Sabbath Puns and Okonomia in Spenser's Faerie Queene

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Sabbath Puns and Okonomia in Spenser’s Faerie Queene

JUDITH H. ANDERSON

With the posthumous publication of Spenser’s Mutabilitie Cantos in 1609, together with the six books of the 1596 edition, The Faerie Queene effectually had a new ending, and, with John Upton’s edition of all seven books in 1758, newly explained wordplay on “Sabbaoth”/“Sabaoth” in the ending’s close.1 This wordplay, a visual and aural pun, was implicit in 1609 but for the first time attested to explicitly in Upton’s notes. My article centers primarily on this wordplay, bringing it, along with the theme of sovereignty in the Cantos, into relation with Giorgio Agamben’s genealogy of what he calls “economic theology,” the development of theology regarding an immanent ordering within divinity and the cosmos.2 Secondarily, the article treats the ending of book 6, Calidore’s conquest of the Blatant Beast and the Beast’s escape into the presence of the poet, aligning it with the truly final ending, that of the partial book 7, which is an “vnperfite” canto consisting of only two stanzas.3 Book 7 was ironically interrupted by events, we might assume, and, in effect, by Mutability herself. The editions of 1609 and 1758 nevertheless afforded a new reading experience in their mutual ending, one that is divinely comic.

SABBAAOTH/SABAOTH: CONCLUDING THE FAERIE QUEENE

The final two stanzas of the Mutabilitie Cantos, which serve to conclude The Faerie Queene, combine earthly motion with

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motionless eternity. Fittingly, this combination comes in a pun, a form of multiplicity favored by Spenser as an often-paradoxical form of unity, and it resides in two visually and aurally similar words, the one referring to the God of eternal rest, and the other to the God of hosts, or active armies:

But thence-forth all shall rest eternally
With Him that is the God of Sabbaoth hight:
O that great Sabbaoth God, graunt me that Sabaoths
sight.
(7.8.2, emphasis added)

The play on the word Sabbath, spelled ao in 1609, Upton, and later editions in the final, unstressed syllable (or two unstressed syllables) of all three occurrences and visually marked either by two bb’s when meaning “rest” or by one b when meaning “hosts,” is virtually impossible to distinguish by pronunciation in English and difficult to keep straight even visually in type. I will distinguish the difference discursively in my argument, while emphasizing Spenser’s punning wordplay by using the more familiar word Sabbath when possible for both.

Before engaging the history of this Spenserian pun and its associations further, I want to review its verbal background. Spenser had training in Hebrew at Merchant Taylors’ School, and he also had access to many versions of the Bible—English, Latin, Greek, Hebrew—that afforded varying transliterations and translations. A homonymic pun is doubtful in Old Testament biblical Hebrew, although a looser form of punning on the transliterated Hebrew words in English is possible. Evidence exists of a confusion in English of the two biblical words in the Renaissance period and with it an invitation to deliberate poetic wordplay. Rather than relying only on a pun in Hebrew, my assumption is that Spenser is punning visually, aurally, significantly, and allusively on the transliterated forms “Sabbaoth”/“Sabaoth” in the final lines of the Mutabilitie Cantos for an English audience: the presence of neither word is in question, and both appear in the first edition of the Cantos, namely that of Matthew Lownes in 1609.

The orthographical forms of “Sabbath” in the OED provide evidence of its potential for punning with “Sabaoth” in English: among the numerous variations for “Sabaoth” (rest) the OED lists are Middle English sabboth, “sabotte,” and “sabothe” and, “by confusion with Sabaoth” (hosts), also numerous instances of “Sabbath” spelled “sabaothe” and “sabbaoth,” the last Spenser’s
version at the end of the *Mutabilitie Cantos*. A telling example the *OED* offers in which “Sabbath” is fused with “Sabaoth” comes from Shakespeare’s Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, act IV, scene i: “By our holy Sabaoth haue I sworne to haue the due and forfet of my bond.” Shylock refers to the Sabbath as the date for the repayment of his loan or else the enactment of the penalty for defaulting. Spenser’s pun evidently had a good chance of being recognized by his audience.

