

On Cheney on Spenser's Ariosto*

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Calling Spenser's reprises of Ariosto "parody" initially strikes me as wrongheaded. But it is striking nonetheless, and that is not a bad way to capture a reader's attention. It may not exactly fit the rhetorician's terminology for an apt strategy in opening a discourse, *captatio benevolentiae*, because it arouses resistance in a mind sometimes still disposed to think of Edmund Spenser, in Milton's phrase, as "our sage and serious poet," or as a Puritan poet, as he is often described nowadays.¹ Moreover, from this early modern English perspective, Ariosto seems, at best, a foolish dreamer, as Milton (*Paradise Lost* 3.459) characterizes him in a dismissive allusion to Astolfo's lunar escapade in *Orlando Furioso*. He is hardly a visionary in the clearly serious ways that his major English inheritors can be fairly described as such. So, what sympathy could they possibly have with him?

Similarly, both to recall Spenser's alleged ambition to 'overgo' Ariosto and to consider the novain that Spenser created as the basic stanza form for *The Faerie Queene* a primary means of achieving such a goal seem like ruminations on a fool's errand. Given the highly inflected nature of Latin, with its four basic conjugations of verbs and five basic declensions of nouns, Italian became a vernacular language rich in potential rhymes. Like Dante's linked tercets, Ariosto's octaves exploit structural possibilities native to the grain of the literary resources he stood in the way of inheriting. By contrast, Spenserian novains, like Spenserian sonnets (indeed, like English sonnets in general), demonstrate the relative poverty of English in this regard. The courtiers in

*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/debrhu01513.htm>>.

Urbino, whose *sprezzatura* Castiglione evokes and celebrates in *Il libro del cortegiano*, shunned sonneteering as a “game” (even in Italian), lest they be seen to sweat over the elegant accomplishments they meant to display nonchalantly. Elizabethan poets, however, were loath to acknowledge, let alone accept, this structural limitation of their language, as both Spenser’s practice and Sidney’s extravagant claims about the capacity for rhyme in English indicate.² National pride, however, does not alter the facts of this matter. Only poetic achievement can do that, by offsetting the conditions for writing such poetry in English with the remarkable performances that such aspiring minds as Spenser and Sidney managed to execute in *The Faerie Queene* and *Astrophil and Stella* respectively.

Likewise, once Donald Cheney engages our attention, the strength of his argument and the subtlety of his readings make persuasive sense; and the stakes are high because of the predictable preconceptions that he so deftly undoes. His idea of sympathetic parody puts him into conversations about influence and imitation that have been increasingly dominated, even in Renaissance studies, by agonistic models of conflict in which poets supposedly go one-on-one in struggles for a place in the sun of cultural status and readerly attention. Reformation culture, both Catholic and Protestant, encouraged such conflict. Tasso, Spenser’s near contemporary, inhabited a world in which Ariosto’s reputation severely constrained ambitions to inherit the mantle of his priority as the preeminent narrative poet who had decisively supplanted his Florentine precursor, Dante Alighieri. Ariosto’s popularity made it more desirable to reinterpret his poem in the light of new criteria of excellence than to acknowledge his obvious shortcomings from the perspective of an increasingly fashionable neoclassicism. Reformatting, rather than reformation, enabled his devotees to buy time while they developed arguments to defend his innovative genius rather than decry his violation of recently restrictive neo-Aristotelian taboos.

Virtually contemporary with the 1590 *Faerie Queene*, Harington’s Englishing of *Orlando Furioso*, published in 1591, bears the marks of

such editorial refashioning, with its manifold glosses and commentaries, as well as the translator's introductory 'poetics' that sounds, in many ways, like an abbreviated version of Sidney's *Defence* especially attuned to the genre of heroic poetry.³ In his letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, which appeared as a postscript to the first three books of his epic romance in 1590, Spenser effects a further abbreviation of these literary principles and thus aligns himself with the 'moralization' of Ariosto's masterpiece that had accompanied its 'neoclassicizing' despite the Italian poet's comparative *sprezzatura* about precisely such matters. Perhaps "What thou lovest well remains," as Ezra Pound claims, but it may require some unforeseeable retrofitting to accommodate changing standards of taste and value.⁴ Moreover, Spenser's letter explicitly refers to Tasso's heroes, Rinaldo and Goffredo, alone among modern exemplars, as though, from the high-minded perspective of a document of that sort, Ariosto's protagonists posed insuperable challenges and were best left out.

Conspicuous allusions to classics, both vernacular and ancient (such as Tasso, Ariosto, Virgil, and Ovid), and to the *rota virgiliana* that Spenser reproduces to describe his career as a poet reveal this sort of willful affiliation with canonical forerunners. Similarly, the brief introductory verses of plot summary (which can mislead)⁵ smack of the readers' aids and other paratextual signifiers that accompany late cinquecento editions of *Orlando Furioso* and *Gerusalemme Liberata* in efforts by publishers and authors to legitimize 'modern' works. In Tasso, due to neo-Aristotelian strictures, some of these features went underground, so to speak, and could not be voiced by the poet *in propria persona*; but when Spenser's narrator queries, "Who knows not Colin Clout?" toward the end of what proved to be the final installment of his poem during his lifetime (the 1596 *Faerie Queene*), he was expressing an aspiration that he had labored conspicuously to achieve, even though he had only, at best, ambiguously succeeded.

Many did not know him in 1596, nor will they ever. But the lucidity and directness of Cheney's thesis and its elaboration make an understanding of Spenser's project far more available and easier to acquire

than heretofore. "Sympathetic parody" offers an unusually inclusive characterization of the moods of imitation and indebtedness so often discernible in *The Faerie Queene*, and the specific examples that Cheney adduces in making his case about Spenser's Ariosto undergo a sharp-eyed scrutiny that reveals both subtle details and dominant tones.

