ Cheney calls attention to the way in which the opening lines of *The Faerie Queene* conflate the (pseudo) Virgilian opening of the *Aeneid*, “Ille ego, qui quondam gracili modulatus avena,” with the ‘parody’ produced by Ariosto, “Le donne, i cavallier, l’arme, gli amori”:

Lo I the man, whose Muse whilome did maske,
 As time her taught in lowly Shepheards weeds,
 Am now enforst a far vnfitter taske,
 For trumpets sterne to chaunge mine Oaten reeds,
 And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds. (I.Proem.1)¹⁵

One feature of these lines that Cheney does not mention deserves particular attention in relation to parody: the use of the term “maske.” Within *The Faerie Queene*, in one of the poem’s closest approaches to formal mock-epic, we encounter “that masked Mock-knight,” Braggadocchio, whose repeated exposure provides matter of “sport and play” to the whole company (IV.iv.13). The coincidence of masked muse and masked mock-knight emphasises the strongly ludic element in Spenser’s various authorial *personae*. There is nothing similar to this in the opening lines of Virgil or Ariosto. In Spenser, however, the authorial *persona* is obsessively self-conscious in a manner that typically combines assertions of prowess with professions of humility. These are, of course, ‘conventional’ poses to strike, yet they encode a very immediate circumspection. The figure of Colin Clout, “under which name this Poete secretly shadoweth himself,” hovers uneasily between self-promotion and self-critique, providing a means of simultaneously advancing and ironizing the self. The association between his amorous and literary aspirations is revealed in “October” when we learn that “some” readers “doubt,” as does “E. K.,” that there is

any distinction between the pastoral poet Colin and the would-be epic poet Cuddie. In other words, the dejected poet is a *persona* of the rejected lover—or perhaps it is the other way around. In the closing lines of *The Shepheardes Calender*, yet another *persona*, one disarmingly named Immerito, advises himself “not to match thy pype with Tityrus hys style”—a dictum contradicted by the preceding assertion that his *Calender* will last forever—“nor with the Pilgrim that the Ploughman playde a whyle.”¹⁶ The latter clause is somewhat cryptic: the highly moralistic *Ploughman’s Tale* was generally ascribed to Chaucer in the Elizabethan period but the notion that the pilgrim ‘played’ the ploughman, or the ploughman ‘played’ the pilgrim, and then only for ‘a while,’ underlines the fictive nature of both *personae*. The ‘real’ Chaucer is far to seek and would, in any case, be appropriated into the Spenserian narrator when *The Squire’s Tale* was rewritten, or sympathetically parodied, as *The Legend of Friendship*. Again and again Spenserian ‘parody’ relates to the complexity, or multiplicity, of the self.

In the second canto of *The Legend of Holinesse*, for example, Archimago, the poem’s great mock-magus, disguises himself to deceive Una. The results are presented as follows:

In mighty armes he was yclad anon
 And silver shield, upon his coward brest
 A bloody crosse, and on his craven crest
 A bounch of haire discolourd diversly;
 Full iolly knight he seemde, and well adrest,
 And when he sate upon his courser free,
Saint George himself ye would haue deemed him to be. (I.ii.11.3-9)

The description would be familiar to every attentive reader since it constitutes a form of deliberate self-misquotation. The ‘false’ St George is a parody, or caricature, of the true:

Y cladd in mightie armes and silver shielde,
 Wherein old dints of deepe wounds 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 iolly knight he seemd, and faire did sitt,
As one for knightly giusts and fierce encounters fitt. (I.i.1.2-9)