The *Mutabilitie Cantos* effectually summarize various combinations of rest and activity in Spenser’s epic romance that are analogous to the final pun on Sabbath and support its presence, lessening the possibility that it is merely the result of a printer’s license. These combinations are evident everywhere in *The Faerie Queene*, ranging from the poem’s metrical form, which conceptually combines stanza, deriving from Latin *stāre*, or “stand,” with verse, deriving from Latin *vertēre*, or “turn, change”; to the poem’s allegory, which combines abstraction with movement, or what Paul Ricoeur terms “conceptual peace and rest” with developing narratives. Recurrently, the *Mutabilitie Cantos* express a related, thematic concern with still movement—still indicating continuous motion or, in a paradoxical pun, motion that is motionless, or still while moving: Spenser describes the figure Nature in the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, as “Still moouing, yet vnmoued from her sted” or place (7.7.13). The same concern also occurs in the 1590 and 1596 books of *The Faerie Queene*, for example, in a description of Florimell, “Still as she fledd” (3.1.16). The combination of rest and restlessness, stability and change, further pertains to the characters and contents of Spenser’s epic romance, from figures in the *Mutabilitie Cantos* to the statues and questing heroes or the Houses and surrounding narratives of books 1–6.

My immediate point is that the wordplay on *Sabbath* in the last two lines of Spenser’s posthumously published *Mutabilitie Cantos* is fitting, in fact perfectly fitted, to what has preceded it in the *Cantos* themselves and in the earlier books of the poem, but I want to linger further over the familiar background of this pun. Its explicit recovery only begins with Upton’s notes in his mid-eighteenth-century edition of *The Faerie Queene*. Upton cites “*the Lord of Sabaoth*” in Romans 9:29 and a verse from the popular medieval hymn *Te Deum Laudamus*, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth,” or “*God of Hosts, God of Armies*” (*Dominus Deus Sabaoth*), and he does so in order to suggest the presence of a pun in Spenser’s concluding lines that is evident in the spelling of “Sabbath,” with two *b*’s for rest and one *b* for hosts.
observes that previous editions are erroneous in failing properly to distinguish between the two words.\textsuperscript{12} Upton’s point about a pun is accepted in the familiar editions of A. C. Hamilton and Thomas P. Roche Jr., as in modern scholarly editions such as the Spenser Variorum, and these modern editions print the first two appearances of \textit{Sabbaoth} in Spenser’s final lines with two \textit{b}’s for the God of rest who is to grant the \textit{Sabaoth}’s sight of the active hosts—one \textit{b}—at the very end of the final stanza. That is, the God of sabbatical rest and peace would grant the “site” of the sabbatical hosts or armies. “Site,” Spenser’s last published word, is another pun, signifying either place or vision. Again, the modern editions’ printing of the sabbatical pun accords with that of Lownes in 1609, the initial printing of the \textit{Cantos}.

Upton, also following the 1609 edition, prints the last two lines as do the moderns, but, surprisingly, in identifying and explaining the sabbatical pun, he reverses the order of the punning words.\textsuperscript{13} In his explanatory notes (2:665), in contrast to his text, the first two instances of “\textit{Sabaoth}”/“\textit{Sabbaoth}” are spelled with a single \textit{b} and refer to the God of Hosts or Lord of Hosts, and the final instance refers to the God of rest—that is, the Lord of Hosts is to “grant … [to the poet] a sight of that day of rest: that great Sabbath and eternal rest.”\textsuperscript{14} The significance of the difference between Upton’s explanation and that of modern editors is the finality of rest for Upton and of active hosts for the moderns. The divergence of Upton’s explanation from his text further attests to the fungibility of the two verbal forms of the sabbatical pun, a fungibility already conspicuous in the orthography of \textit{Sabbath} in the \textit{OED}, and it does so even as Upton insists on the need to distinguish their meanings. I should add that for me the very presence of the pun—that final doubleness of rest and activity in divinity, as in still movement—is what matters most, and the consonance of the final pun with the rest of the \textit{Mutabilitie Cantos}, as well as with the earlier books, is strong evidence for its presence.

