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Keith Waddington

M. Brian

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**An Analysis of Selected
Stanzas From Spenser's
*Faerie Queene***

I

Upon a bed of Roses she was layd,
As faint through heat, or dight to pleasant
sin,
And was arayd, or rather disarayd,
All in a vele of silke and silver thin,
That hid no whit her alablaster skin,
But rather shewd more white, if more might
be:
More subtle web Arachne can not spin,
Nor the fine nets, which oft we woven see
Of scorched deaw, do not in th'aire more
lightly flee.

In the *Epithalamion*, we saw our Petrarchan female¹
reclined in lilies and violets, symbolising purity and
humility respectively. It is not surprising then that

¹Actually she has all along been only a quasi-Petrarchan
female, qualified if for no other reason than that she
accepted her suitor.

Acrasia, the antithesis of the Petrarchan female, is composed, instead, lounging in a bed of roses. There is, in this image, an idea of nature perverted or perhaps possessed, a nature whose thorny pricks offer comfort rather than pain; whose rosy colours bring to mind rosy blood rather than rosy cheeks. Acrasia's comfort is surely equalled only by our own discomfort. And of course, bearing in mind the allegorical nature of *The Faerie Queene*, we must surely be cognisant of the tacit connection between rosary-rose bed-and rosery-the Roman Catholic beads used as a guide to prayer. We might thereby conclude that Acrasia slumbers in a bed that has been forged² by Catholic prayer.

As we turn to that "pleasant sin," we turn to a more problematical conception. Earlier, ambling through the *Bower of Bliss*, we observed things that "seemed," things "as if." In effect, the character of the province was *gradually* revealed: the descriptions of the *surface* of things undermined by a growing realisation that all was not as it seemed. It could be argued, in this light, that the "pleasant" is likewise not as it seems, but a "pleasant" laced with irony. By careful examination though, taking note of implicit statements like "Fraile harts" in the third stanza of our selection, it seems somewhat obtuse to read this as nothing more than an instance of irony. Evidence does seem to suggest a certain acknowledgement, on

²Unusual diction deliberate.

Spencer's part, that sin does indeed possess a pleasantness that cannot be denied, and so it would appear that to live according to absolute virtue is impossible. It could even be argued that Spencer's depiction of intemperance is wrought with the same fervour as the characters' practice of intemperance.

Moving to address the description of dress, we are again struck by the dissimilitude of Acrasia and the Petrarchan female of *Epithalamion*. Where one is hidden beneath layers of "odour'd sheetes, and Arras coverlets" and *displays* only "proud humility," the other *wears* only a veil designed to accentuate rather than to moderate; a cover so painfully transparent as to reveal metaphorically more—"shewd more white, if more might be"—than the very nakedness it covers. Notice also Acrasia's skin: no Lilly white here, but cold stony white, itself semi-transparent. We see here as well the beginning of a description of Acrasia which incorporates a mixture of cold and hot images, certainly a further hint that she is a kind of perversion of the natural order.

We should also take note that the veil is a kind of perversion of the wedding veil. Not only is its effect contrary to that customary token of humility, as we have already noted, but it is worn by Acrasia out of context: in bed. And where we see the groom of the *Epithalamion* beckon to night:

Spread thy broad wing over my love and me,

that no man may us see

and thus his bride slips under covers of darkness, Acrasia, on the other hand, covets of daylight,³ that any man might see.

It is certainly not for mere effect that the veil—which also could be seen as a perversion of a nun’s veil, and so as another depiction of the Catholic church as villain—is further likened, in this almost epic simile, to the web of a spider. The intention, clearly, is an association between the Acrasia and the *Arachne*. The web she weaves is the web of enticement and temptation, into which the “Fraile harts” of men fall. Such enticements and temptations are found everywhere in the spider lady’s boudoir—for such is the Bower of Bliss—from the artificial beauty of art that endeavours to replace nature, to the rendition of ease—antithetical to the Protestant work ethic, and represented in book I canto IV as: “Idleness the nourse of sin”—beauty and sexual satisfaction. We also might remember the ceremonial nuptials of certain members of the *Arachne* family conclude with in a cannibalistic feast in which the male is entirely consumed. This is an obvious metaphor that need not be further explained.