The complication, of course, is that while the false St George is disconcertingly similar to the true, the 'true' St George is disconcertingly similar to the false: in fact, Archimago succeeds only because "the true *Saint George* was wandred far away" (I.ii.12). Which, then, is the 'parody' of which? To readers familiar with the traditional iconography, the Redcross Knight's arms 'quote' those of the saint, "yet armes till that time did he never wield." Both the 'true' and the 'false' St George merely 'seem' to be what they appear to be. Both are "ycladd" in arms that are not their own, and the word "ycladd" rings heavily thereafter: the "loftie trees" of the Wood of Error are "yclad with sommers pride" (I.i.7) and, more perilously still, Archimago, who conjures up the lascivious parody of Una that sends Redcross wandering far away, is "in long blacke weedes yclad" (I.i.29). The self-discovery of the 'true' George is the work of Spenser's allegory. Looking at the opening lines again in this connection, one notes not the fulfilment but the elision of the Virgilian 'rota': "et egressus silvis vicina coegi / ut quamvis avido parerent arva colono, / gratum opus agricolis" ("leaving the woodland, I constrained the neighbouring fields to serve the husbandmen, however grasping—a work welcome to farmers"). Herein lies the most witty and certainly most 'sympathetic' parody of all. By exploiting the etymology of the name George (then commonly derived from 'geos' and 'orge,' earth and tillage), Spenser will replace Virgil's agricultural *Georgics* with a spiritual equivalent by making a saint of a child found in the 'furrow' of a tilled field:

Where thee a Ploughman all unweeting fond,
As he his toylesome teme that way did guyde,
And brought thee up in ploughmans state to byde,
Whereof *Georgos* he thee gave to name. (I.x.66.3-6)

Spenser's spiritual 'Georgics' will be welcome to tillers of the soul not the soil.¹⁷

More daring still, if we pursue Cheney's advice to "find the family romance in the text," is the astonishing use of Chaucer's mock-epic

poem *Sir Thopas* as a source for Arthur's dream-vision of Gloriana, an unprecedented instance of subtextual subversion. With so much 'serious' romance material available, what exactly was the point of this? Andrew King comments that "if Spenser's admiration for Chaucer cannot be questioned, then neither can his own lively irony. Spenser's subversively 'serious' reading of *Sir Thopas* disarms Chaucer's irony and his criticism of native romance." "Spenser," King concludes, "draws upon the same romances which Chaucer had satirized, and in a few instances even named, in *Sir Thopas*." Examples of the sort are *Bevis of Hampton*, *Guy of Warwick* and *Lybeaus Desconus*.¹⁸ This is a very well observed point, but we need to ask how unsympathetic Chaucer actually was to the tradition that *Sir Thopas* burlesques, a tradition that includes *The Knight's Tale* and much of *Troilus and Criseyde*? May we not rather see *Sir Thopas* (a tale wittily assigned to Chaucer's own narrative *persona*) as a medieval *Don Quixote*, drawing its own imaginative strength from the tradition it appears to mock? And one also wonders how 'seriously' Spenser has taken Chaucer's parody. The dream-vision occurs during the *enfance* that Spenser has created for Arthur, when "first the coale of kindly heat appears / To kindle love in every living brest" (I.ix.9). But Arthur rejects this "kindly heat," scorns "that idle name of love" and cruelly ridicules other lovers. By his own account he "ioyd to stirre up strife, / In middest of their mournfull Tragedy, / Ay wont to laugh, when them I heard to cry" (I.ix.10). His apparent emotional "libertie" is taken as a sign of divine favour: "the heavens with one consent / Did seeme to laugh on me" (I.ix.12). But the heavens' last laugh is at Arthur's own expense and Spenser greatly enforces its poetic justice by drawing upon *Sir Thopas* rather than any of a multitude of other texts that might have provided a 'serious' analogue. The scornful young knight learns the hard way that in matters of the heart the sublime and the ridiculous meet:

Me dremed al this nyght, pardee,
 An elf-queene shal my lemman be
 And slepe under my goore.

“An elf-queene wol I love, ywis,
 For in this world no womman is
 Worthy to be my make
 In towne;
 Alle othere wommen I forsake,
 And to an elf-queene I me take
 By dale and eek by downe!” (VII.787-96)¹⁹

[...]
 Me seemed, by my side a royall Mayd
 Her daintie limbes full softly down did lay:
 So faire a creature yet saw never sunny day.