In the relevant verse from Romans that Upton cites, the Geneva Bible in English lacks the specific word \textit{Sabaoth}—one \textit{b}, referring to hosts—but this word, which is often left untranslated, is available in the Vulgate, which continues to be a common scholarly source in the Tudor-Stuart period, and the same word is also found hundreds of other times in the Bible. That \textit{Sabaoth}, like the Hebrew words \textit{amen} and \textit{haleluja}, is often left untranslated testifies to its traditional sanctity, to its resistance to a satisfying translation, and, in the specific instance of \textit{Sabaoth}, to its breadth and variations of meaning.\textsuperscript{15} The context of its occurrence
in Upton’s verse from Romans is an account of the remnant to be saved. The specific verse reads, “Except the Lord of hostes had left vs a sede, we had bene made as Sodom, and had bene like to Gomorrha.” Geneva’s gloss on this and the adjacent verses reads in part, “the fewe, which shal remaine shalbe a worke of his justice, and shal set forthe his glorie in his Church” (Romans 9:29n, abbreviations expanded). This is an account of God’s action in the world and of the realization of his glory among his saints on earth and in heaven. Elsewhere in the Bible, the sabbatical Lord of Hosts is the commander of the armies of Israel (e.g., 1 Samuel 17:45) or the Lord of all the agents and forces that he has created and sustains (e.g., Genesis 2:1; Isaiah 45:12). Part of Roche’s gloss on Spenser’s pun puts the point about the Lord of Hosts succinctly: “Spenser is calling on the God of the universe, the Lord of Hosts, both heavenly and earthly.” Neither Roche nor Don Cameron Allen, the latter in a frequently cited article, interprets Spenser’s prayer for a “site” as a desire merely for rest but instead, in Roche’s words, for the “perfection” of earthly labors “in the full knowledge of the beatific vision,” and, in Allen’s words, as a place in God’s Sabbath, a dwelling in repose, wherein “the great panorama of the Creation”—that is, a panoramic view of all the active hosts—is seen as God sees it from an “immovable center.” This is a distinctly Boethian vision, resonating with Boethius’s Consolation of Philosophy, a source known to Spenser. When the pun on Sabbath—with one $b$—is thus located in Spenser’s final “site,” as in modern editions, but opened to biblical occurrences besides the one in Upton’s singular explanation, it aligns suggestively with the divine economy, or providential government, of the universe. The conclusion of the Mutabilitie Cantos is hardly their only specifically biblical passage. For salient examples, Nature appears in response to Mutability’s appeal to “the God of Nature”—the God ambiguously either transcendent to, or immanent in, Nature—and Spenser associates Nature herself both with the biblical God whose face cannot be seen “but like an image in a glass” and with the transfiguration of whose Son, or image, his apostles witnessed (7.6.35; 7.7.6–7). Imaging eternity in such ways, time further resonates with its description in Plato’s Timaeus as “a moving image of eternity,” as many readers have recognized. These are familiar connections. But the moving image of eternity also invites another far-reaching and more unsettling connection with what Agamben has characterized as “economic theology.” Agamben tracks the genealogy of this theology to Greek “oikonomia,” glossed as “an
immanent ordering,” and Englished as “economy,” and he follows it from Antiquity through the Middle Ages into the Renaissance and beyond (p. 1). He argues that theology, from its earliest roots, “conceives [both] divine life and the history of humanity” as an economy, an immanent ordering, and he attends closely to the relevant lexicon of Paul’s Epistles, the early Christian Fathers, and medieval theologians (p. 3). Agamben’s genealogy is extensive and vastly learned, and I can touch only on some highlights that bear suggestively, if speculatively, on Spenser’s final pun, final Cantos, and, beyond these, on the end of book 6.22

