Fashioning a Gentleman:

Analyzing Flawed Virtue in Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, Books II & VI

Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* follows various Knights-errant on their quests to keep the land of Faerie safe from the threats that daunt its lush scenery. Each of these knights serves as an allegorical representation of a personal virtue that is often necessary to defeat the villain at hand, and which Spenser implies in his “Letter to Raleigh” should teach one to “fashion [themselves] a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline” (Book 1, 205). However, Spenserian virtue often proves difficult, for the characters seem unable to embrace their virtue for the entirety of the book. Falsity runs rampant but is usually embodied more obviously by the villains, such as Duessa and Archimago, than it is by the heroes. The disparity between “hero” and “villain” becomes increasingly intense as the volumes of *The Faerie Queene* accumulate in the reader’s consciousness, not in the sense that any of the knights becomes evil, but rather in their increasing inability to stay true to what they are meant to embody. We see this failure displayed obviously at the end of Book II when Guyon violently and intemperately destroys the Bowre of Bliss. The same is true in Book VI when Calidore’s embodiment of Courtesy allows him to defeat his enemies, but we quickly see the falsity that drives such virtue. The question arises then, as to why—in tales in which people truly become whatever they represent—Spenser would allow his heroes to succeed, yet remain flawed. In looking closely at
some of the villains, and comparing their transformations to those of Guyon and Calidore (as “perfect” representations of Temperance and Courtesy), we can expose a commentary on the flaws of a life based on virtue that should better oneself, but that ultimately seems to do little more than prove that humanity is incapable of purity.

It stands to reason that in analyzing the heroes’ transformations and considering them as less than heroic in the overall scheme of things (to the extent in which they are not pure good, and therefore susceptible to villainy), we must look to the actual villains for a sense of just how one dimensional allegorical characters often are in *The Faerie Queene*. Two villains Guyon encounters early on—Furor and Occasion—embody his biggest issues in the final canto of Book II. The pair work in tandem, and are pure allegory, not once offering any action not firmly backed up by the concept their name represents. Of Occasion, Spenser writes:

> And ever as she went, her young did walke  
> In fowle reproach, and termes of vile despight,  
> Provoking him by her outrageous talke,  
> To heape more vengeance on that wretched wight. (2. IV. 5. 1-4)

Here we are offered a description of the constant action of Occasion, who follows Furor closely, driving him forward with her words that stir anger within the victim. There is no point at which she stops embodying this concept. Furor is the same, described as a madman inflamed by “frantick fit…that oft himselfe he chaunst to hurt unwares” (2.IV.7. 3,6). These concept figures are certain of themselves, whereas Guyon never truly is. Calidore encounters slightly less monstrous monsters in Canto I of Book VI when he stumbles upon Briana’s castle, which serves as a staging ground for the extortion of human hair. While the concept of the villains here invites typical Spenserian humor, the affront on courtesy is apparent, and Calidore storms the castle in
the most discourteous way to defeat it. Briana taxes those who pass for their hair to craft a mantle at the behest of a knight she loves, whose name, Crudor, literally means “cruel, rude…primitive and basic” (Book 6, 11, Note 1). Crudor’s command seems barbaric and ridiculous, but his allegorical name portrays that. When Briana summons him to her aid he offers no semblance of courtesy, the lacking of which we would expect from a villain whose name screams discourtesy. When Crudor arrives on the scene he “Ne stayd to aske if it were he by name./ But coucht his speare, and ran at him amaine” (6.1.33.3-4). The beastly man charges without thought, showing off his primitive nature. In Crudor, we are shown a villain who like Furor and Occasion is at face value, and under the surface, exactly what he is meant to be; he too is the perfect representation of his name. If this leads to the surmise that perhaps creatures in The Faerie Queene are named for their fixed and unchanging attributes, although on the surface this may seem entirely plausible Spenser dispels any such thought in Book III through the journey of Malbecco. This man embodies jealousy, but until it consumes him completely he keeps his name and his human form. Of his ultimate transformation Spenser writes:

There dwels he ever, miserable swaine,
Hatefull both to him selfe, and every wight;
Where he through privy griefe, and horror vaine,
Is woxen so deform’d that he has quight
Forgot he was a man, and Gelosy is hight. (3.X.60.5-9)

In this passage Malbecco becomes consumed entirely by what he embodies. He turns from a jealous man into Jealousy itself. Harold Skulsky says of this metamorphosis that “what remains, ironically, is the perverse chastity, or absoluteness, of a fixed idea” (449). What Skulsky implies by this “perverse chastity” is the absoluteness and sterility that Malbecco embodies in becoming
an allegorical creature. In his transformation he has cast his lot in stone, and will remain unchangeable from then on, unable to undergo another metamorphosis. The emergence of Malbecco as a “fixed idea” shows that similar creatures of allegory are born from persons who become embodied entirely by what they represent, and that they are not in fact real people. In this the transformation is grounded in the villainous. If people can be transformed into pure unchangeable vice, then surely good people should also be able to undergo similar transformation altogether into virtue. Spenser’s characters—by their names—should be pure or at least able to become pure, yet it seems that the transformation might be an impossibility for anything that is good.