Most goodly glee and lovely blandishment
 She to me made, and bad me love her deare,
 For dearely sure her love was to me bent,
 As when iust time expired should appeare. (I.ix.13.7-9; 14.1-4)

Given its prominence in the opening canto, the word ‘seemed’ sounds disconcerting on Arthur’s lips, and so too is his subsequent Thopas-like profession to follow his vision “whether dreames delude, or true it were.” The problem, as we have seen, had illustrious precedents: false dreams were one of Virgil’s major concerns. But, as T. P. Roche has noticed, Spenser’s own opening canto had already introduced the subject of delusive dreams in direct connection with “blandishment.”²⁰ As the false Una appears to the sleeping St George, we are told, “then seemed him his Lady by him lay” (I.i.47). He awakens to find her apparently standing by him “with gentle blandishment and lovely looke, / Most like that Virgin true” (49). Even more disconcertingly, Arthur awakens to find “nought but pressed gras, where she had lyen” (I.ix.15). Spenser had been over such terrain before in the “Aprill” eclogue of *The Shepheardes Calender*. Pondering the mysterious nature of “fayre Elisa,” Thenot asks “O quam te memorem virgo?” [“How shall I address you, maiden?”] borrowing his words from Aeneas’s address to a disguised Venus. Hobbinol replies “o dea certe” [“surely a goddess”] borrowing from the succeeding line (*Aeneid* I.328). Yet the context is anything but reassuring. In the *Aeneid*, Venus demonstrates her true identity, and her divinity, by disappear-

ing, leaving her frustrated son to complain “quid natum totiens, crudelis tu quoque, falsis / ludis imaginibus?” [“why, cruel woman, do you mock your son so often with delusive phantoms?”] (407-08). In raising the spectre of delusion, both passages capture something of the elusive quality of Elizabeth’s royal favour. The fairy mistress, as Helen Cooper has recently argued, was a very ambivalent image under which to figure England’s monarch.²¹ But for that very reason it provided a means of negotiating with the thorny subject of female regiment, a means of insinuating critique into eulogy. The parodies of the *Aeneid* and *Sir Thopas* point in the one direction. Spenser’s queen was “fairy mistress” to a number of suitors—Leicester, Anjou, Essex, Raleigh—to whom she made “louely blandishment” only to leave them, like Keats’s “Belle Dame sans Merci,” pale and wan on the cold hillside with little more, metaphorically speaking, than “pressed gras, where she had lyen.” For them “iust time” was fated never to “appear.” The parody of the parody of *Sir Thopas* reflects not merely on Arthur but on his lady also, bringing out the mischievous elf in the glorious fairy queen. Throughout the wider poem the queen’s sovereignty is figured in Gloriana but her private person, Spenser tells Raleigh, “I doe expresse in Belphebe, fashioning her name according to your owne excellent concept of Cynthia, (Phoebe and Cynthia being both names of Diana).”²² This recollection of the hopeless, depressive desire of the “Ocean” (Wa’ter being Elizabeth’s pet name for Raleigh) for the “Moon,” is sufficient to indicate a level of discontent in the portraiture. If Gloriana is largely confined to the role of unmoved mover, the narrative finds in Belphebe an incarnation who can participate in ongoing events. She proves erratic precisely because of the ironic disparity between royal icon and Tudor reality, because Elizabeth was not, and never could be, “dea certe.” It is therefore fitting that we first encounter Belphebe in a richly mock-heroic context, in her meeting with the masked mock-knight, Braggadocchio. Trompart announces his master (who is, in fact, cowering in a bush) as “my Lord, my liege, whose warlike name, / Is farre renowmd through many bold emprise” (II.iii.35). “With that,” comments the narrator,

“he crauld out of his nest, / Forth creeping on his caitive hands and thies.” Belpheobe’s appearance at this point has been described as an instance of “conspicuous irrelevance” but its mock-heroic context anticipates with delicious proleptic irony her emotionally undignified encounters with Timias in books three and four, episodes that allegorise in embarrassing detail Elizabeth’s tortuous relationship with Raleigh, the man credited with first “fashioning” the “concept” of Cynthia.²³