Agamben stresses that even Greek oikos, which underlies the more conceptual term “oikonomia,” or immanent ordering, refers to a more complex organism than just a single-family house or even an extended family. He finds crucial comparisons of it to the administration of an army or the functioning of a ship or to a commander in battle or to the administrative apparatus of a king—each of these, I would add, a complex organization with a leader and similar to the biblical meanings of a lord of hosts (pp. 17–8, 24, and 71). He locates the oikonomia in the “‘economic’ administration of divine life, which extends from the heavenly house to its earthly manifestation” (p. 37). In the numerous theological documents Agamben treats, God is one, a single power, but the display of this power is triple: that is, “the Trinity is not an articulation of the divine being, but of its praxis,” or working (p. 41). The Trinity itself is therefore an economy, an “articulation and administration [both] of divine life, and the government of creatures,” which critically includes the working of providence (p. 47). The paradigm Agamben traces, which deeply marks Christian theology over centuries, appears to be a ghostly presence in Spenser’s sabbatical pun, with its two conceptions of divine life, the one of unchanging, eternal rest and the other of activity, the one transcendent to Nature, the other immanent in it, as Spenser describes “the God of Nature” in the Mutabilitie Cantos.

Agamben’s study increasingly attends to a kind of dualism—perhaps too dramatically, he calls it a “fracture”—in the economic paradigm, which troubles it and which, to my mind, Spenser’s Mutabilitie Cantos reflect as well (p. 111). Agamben explains how the conception of “the oikonomia makes possible a reconciliation in which a transcendent God, who is both one and triune at the same time, can—while remaining transcendent—take charge of the world and found an immanent praxis of government” (pp. 50–1). But he also finds that attempts thus “to articulate in a single semantic sphere—that of the term oikonomia—a series of
levels” result in a reconciliation that proves “problematic: non-involvement in the world and government of the world; unity in being and plurality of actions; ontology and history,” even while these still “continue to interact as a functional unity” (pp. 51–2): my own word “still” strikes a deliberate, mnemonic chord with Spenser’s *Mutabilitie Cantos*. Over the developing course of time that Agamben traces, he comes to discover within the conception of the Trinitarian economy a fissure “between being and praxis [that is] in the deity himself” (p. 111; cf. 52–4). This is the first seed of what eventually emerges ever more clearly as a division between God’s sovereign power and the government of the world, in which sovereignty is held to derive from God’s own. Relatedly, I think of Martin Luther’s *Deus absconditus*, or hidden God, and later of a God even more fully withdrawn and a worldly economy further untethered from divinity, its sovereign power arbitrary or empty.  

Agamben’s conception of a fractured deity, which now inheres in his understanding of the Trinitarian economy itself, is reflected in the relation of divinity to earth. Here I will resort to a longer quotation of Agamben, insofar as it sounds very much like the Elizabethan Renaissance, especially if we remember Hamlet on the “special providence in the fall of a sparrow”: “The history of the concept of providence coincides with the long and fierce debate between those who claimed that God provides for the world only by means of general or universal principles ... and those who argued that the divine providence extends to particular things—according to the image in Matthew 10:29, down to the lowliest sparrow” (p. 113). Agamben adds that general providence without particular providence, a position that also aligns with Aristotle and late classical philosophy, subsequently leads to deism.