As with anything remotely divine, Temperance is a challenging virtue to embrace. It embodies almost godlike impartiality in all things, and in viewing it in that divine light, Guyon can come across as one of the most skilled champions in The Faerie Queene. Guyon, however, needs his advisor—the Palmer—to keep him from breaking his temperate state. Thus, Guyon’s glorious nature is downplayed, for suddenly we picture a hero who needs a conscience to keep him consistently in check. The house of Alma serves as an excellent platform for the structure of Temperance. Of its role in society J. Carscallen says that “Allegorically, Alma’s castle is the human body as ruled by the soul…or the whole natural man as ruled by a higher principle” (681). This certainly seems to be the case; however, Alma’s castle is also likened to the Tower of Babel in a way that damns the concept of Temperance. The narrator says,

First she them led up the Castle wall,

That was so high, as foe might not it clime,

And all so faire, and sensible withal,

Not built of bricke, ne yet of stone and lime,
But of that thing like to that *Aegyptian* slime

Whereof king *Nine* whilehome built *Babell* towere,

But O great pitty, that no lenger time

So goodly workemanship should not endure:

Soone it must turne to earth; no earthly thing is sure. (Spenser, 2.IX.21.1-9)

What this seems to imply is that being truly temperate—as the castle and the Palmer seem to be—is akin to reaching out and trying to touch God. It comes as no surprise that Guyon’s virtue is impossible to uphold in the purest sense, for “no earthly thing is sure”.

Guyon nearly breaks his virtue many times throughout the poem, especially during two encounters within the Bower of Bliss, but also across the text as a whole, and most of the time in his relationships with women (whether in trouble, or just trouble). The first encounter of the Bower that captivates him, and as a result almost shatters his virtuous presence, involves the beautiful women in the fountain who seduce him. Of his near fall to these harlots, we are told that within Guyon

>The secrete signes of kindled lust appeare,

>Their wanton meriments they did encrease,

>And to him beckoned, to approach more neare,

>And shewed him many sights, that corage cold could reare. (2.XII.68.6-9)

He is about to fail, to become consumed by bliss and to abandon his quest, but the Palmer it seems is purer than the body, and intervenes before it is too late. This is just one of the numerous occasions in which we are shown just how truly *human* Guyon is. Despite the Palmer’s governance Spenser allows Guyon to fall, for after Guyon and his advisor take on Acrasia and capture her in a swift and anticlimactic encounter, he succumbs to passion and begins to destroy
everything around him. Considering his virtue, which embodies moderation in all things, this outburst should not be an excusable act; and considering the nature of the Palmer, and the advice which he has given throughout the Book, one would expect him to step in and stop Guyon from breaking his virtuous intent. What comes across in this act of permitted intemperance is a truly harrowing thing indeed: to Spenser even the soul cannot be truly pure, and in succumbing to passionate rage the knight of Temperance becomes abruptly and obviously intemperate.

Courteous is a virtue that governs our entire existence as a society. In effect, everyone has to be courteous every day or else we run the risk of offending, of isolating ourselves from human relations, and of becoming somewhat bestial in our behaviors. Calidore is in essence a representation of the pinnacle of social standards, which in Spenser’s time would certainly revolve around courtly life. However, despite the fact that Calidore’s name literally derives from the Greek word “nice” (Book Six, 6, Note 9), the acts he commits in the name of courtesy end up doing little more than furthering his own power and station, so in effect, although they may seem true and “nice”, they are in fact mirrors of courtly life: revolving purely around status and advancement. There is frequent talk of Carpet Knights within *The Faerie Queene* and if Calidore’s brash violent streaks and martial prowess did not show such a different side of him than the courteous and “generous” knight, it would be easy to place him among that category as well. One of the first instances we see of this self-appropriation is when Calidore comes across Tristram fighting with the knight on horseback. Here, Calidore appears to see nothing wrong with the duel, and continues to walk on by, but when he sees that roles have reversed and Tristram is in fact the victor, he goes over to challenge the man on what right he has to kill a knight, saying,

“…what meanes this, gentle swaine?
Why hath thy hand too bold it selfe embrewed
In blood of knight, the which by thee is slaine,
Be thee no knight; which armes inpugneth plaine?” (Spenser, 6. II.7.2-5)