One of the hallmarks of *The Faerie Queene* is the element of self-parody that pervades it on almost every level. For every heroic image there is an unheroic double virtually indistinguishable from the real thing: a true and false St George, a true and false Una, a true and false Florimel, a true and false Venus and Adonis. The die was cast from the moment that Spenser decided to reflect his monarch “in mirroures more then one” (III.Proem.5). Mirrors not only reflect but also, necessarily, distort. They never quite show the self nor ever quite fail to show it. Hence the anxiety in the period, and the poem, to distinguish between true and false “glasses” (VI.Proem.5). Ben Jonson, one of Spenser’s acutest readers, evokes the topos perfectly when he has Epicure Mammon announce in *The Alchemist* how he will have,

my glasses,
Cut in more subtill angles, to disperse,
And multiply the figures, as I walke
Naked betweene my *succubæ*. (II.ii.45-48)

Later in play the “Queen of Faery” is introduced as nothing more than a fraud to cheat a gullible clerk.²⁴ Her minister is Subtle, disguised as a “Priest of Faery,” just as Spenser’s Lucifera, audaciously described as “a mayden Queene, that shone as *Titans* ray” is attended by the ‘wizard’ Avarice—and five other deadly sins (I.iv.8-36).

The true and false Genius of the Garden of Adonis and the Bowre of Blisse encapsulate on a wider philosophical plain all of the particular contrasts between true and false, heroic and mock-heroic, that pervade the poem and problematise the very concept of the ‘self.’ The effect is all the more acute in that Bowre and Garden are not so much

polar opposites as (to borrow a term from Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*) "polar twins." Whereas the false Genius "doth us procure to fall" through "guilefull semblaunts, which he makes us see," the true Genius attempts to offset this by allowing us to foresee "straunge phantoms." How we are to distinguish between "semblaunts" and "phantomes" remains unclear since both Genii operate "secretly" (II.xii.47-48). The false Genius is "quite contrary" to the self yet also somehow integral to it. Appropriately it is within this delusive domain, where art is at its most deceptive, that Spenser supplies, in his use of Tasso, one of the most blatant instances of 'parody' to be found in the poem. Guyon's approach to Acrasia's inner sanctum is set to enchanting music:

So passeth, in the passing of a day,
 Of mortall life the leafe, the bud, the flowre,
 Ne more doth flourish after first decay,
 That earst was sought to decke both bed and bowre,
 Of many a Ladie, and many a Paramowre:
 Gather therefore the Rose, whilest yet is prime,
 For soone comes age, that will her pride deflowre:
 Gather the Rose of love, whilest yet is time,
 Whilest loving thou mayst loved be with equall crime. (II.xii.75)

This song, as has long been recognised, is translated virtually verbatim from the sixteenth canto of Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*:

Così trapassa al trapassar d'un giorno
 de la vita mortale il fiore e 'l verde;
 né perché faccia indietro april ritorno,
 si rinfiora ella mai, né si rinverde.
 Cogliam la rosa in su 'l mattino adorno
 di questo dì, che tosto il seren perde;
 cogliam d'amour la rosa: amiamo or quando
 esser si puote riamato amando. (XVI.15)²⁵

The closeness of the translation is self-evident but there is one crucial, contextual difference. In Tasso the singer, identified in Spenser merely as "some one," is a parrot. During this period, as we gather from Shakespeare's *Othello*, to "speak parrot" was synonymous with

speaking nonsense (II.iii.275), and Tasso's identification of the singer ironizes the advice proffered by the song. But the effect is more subtle still. In mimicking human language, widely regarded as one of the distinguishing characteristics of humanity, parrots unwittingly parody it. Tasso's parrot sings 'in a language like our own' ("la voce sí ch'assembra il sermon nostro"). Edward Fairfax supplies the translation "her leden was like humane language trew"—like 'true' human language yet not quite 'true' human language.²⁶ This is why parrots fascinate us. They raise profound questions about the relationship between sound and sense, between what is merely said and what is really understood. The message of the song—*carpe diem*—has been parroted from generation to generation, but has anyone really understood it? Is it no more than senseless repetition? If so, what can be said of the literary mimesis that here repeats it yet again? Is Tasso Spenser's true or false poetic Genius?