From the retrospective distance of modernity, Agamben’s argument relates to Spenser’s pun on *Sabbath*, but without really compromising it. This pun, after all, has a ghostly, if highly plausible, origin in Upton’s explicit discovery of it, and it exists in Spenser’s last published poem as a prayer, not a philosophical-theological problem. What the fracture and reflected problem of the *oikonomia* as a series of levels arguably does, however, is to redirect our attention to the strange role of Jove as a sovereign power in the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, a role that should derive from deity as the transcendent source of human authority. With Agamben in mind, we have renewed reason to ask what Jove’s function is in the *Cantos* and what he might represent there.
The feature outstanding in Jove’s figure is his claim of sovereignty, supreme power. Three times within ten lines his sovereignty is asserted by Jove himself or by the narrator. Jove disposes himself on his “soueraine throne,” the more to project his “grace and Maiestie” before the Olympians of his court, who cower in the face of Mutability’s challenge to their rule (7.6.24). He puts on a kingly pose as he would a mantle, covering himself in glory, an early modern equivalent of acclaim in Agamben’s argument, and perhaps ironically suggesting to readers that he actually has no clothes. (Agamben would have us think of glory or “Maiestie” in connection with the cultic displays, acclamations, and rallies of dictators.) Rebuking Mutability, Jove asserts his sovereignty “by Conquest of our soueraine might [rhyming with ‘Right’], / And by eternall doome of Fates decree” (7.6.33). Whether in Agamben or Boethius, Fate is subordinated to Christian Providence. More outrageously, or comically, Jove then advises the foolish Mutability to “faine,” that is, to desire, or at least to pretend, to “Haue Ioue thy gratious Lord and Soueraigne” (7.6.34). Considerable comedy, or more exactly parody, colors the confrontation of Jove and his bold but beautiful intruder, a beauty to which he responds in a way that would make a woman think twice about his “gratious” offer to have him above her as her “Lord and Soueraigne.”

The Mutabilitie Cantos contain a dizzying number of powers besides Jove and the administrative apparatus of Olympians over whom he rules, while he presumes to rule as well over realms stretching from the heavens to the earth. Aside from Mutability’s rival claim to sovereignty, Nature is addressed as “soueraigne goddesse” by Mutability, and considered so by Jove (7.7.16). Nature, of course, serves “the highest him, that is behight / Father of Gods and men by equall might; / To weet, the [ambiguously phrased] God of Nature” (7.6.35). At the outset of the second of the Mutabilitie Cantos, the poet invokes his Muse, the daughter “of heauens King / (Thy soueraine Sire),” to assist his singing the “fortunate successe, / And victory” of Jove over Mutability (7.7.1). Jove is the Muses’ sire in classical myth. What is curious about the poet’s avowed epideictic intention is that, while Mutability’s claim of sovereignty is rejected by Nature, Jove’s victory is deeply qualified by Mutability’s challenges, and the poet’s own feelings about Mutability’s suppression are ambiguous in the end. Although he considers Mutability “vnworthy / ... Of the Heav’ns Rule,” he recognizes that
In all things else she beares the greatest sway.  
Which makes me loath this state of life so tickle;
And love of things so vaine to cast away;
Whose flowring pride, so fading and so fickle,
Short Time shall soone cut down with his consuming 
sickle.

(7.8.1)

The ambiguities of the poet’s reluctant renunciation are well-known: in the third line cited, “things so vain, love so vain, so vainly to cast away”; in the second line, the word “loath” means either “loath” or “loathe,” signaling either reluctance or disgust; and the word “pride” in the fourth line indicates either the natural splendor of trees and flowers in bloom or else sinful vanity, as it ambiguously does in the first canto of *The Faerie Queene*, the opening description of trees in the Wandering Wood (1.1.7). The same lines cited are pregnant with other memories, for example, of Spenser’s own Garden of Adonis in the third book of *The Faerie Queene* (3.6.39), and of the ending of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseide*, in which the narrator advises readers to think “al nis but a faire, / This world that passeth soone as flowres faire.” This Chaucerian advice has been poignantly captured by E. Talbot Donaldson: “All the illusory loveliness of a world which is [our] only reality is expressed in the very lines that reject that loveliness,” with an emotional effect that is thoroughly ambiguous, I would add.