³Here, as elsewhere, poetic licence is requested. The doubtful grammar was necessary in order to produce the parallel phrasing of “covers of darkness” and “covets of daylight”. And why not, indeed?

Strewn about, like coins in the fountain of the *Bower of Bliss*, the word "silver"—used in this stanza in reference to the thinness of the veil—donating here the attempt to improve on natural beauty by artifice, which is in truth a degradation of that beauty—for it comes from man and not from God—hidden beneath the veil of conceit; and donating elsewhere a hunger for riches that can certainly be fed in this realm, though, we doubt, is hardly likely to be satisfactorily satiated.

II

Her snowy brest was bare to readie spoyle
 Of hungry eies, which n'ote therewith be
 filled,
 And yet through languour of her late sweet
 toyle,
 Few drops, more cleare then Nectar, forth
 distild,
 That like pure Orient perles adowne it
 trild,
 And her faire eyes sweet smyling in delight,
 Moystened their fierie beames, with which
 she thrild
 Fraile harts, yet quenched not; like starry
 light
 Which sparckling on the silent waves, does seem more
 bright.

As with the alabaster white, we have here another instance where the usual purity associated with white, as

in the *Epithalamion* and *Amoretti*, is spoiled, rendered cold, voided of humanness.

As is typical in the Petrarchan tradition, we next encounter war imagery, though here with an ironic twist appropriate to the subject. Since Acrasia is in effect everything that the Petrarchan female is not, it is fitting that we should see a certain amount of reversal: It is the pain felt by the suitor, a consequence of the female's disdain, which usually fosters those images of conflict; but here, where encouragement supplants disdain, the "spoyle" of war is not the suitor's heart, but Acrasia's bare breasts; and here, the spoils of war are not taken by the winner from the loser, but given by the winner to the loser. And yet, since we are now in a material rather than spiritual region, the more "physical" meaning of "spoil" immediately leaps to mind, namely: to go bad. The eyes, gazing upon those lewd breasts, that are turned bad. From this point of view, we might entertain yet another meaning of spoil, namely, to take by force, for we can easily imagine the power of Acrasia's looks capturing—perhaps by enchantment—the animal predilections of the male.

There is, finally, in this small word "Spoyle" a sense of active corruption—and this would certainly suit Spenser's agenda, which, as already hinted, includes the notion that all this intemperance is only in small part the male's fault, for he does indeed have that "Fraile" heart, and the

merchandise offered is so very enticing—and we see so well Acrasia's power to turn good into bad.

To conclude this brief examination of war imagery, clearly Spenser makes use of this, and other aspects of the Petrarchan convention, not strictly in a manner conforming to the original, but instead in a manner, as already suggested, most fitting to the purpose at hand. Further proof of this can be seen in the *Epithalamion*, where we find: "bring home the triumph of *our* victory." (My italics). Here we see something quite different from a Petrarchan triumph, where the female relentlessly shuns her would-be suitor, but a mutual triumph.

In yet another instance of ironic rendition, Acrasia is shown crying tears more clear still than the Homeric drink of the gods, giver of life and beauty. No doubt, in her own eyes, this spider woman, this enchanting witch, is indeed a goddess, and so why should she not spill tears of refined nectar? In a rather appropriate simile, those tear drops soon become small treasures of "Orient perles," further blurring the boundary between nature and artifice and reiterating the theme of greed for worldly goods: and as nature's nectar attracts insects, what better than small treasures to attract those greedy, buzzing, unrestrained men.

If we know the purpose of those tears, we have yet to discover their cause. Simply, they come "through languour

of her late sweet toyle."⁴ The important thing to note here though is that languor signifies not only a dreamy inertia, but an affliction. Do we therefore detect a certain understanding, on the part of Spenser, that just as the men might make claim to weakness as an excuse for their intemperance, Acrasia might likewise be tormented by an inclination which is stronger than any powers she could muster in opposition⁵?