In enumerating the qualities requisite for a poet in his *Discoveries*, Ben Jonson counselled that

the third requisite in our *Poet* or *Maker*, is *Imitation*, to bee able to convert the substance, or Riches of an other *Poet*, to his owne use. To make choise of one excellent man above the rest, and so to follow him till he grow very *Hee*: or, so like him, as the Copie may be mistaken for the Principall.

Yet this must not be done "servilely" but rather in such a way as "to draw forth out of the best, and choisest flowers, with the Bee, and turne all into Honey." As the bee imagery is borrowed (ultimately) from Seneca, the passage practices what it preaches.²⁷ In *The Faerie Queene* Spenser appears at first sight to assume the role of the parrot repeating, or stealing, Tasso's words, growing "very *Hee*." Yet he is careful to do so in a context that both replicates and distinguishes itself from the original. The "song," although it brings the two poems so close together as to touch, becomes the focal point for their disparity. Armida loves Rinaldo, but Acrasia strives to destroy Verdant. In Tasso the gardens are destroyed by Armida herself, in Spenser by Guyon. In Tasso Armida and Rinaldo are reconciled, in Spenser Verdant must abandon Acrasia. The danger of any further association is

neatly indicated at the opening of the next book when Guyon rushes unthinkingly against St George, spurring his horse “whose fierie feete did burne / The verdant grasse” (III.i.5). The choice of adjectives (“fierie” and “verdant”) constitute a parodic comment on the incipient intemperance of the man who has just saved Verdant from combustion in the “fierie beames” of Acrasia’s eyes (II.xii.78). Interestingly, in the revised *Gerusalemme Conquistata* the reconciliation between Armida and Rinaldo is excised—indicative, perhaps, of the poem’s wider shift from “liberation” to “conquest.” Yet the song of the rose remains beautiful despite Spenser’s decision to end it with the very non-Tassitan words “equall crime,” and generations of readers have been greatly discomfited by the subsequent destruction of the gardens.

One of the strangest effects of parody is the persistence of ‘sympathy’ despite opposition. As I have argued elsewhere, something very similar happens when Spenser sets out, in what is apparently the most unsympathetic mode and context, to parody Gaelic bardic poetry in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*.²⁸ I do not wish to rehearse that argument here but rather to relate it to the subjects in hand, sympathy and antipathy. Like Tasso’s song of the rose, bardic poetry is also allegedly associated with ‘crime’—in fact with the “equall crime” of Gaelic and Gaelicised Old English families. To Irenius it suggests how “evill thinges beinge decte and suborned with the gaye attire of goodlye wordes maye easelye deceaue and Carrye awaie the affeccion of a yonge minde that is not well stayed [...]”²⁹ Poetry, it is said, is what gets lost in translation—and particularly, one might have thought, translation into prose. In order to illustrate Irenius’s point, Spenser produces a prose travesty of an unidentified bardic poem which is meant to stand as an epitome of bardic poetry in general. In doing so he strips that poetry of its complex metres, its dense mythology, its traditional forms of address and compliment, its intricate structure and stylised diction. Yet something of the energy and strength of the original survives the exercise. That is merely one irony of the situation, another is even more striking. One of Bakhtin’s most