Before returning to Spenser’s closing pun on *Sabbath* in the last lines of the Mutabilitie Cantos, I want to consider the telling displacement, or duplication, of Jove’s sovereignty, both at the outset of Mutability’s uprising and at the outset of the recreatively comic vignette of Diana and Faunus, which concludes the first of the Cantos. This displacement glances at the ruling sovereign of England and Ireland, Queen Elizabeth, and it serves to connect these glances to Jove, as well as to hint that he is a stand-in for her, one safely distanced by gender, mythology, and location. Cynthia, the Olympian moon goddess and a pseudonym for Queen Elizabeth, is said to reign “in euerlasting glory,” which reinforces the allusion to the Queen, who is known as Gloriana in the poem and for whom, according to Margaret Christian, “glory” itself is a code word (7.6.8). Later, at the outset of the bawdy Irish interlude, Cynthia is more openly said to be “soueraine Queene profest / Of woods and forrests,” and in another of the Queen’s and the moon goddess’s shared pseudonyms, Diana appears in these for-
ests as the object of Faunus’s lecherous peeping, a parody of Mutability’s rising against Jove (7.6.38). To make matters worse (or better), Faunus himself is a nature deity, one who, the poem tells us, cannot be gelded, or, effectually for a fertility god, destroyed (7.6.50). The depiction of Jove’s sovereignty and the allusive ties of Cynthia-Diana-Elizabeth to him challenge—indeed make fun of—the traditional status of earthly sovereignty as an expression of the immanent divine ordering, or oikonomía. Mutability’s clinching argument in the case she pleads before Nature is that the Olympians are themselves earthly, not only subject to motion as planets but also earth-born as myths. Their origin as gods is merely human, as is the earthly sovereignty figured by Jove.

The remaining references to sovereignty (barring a reference to a sovereign May Queen: 7.7.34) merely reinforce the competing claims of Mutability and Jove, understood figuratively as those of motion and rest, change and stasis, action and order, rebellion and rule. Yet enough of the curtain is lifted in the first two Mutabilitie Cantos to expose the mystery of sovereign power before Spenser turns in the very end to the mystery-laden sabbatical words of the Bible, the one promising rest and the other activity. Given a peek behind the curtain, I suppose that the sabbatical pun could be taken as a sardonic expression of disillusionment with worldly order. But recalling the recreative tone of the Mutabilitie Cantos and the form of the final, punning lines, a prayer, I take the pun instead as an expression of lingering hope, of desire, and finally of faith in a divinely comic ending.

Still, the possibility exists, and it is only a possibility, that yet another pun lies in the words for Sabbath, namely Hamilton’s suggestion, based on William Camden’s Remaines concerning Britain, that “Elizabeth signifies ‘Peace of the Lord, or quiet rest of the Lord.’” Camden does not offer etymological evidence for his explanation, but presumably it is based on transliterated Hebrew El (god) and Sabbath as rest or peace. Such a derivation, alluding to the knotty plural Elohim, a name of God in the Bible, could return us to the complex oikonomía of divinity, the God at once singular and triune, as Agamben examines this divine ordering. Etymologically, however, the Queen’s name actually derives from Hebrew Elisheva (or Elishebha) in the Septuagint’s Koine Greek, meaning “My God is an oath” or “My God is abundance,” and otherwise in biblical Greek, rendered as Ἐλισάβετ, “Elisabet.” If the pun on Elizabeth’s name, as understood by Camden, is indeed present in Spenser’s closing prayer, it leaves us with the same result: a choice of ironic disillusionment with the worldly
order or of lingering hope for something better. The final mystery for Spenser, as well as the basis of Agamben’s genealogy, lies in language, in the status of words and their relationship to the Word. It is only fitting that Spenser’s final words in the Mutabilitie Cantos should leave us to ponder a copious pun.

LOOKING BACK: THE 1596 INSTALLMENT

Over decades, there have been numerous pessimistic, optimistic, and mixed readings of the final stanzas of the Mutabilitie Cantos, and many, perhaps most, have been influenced by the relatively darker, more secular books of the 1596 installment of The Faerie Queene. From book 4, the first of these books, time (“the cankerworme of writs”), “haplesse fate / Or hard misfortune,” and above all words, which “expresse the meaning of the inward mind” for good or ill, comfort or pain, play a conspicuous role that continues in books 5 and 6 and might be seen to culminate first at the end of book 6 and then in the final Cantos (4.2.33, 4.6.47, and 4.8.26). In the 1596 installment, memorable, nightmarish figures of poisonous words are recurrent: Slander, Envy, Detraction, and their agent the Blatant Beast, the major antagonist of book 6. In book 5, the misguided Giant who tries to weigh anything from land to words materially, and Malfont, the poet with his offending tongue nailed to a post in punishment, provide further haunting images. Against these, lyric moments, most especially the vision of the Graces on Mount Acidale, are the artistic bulwarks, if so ill-fitting a noun can be used for such fleeting, visionary achievements.