There is certainly more than a modicum of ambiguity in this stanza, and we should be thankful that Elizabethan spelling allowed Spenser the possibility of differentiating between the eyes of the male onlookers and those of Acrasia by lettering the former "eies" and the latter "eyes".⁶ This being said, we now observe that her tears are not only unable to quench her fiery "beames," as tears might, in a natural place, wash away sin, but they in fact intensify those "beames," for just as stars appear brighter in the blackness of the reflecting sea, so those tears act as a

⁴Notice the almost oxmoric "sweet toyle."

⁵None of this is to suggest that Spenser accepts such forces should win, but only that he recognises that every strength has its contumacious weakness, and it is for this reason that forgiveness, with repentance, can be granted.

⁶At least *I* am thankful. If this is not an argument for free spelling, it is at least one for confined syntax.

foil, making those beames more beautiful, more enchanting, more able to captivate the men they fall upon.

III

The young man sleeping by her, seemed to be
 Some goodly swayne of honorable place,
 That certes it great pittie was to see
 Him his nobilitie so foul deface;
 And sweet regard, and amiable grace,
 Mixed with manly sternness did appeare
 Yet sleeping, in his well proportiond face,
 And on his tender lips the downy heare
 Did now but freshly spring, and silken blossomes
 beare.

Last of all we turn to a stanza whose simplicity conveys the character of the young man it depicts. We see him sleeping, and thus, by association, less guilty than he might otherwise appear.⁷ As evidence of this, note the diction, for though he has committed carnal acts with Acrasia, we yet read such as: "goodly," "honorable," "amiable" in his description.

And yet, as we have already said, every strength has its opposite weakness, and this applies not only in the outside world of people, but in the inner world of person, where

⁷This is a convention made famous—or perhaps infamous, for it does smack of deceit—by Samuel Richardson, who maintains the virtue of his Petrarchan Clarissa, despite the rape she suffers, by having her unconscious during the act.

conflicts usually mirror those of the outer, and where, in fact, the winner and loser is actually decided. To speak plainly, we see the external conflict between Acrasia and the men she must seduce, but also the inner conflict between intemperance and temperance. From this angle we might view Acrasia as a personification of man's propensity towards immorality and sexual passion, doing battle with good conscience and religious purity; and it is in this inner realm, in this inner conflict, that the worldly battles of temptation are actually won and lost. Accordingly, this slumbering "swayne"—"lover" clearly in the ironic sense—must himself be held at least partly responsible, for all the web weaving of Acrasia. And this is indeed the case, for we see "Him his nobilitie so foule deface" and not *her* his nobilitie so foul deface. It must be admitted though that Spenser, being of the much whiskered sex, is want to place as much blame as possible in the eyes of Acrasia, or, in the terms of our psychological interpretation, on the shoulders of temptation.

The Faerie Queene is a long walk from a Petrarchan love sonnet, and much of the footing is uphill; nevertheless, it has been made clear, amongst other diverse analysis, that Petrarchan traditions are indeed alive and well in this work. More importantly, we have seen that Petrarchan traditions are not so much a set of rules to Spenser as a

set of images, which might be shown reflected in reverse or twisted in perversion, as easily as shown in their unadulterated originality.⁸

⁸A note on originality: The goal of this necessarily selective paper has been both to point out the patently obvious, as well as to offer an *individual* analysis untinted by those murky filters of "research." Perhaps this has entailed a good deal of fumbling and tumbling in the dark, but it is perhaps preferable to find the light ourselves—and see with horror the bruises—than have the room described by some faceless fellow in a text book, who might very well be blind and be simply retelling what he was told by another blind fellow, and so on. This is by no means a condemnation of scholarship, but more a sad reflection that the more we know from other people, the less we know of ourselves. Then again, perhaps this is even more fumbling in the dark, and someone should really just open the shutters and let in some sunlight—if such a thing exists. Please note: this is a final footnote, and my final footnotes never count.