valuable insights was how in parody—as often also in translation—two different voices converge in a manner that threatens not merely to elide difference but to turn parody into self-parody. In ventriloquizing the bard, Spenser risks the exposure of the ‘bardic’ element within himself, not, that is to say, the true Genius of bardic verse evident in the original, but his own caricature of that voice, the false Genius, with its alleged attraction to indiscriminate violence and even to ‘savagery.’ In other words, the parody threatens to render the caricature self-reflexive. “Theoretically,” Bakhtin notes, “it is possible to sense and recognize in any parody that ‘normal’ language, that ‘normal’ style, in light of which the given parody was created. But in practice it is far from easy and not always possible.”³⁰ Tasso’s sympathy for Armida inflects and partially subverts Spenser’s own hostility towards Acrasia, just as the bardic cult of heroism, with its rejection of courtly luxury, inflects the vibrant rhetoric of Irenius’s parody to betray a latent similarity between ventriloquist and victim. One might even call it a latent sympathy.

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NOTES

¹M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) 58.

²Alexander Pope, *Alexander Pope*, ed. Pat Rogers, Oxford Standard Authors (Oxford: OUP, 1993) 487-88. All quotations are from this edition.

³Gerard Genette, *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982).

⁴Pope 420.

⁵Fred W. Householder, “Paroidia,” *Classical Philology* 39 (1944): 1-9.

⁶Bakhtin 58-59.

⁷Annabel M. Patterson, *Hermogenes and the Renaissance: Seven Ideas of Style* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1979) 177.

⁸Matteo Maria Boiardo, *Orlando Innamorato*, trans. Charles Stanley Ross (Oxford: OUP, 1995) xiii.

⁹Graham Hough, *A Preface to The Faerie Queene* (London: Duckworth, 1962) 23.

¹⁰All quotations are from John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (London: Longman, 1971).

¹¹John Dryden, *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays*, ed. George Watson, 2 vols (London: Dent, 1962) 2: 233.

¹²Statius, *Silvae*, trans. J. H. Mozley, Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1928) 1: 3.

¹³Pope 488.

¹⁴Cheney 1.

¹⁵All quotations are from *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Thomas P. Roche with the assistance of C. Patrick O'Donnell, Jr (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978). All Virgilian quotations are from *Virgil*, trans. H. R. Fairclough, rev. ed., Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986).

¹⁶*Edmund Spenser: The Shorter Poems*, ed. Richard A. McCabe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999) 13, 38, 133, 156. All shorter poems are quoted from this edition.

¹⁷For Spenser and the *Georgics* see further Andrew V. Ettin, "The *Georgics* in *The Faerie Queene*," *Spenser Studies* 3 (1982): 57-72; Jane Tylus, "Spenser, Virgil, and the Politics of Labour," *ELH* 55 (1988): 53-77.

¹⁸Andrew King, *The Faerie Queene and Middle English Romance: The Matter of Just Memory* (Oxford: OUP, 2000) 9-11.

¹⁹All quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

²⁰T. P. Roche, "The Menace of Despair and Arthur's Vision, *Faerie Queene*, I.9," *Spenser Studies* 4 (1984 for 1983): 71-92 (74-75).

²¹Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: OUP, 2004) 173-217.

²²*Shorter Poems* 16.

²³Harry Berger, *The Allegorical Temper: Vision and Reality in Book 2 of Spenser's Faerie Queene* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1957) 125-46.

²⁴Ben Jonson, *Works*, eds. C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1925-52) 8: 319, 356-59.

²⁵All quotations are from Torquato Tasso, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, ed. Anna Maria Carini (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1961).

²⁶Edward Fairfax, *Godfrey of Bulloigne: A Critical Edition of Fairfax's Translation of Tasso's Gerusalemme Liberata, together with Fairfax's Other Poems*, ed. Kathleen M. Lea and T. M. Gang (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1981) 451.

²⁷Jonson 8: 638-39; 11: 284.

²⁸Richard A. McCabe, *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment: Elizabethan Ireland and the Poetics of Difference* (Oxford: OUP, 2002) 47-51.

²⁹Edmund Spenser, *The Works of Edmund Spenser*, ed. Edwin Greenlaw et al., Variorum Edition, 11 vols (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins P, 1932-58), 9 (1949): 125.

³⁰Bakhtin 76.