This speaks heavily to social convention, for it implies that if Tristram is not of noble birth, then the law of armes has been broken, for he is too low to kill one so high. Interestingly enough, it is not upon being told the story of the knight’s atrocious act that Calidore completely forgives Tristram, but on finding out his heritage, and that he is in fact noble born. At this point, Calidore makes him a squire, gives him the armes of the fallen knight, and even gives him charge of the damsel, saying simply:

“But since this Ladie is all desolate,
And needeth safeguard now upon her way,
Ye may doe well in this her needful state
To succor her, from daunger of dismay;
That thankfull guerdon may to you repay.” (6.II.38.1-5)

These rewards are certainly socially acceptable, but are they really Calidore’s to bestow? Spenser subtly links deception to courtesy throughout by showing that Calidore is inclined to deceive wherever necessary. We see this in his willingness to lie about Priscilla’s absence, and what we can only assume is her lack of virtue. He blatantly lies to her father, and brings a severed head to reinforce the lie, all because he was asked nicely. Calidore does the same with Pastorella, initially trying to pay for her, and when that fails using his virtue to woo a woman who, for all intents and purposes, is more an object of lust than love. This love seems untrue, as no love has yet stood in the way of a virtue to such an extent that knights give up their quest, and yet
Calidore not only gives up said quest, but also gives up being a knight entirely. Of Calidore’s truancy Humphrey Tonkin states that

Calidore's action in putting aside his knightly armor brings us face to face with the central moral dilemma of the whole quest. In the context of Calidore's quest, the action is culpable in the most obvious of senses: abandonment of the trappings of knighthood is moral cowardice of the worst kind, constitutes an affront to Gloriana, and implies that Calidore has forgotten all about his quest. (qtd. in Myers, 238)

Calidore’s pursuit of Pastorella seems more like the actions of the rapacious Braggadochio than those of a knight of Gloriana’s court; it is self-serving, and entirely unknightly…yet somehow quite courtly. His actions with Tristram, his lying for Priscilla, and his love for Pastorella, all point to Calidore abusing his authority through courtesy, but the most fascinating thing about the virtue is how it conquers its enemy so thoroughly, only to have the beast escape so efficiently.

Calidore’s quest all along was to defeat the Blatant Beast, a creature whose very bite seems incurable, but who otherwise can be strangely difficult to define. Merritt Y. Hughes writes that Spenser “makes it clear that [the beast] certainly shadows a host of various kinds of calumniation committed by men of all professions” (268). It is interesting then, that when Calidore finally corners the monster in a monastery he overcomes it with little effort at all. After knocking the beast down, the narrator says that Calidore

His shield he on him threw, and fast downe held,

Like as a bullock, that in bloudy stall

Of butchers balefull hand to ground is feld,

Is forcibly kept downe, till he be throughly queld. (Spenser, 6.XII.30.6-9)
This can be viewed symbolically as the clashing of the virtuous with the unvirtuous tongue. As courtesy, Calidore politely subdues the slanderous beast. However, within eight stanzas the beast escapes, and this in itself shows us that one cannot defeat slander, for as long as courtesy exists so too will its opposite. The Blatant Beast runs free because it is a tool of the court. It is akin to Calidore’s companion, the thing that governs him as the Palmer governs Guyon. It completes him, giving him the power to control those around him through either defamation or kindness. In this we can see the failure of courtesy plainly stated through its relationship to the courtly life; it is a virtue that claims to separate men from beasts, but the irony of it is that any and all courtesy is false courtesy.

On the surface, characters in *The Faerie Queene* seem to be one dimensional, and although Faerielond certainly contains many who are not what they seem, these falsities are never hidden for very long. The virtues, however, seem to be exceptions to that rule. We are shown this throughout each book, for what seems to be a perfect and simple world with defined roles shifts over time, and the virtues lose the very essence of what defines them. For Guyon, this is because of the high expectations and almost divine dedication that is required to keep temperance alive; and for Calidore, it is the impossibility of keeping courtesy alive in any degree of sincerity, without also embodying blatant discourtesy. Stephen Greenblatt believes that “Spenser’s knights never quite [reaching] the havens they seek may reflect irresolvable tensions” (777), and this may be true, but despite these impossible virtues, man has no issue descending into villainy: becoming completely and totally wrapped up in raw emotion, or vice. These things reveal Spenser’s commentary on the dubious virtuous ideals that governed Elizabeth’s court, while also serving as a scathing commentary on human weakness. They show us that, if people want a place in high society, on paper they have to become *inhuman*. But they also show us that
people have no problem being beasts but lack the will and ability entirely to transcend that possibility.
Works Cited


