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Spenser and Sin

Spenser's depiction of carnal sin and sensuality seems to lead towards two main questions. Firstly, to what extent is the *desirability* of that sin, as depicted, appropriate? And secondly, is Spenser himself caught up in that sin, rendering his morality a half-hearted affair?

To begin, it would be absurd to imagine the knight of Temperance tempted by matters that are not entirely desirable. To quote Horace: "All that shiny stuff will dazzle and disorder you, tilt your soul towards falsehood." Guyon, already a languid fellow, would lose much of his allegorical self if he were faced with two old hags frolicking in the fountain of sin, and came upon a scantily clad Acrasia with boils on her bum. Certainly the reader's task—and indeed the task of life—would be made effortless if wickedness always came wrapped in soiled and unappealing rags. What we find though—both in the poem and in life—is sin disguised in delightful wrappings, concealing the filth beneath. The filth beneath, at least as regards to carnal sin, is primeval lust, and it is this aspect, *beneath* the surface, that is decisive, and not the *trappings* of outer appearance. This is not to say that the external appearance is of no import, but simply that its nature, its worthiness, is dependent upon the internal qualities it covers.

When the animal of primeval lust is allowed to roam free, we must recognise the victory of sin. When there is even an *attempt* to shackle him, then we see the presence of holiness.

It is quite clear in Spenser's honest depiction of sensuality—

another aspect of external appearances—that though this sensuality might encourage sin, it is not in itself sinful. Again, the nature of sensuality is dependent upon the internal qualities from which it grows. Indeed, carnal pleasure itself, when contained within the bounds of matrimony—another form of shackling—is free from sin.

It is the dichotomy of the pleasant *appearance* of sin and its true hideous nature that gives interest and actually *defines* sin, particularly in the *Bower of Bliss* section. This *desirability* of sin then, as Spenser portrays it, is not only appropriate, but essential.

It also should be made clear that it is not so much sin that is *too* desirable, but that purity is *too* bland. We have already mentioned that Sir Guyon is an insipid character, and it is this passive quality he manifests that makes him far from endearing. All the life, all the activity, all the enticement, all the attraction, all the charm remains in the realm of sin, leaving little for poor Guyon. Indeed, since he is above all an allegorical figure, there is a certain “unhumanness” to him. It is only when he reaches the two nymphs and the fountain in the *Bower of Bliss*, slowing his pace: “Them to behold, and in his sparkling face/The secret signes of kindled lust appeare” that we feel we are dealing with a real man.

If the goodly knight seems less than human, the same cannot be said of Spenser. And here we turn to the second part of the question, namely: Whether or not we witness an author too captivated by the sinful charms of his own creation, as if he were in some way seduced by them. Indeed, the sudden and shocking destruction of the *Bower of Bliss*, after so much attentive and leisurely exposition of its delights,

might easily be seen as the sudden thrashing of the whip of self flagellation, as if Spenser awoke from his erotic dream just in time: the over reaction of the latter perhaps an indication of the inappropriateness of the former.

Certainly the descriptions of Acrasia's abode are attenuated. We must bear¹ in mind though, that Sir Guyon escaped the domain of Mammon with hardly a moments' temptation. The character of Mammon himself made this inevitable, for he is trapped in his own mode of thinking, believing everyone to be as he is, and is thus incapable of *true deceit*. For this reason, he represents his subterranean kingdom without attempt at disguise, expecting Guyon to be charmed as much by the hellishness as by the riches, and surprised as well as angry when he is not. When he offers his daughter to Sir Guyon, he says: "Thy spouse I will her make, if that thou *lust*" (my italics). Here we discover Mammon's inability to see things in anything but his own terms. Naturally enough then, the temptations of lifeless riches, presented in the gloomy light of actuality, are no temptation for Guyon.

Accordingly, the *Bower of Bliss* must make up for the desirability lacking in the encounter with Mammon. This is a simple matter, for here we find activity and light taking the place of lifelessness and gloom. Here we find pleasure and amusement. But there is no ambiguity as to which camp Spenser's belongs—at least, not on the page. From the very outset we are offered key words and phrases: "Then suddenly both would themselves unhele/And th'amarous sweet spoils

¹Pun intended.

to greedy eyes revele.” CXIII To stick strictly to the point, these sweets are *spoiled*. Above all though, *greedy* eyes here watch, and how can this greed be anything other than a chastisement in a book exalting Temperance?

We should next compare the breasts of these wanton lasses with those of the Petrarchan lady in *Amoretti*.

And her two lilly paps aloft displayd,
And all, that might his melting hart entise

Alternately:

Fayre bosome fraught with vertues richest tresure,
The neast of loue, the lodging of delight:
the bowre of blisse, the paradice of pleasure,
the sacred harbour of that heuenly spright
How was I rauisht with your louely sight,
and my frayle thoughts too rashly led astray?
. . . And twixt her paps like early fruit in May (LXXVI)

twoo golden apples of vnualed price
. . . Exceeding sweet, yet voyd of sinfull vice (LXXVII)

Here we see the lover contemplating his lady's breasts, those golden apples in a silver dish. First of all, we see a juxtaposition of natural beauty with refined beauty, artful beauty. This is none of the artfulness of Philotime or Acrasia in *The Faerie Queene*, but rather an art which, we see from the context, seems to represent the civilised aspect of man. Also, the breasts are “Exceeding sweet, yet void of sinful vice,” as well as being “sweet fruit of pleasure brought from paradise.” And so we see a sensual sexual pleasure which is derived not from hell, not made of sin, but from heaven made of holiness.

This also demonstrates Spenser's true position. First of all, to be

brief, notice the key words: “Fayre . . . vertues richest treasure . . . paradise . . . sacred . . . harbour . . .” There is as much purity in the female of the Amoretti as there is sin in the *Bower of Bliss*. The breasts of sin are used as a weapon, to weaken the resolve of Temperance. The breasts of heavenly beauty actually provoke and insure Temperance, for they belong to chastity.

But notice also that Spenser is quick to admit the power of this loveliness, especially when we consider the natural weakness of man.

The point though is to demonstrate that Spenser clearly is in no way enchanted or fooled by the *sin* of the *Bower of Bliss*, but simply that he has the honesty to depict an apple as an apple, and not a pear.²

Spenser, in the *Epithalamion*, looks at beauty of the physical world as a symbol of spiritual beauty, in a sense seeing the world’s beauty as shadows on the Platonic cave wall, representing ideal archetypal or, to give it a more Christian slant, spiritual beauty. In the *Bower of Bliss*, however, the opposite is true, and physical beauty is a parody, representing, instead, inner corruption. In this light, the destruction of the *Bower of Bliss* is sudden not because it was unexpected, but because, indeed, it *was* expected. There is no need to lead up slowly to that destruction, nor to justify it. The loveliness of the place is not sinful in itself, but it is as a body to a sinful soul. The loveliness is the wrappings and the trappings of Intemperance, and, if Intemperance is to be destroyed, so too must its devices.

²Pun intended.

There can be little doubt that the sensuous world is indeed one which Spenser insists upon exploring. Unfortunately, the border between sensuality and sin is often a blurry one, and though Spenser certainly is able to recognise positive aspects of one, this is not to say that he believes them, even unconsciously, to be present in the other. Indeed, as we have seen, it is clear that Spenser in no way is captivated by his portrayal of lasciviousness.

In fact, what we are more likely to find is the reader himself being seduced by the scene, who then begins a laborious and contrite and convoluted rationalisation which, one way or another, projects his own guilt onto the face of Spenser.