Spenser is drawn both to episodes in the *Furioso* which are fraught with signs of allegory, such as the 'arborification' of Astolfo and the stripping of Alcina, and to a novella like the tale of Ginevra and Ariodante, which Spenser transforms into a blatantly symbolic narrative in the process of adaptation.⁶ The patent allegories of such Spenserian episodes, with their often purely symbolic figures and settings, bespeak their author's almost total immunity to the canons of mimesis that predominate in young Tasso's poetics. Despite his belated addition of an "Allegoria del poema" to the *Liberata*, which probably inspired Spenser's Letter to Raleigh, Tasso was anxiously anticipating official disapproval and censorship of his poem's elements of romance and, especially, the erotic themes that these entailed and Tasso clearly cherished. But, after Spenser's occasional reworkings of Ariostan material in its first two books, *The Faerie Queene* confidently offers a sustained version of a major strand in *Orlando Furioso's* plot. The adventures of Britomart, the heroine of Spenser's third book, are founded upon those of Bradamante in the earlier Italian poem.

The transition to these adventures, which constitute what you might call the Ariostan motherlode in this mine of intertextual treasures, contains a particular gem. In relation to his Italian precursors, Spenser confidently hides this allusion in plain sight by setting it in the brightest of foils, and Cheney discovers this jewel. Spenser so discerningly understands the tensions of genre between (and within) his two primary Italian pretexts that he exploits it dramatically in both grand and subtle gestures. The destruction of the Bower of Bliss at the end of Book 2 takes place with climactic finality and brings emphatic closure via Spenser's homage to Tasso's lushest erotic episode. It is palpably epic in its conclusiveness, as if the telos of such errantry required complete finishing off. We will not hear a significant echo of Tasso in

Spenser's poem for its next three books. Yet, to begin again in Canto 1 of Book 3, Spenser soon hits almost the highest note of Ariostan irreverence. In what is virtually the opening romance episode of *Orlando Furioso*, once the exordium is over and the present stories of individual knights have begun, chivalry wins fulsome praise in an authorial apostrophe to its "grand goodness."⁷ However, the depicted manners of these cavaliers are as much pedestrian as equestrian, and the ideals of chivalry yield to pragmatic compromise in the interest of sexual fulfillment, despite differences of religion and other priorities of group loyalty. The pursuit of Angelica turns epic concerns of faith and war into secondary matters, inconsequential in comparison with the prerogatives of sexual appetite; and it produces the cartoonish image of two rival knights cleverly agreeing to share a horse and catch up with the object of their desire before they continue their duel. Having lost one or another key piece of their knightly equipment (a helmet in one case, a horse in the other), they are typical of high-profile heroes throughout Ariosto's poem. There is always something missing: a sword, a brain, etc. They hardly seem memorably efficient at anything else except going AWOL to chase women, whom they seldom catch and often treat ungallantly, if they do.

There are many light touches of great perspicacity in Cheney's graceful essay, but his notice of Spenser's sly recovery of Ariosto's two-cavaliers-on-a-horse comedy strikes me as something special—not only finely observed by Cheney, but rarely remarked by others. I had never noticed this nuance of artistic imitation till I first heard Cheney point it out, and I had been looking long and hard for such details. They enable the central argument of Cheney's essay to gain secure conviction even in resistant readers who too readily trade in much broader strokes. "Sympathetic parody" becomes an apt phrase for two poets of such apparently different temperaments operating in such strikingly different milieux. This concept helps readers forgo false alternatives and cultivate a manner of listening closely that allows us to hear voices long abandoned to silence by habits of read-

ing grown dim-sighted with routine overuse and deaf to subtle ranges of poetic resonance caught by Cheney's keen ear.

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NOTES

¹*Aereopagitica*, John Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: The Odyssey P, 1957) 716-49, 728. All Milton citations come from this volume.—Anthea Hume, *Edmund Spenser: Protestant Poet* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984) 13-40, esp. 14, 21-23. See also John N. King, "Was Spenser a Puritan," *Spenser Studies* 6 (1989): 1-31.

²*The Defence of Poesy*, Sir Philip Sidney, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: OUP, 1989) 212-50, 248-49.

³See Robert McNulty, ed., *Ludovico Ariosto's Orlando Furioso Translated into English Heroical Verse* (1591) (Oxford: OUP, 1972); Simon Cauchi, "The 'Setting Foorth' of Harington's Ariosto," *Studies Bibliography* 36 (1983): 137-69; and Daniel Javitch, *Proclaiming a Classic: The Canonization of Orlando Furioso* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991) 48-70.

⁴See Canto LXXXI in Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (1-95) (New York: New Directions, 1965) 95-100, esp. 96.

⁵See "Duessaes traines" in the summary stanza that serves as a heading of Canto 1 of Book 3, where Duessa never appears despite this explicit forecast of her activities-to-come in the sequel. All citations of *The Faerie Queene* come from the edition by Thomas P. Roche, Jr. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978).

⁶Spenser's episode of Fradubio draws upon the transformation of Astolfo into a tree in *Orlando Furioso* 6, though the roots of this passage extend back to the Polydorus episode in *Aeneid* 3. Dante's imitation of this Virgilian pre-text in *Inferno* 13 is extremely important for Ariosto but not for Spenser. The stripping of Duessa imitates the revelation of Alcina to Ruggiero by his rescuer, Melissa, in *Orlando Furioso* 7. The story of Ariodante and Ginevra appears in *Orlando Furioso* 4 and 5. Spenser's editors have long noted these sources.

⁷Cf. Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, ed. Cesare Segre (Milan: Montadori, 1976) Book 1, canto 22.