Two features of the Mutabilitie Cantos strike me as being particularly distinctive when set against the 1596 installment of The Faerie Queene, namely, their dominantly comic and mythic mode—again, I would stress, dominant and crucially so. The distinction is not that these features have never before appeared in The Faerie Queene’s six earlier books, in which comic parody is present from the start, as evident, for instance, in the treatment of Archimago’s disguising or of Redcrosse’s ungainly dragon, reduced to a tourist attraction once defeated. A mythic mode is also notably recurrent in The Faerie Queene, but mythic figures never enter the narrative of quest, with the possible exceptions of the Cupid-like angel who comes to Guyon’s aid, and Cambina, who belongs to a mythic register but enters the relatively more primary narrative. Other mythic figures, like Venus and Diana in the Garden canto of book 3, are set off in another realm and most
frequently situated in one of the Houses of the poem—Busirane’s, Venus’s, or Isis’s, for example. Sometimes, such figures are immobile statues, still more apart from a narrative of errant questing. While virtually any generalization about The Faerie Queene encounters unruly exceptions, I will nonetheless reaffirm that the dominantly comic and mythic mode of the final Cantos is new and that it figures significantly in them, specifically to affect the response the final stanzas invite. Form in Spenser’s poetry is fundamentally, not superficially, shaping.

The end of book 6, which, in a sequential reading of the whole published in 1609 and again in 1758 with the sabbatical pun made explicit, immediately precedes the Mutabilitie Cantos. As the immediate antecedent, it affects them, providing relevant contrast or continuity. Comic form plays a crucial, contextual role with respect to both these possibilities. In the ending of book 6, Calidore captures the Blatant Beast and leads him on a victory tour through Faerie, a distant recall of the defeat and display of Redcrosse’s dread dragon in book 1. But Calidore’s Beast escapes to rage once more through the world, and the bitter words of the poet emerge from the fiction to acknowledge the pain the Beast’s bite has caused him. In a much earlier reading elsewhere, I suggested that this bitterness cannot simply cancel the Acidalian vision or indeed the gifts of the Muses more generally. In the present article, I want to stress further the role of form as a defining feature of poetic vision in book 6, as throughout The Faerie Queene, although ever more noticeably so in the 1596 installment. As the culmination of this installment, book 6 features numerous poetic forms that figure thematically: lyric, narrative, allegory, parody, romance, complaint, and pastoral. The cannibals’ ogling of Serena features a blazon that alludes to the sonnet tradition, and the initial depiction of Mirabella, attended by Scorn and Disdain, is effectually an emblem.

The animation of the Blatant Beast, which is focal in what follows, merges elements of myth, cartoon, and beast fable. Although a product of human envy and cruelty, the Beast embodies subhuman unkindness. He is an unnatural monster, “bred of hellishe race” and begot “Of Cerberus / … And fell Chimæra in her darkesome den, / … Where he was fostred long in Stygian fen” (6.1.7–8). In the holy hermit’s telling, the Beast is reborn as the direct progeny of Echidna, half maiden, half snake, whom the gods thrust into a subterranean cave where, with Typhœus (Spenser’s Typhaon), she bore Chimæra, Cerberus, and the similarly dog-like Blatant Beast (6.6.9–12). Taken together, the Beast’s two
genealogies suggest infernal incest, insofar as Cerberus and Chimæra are both his siblings and begetters. The genealogy of the Beast belongs to a mythic mode that is fantasied, even while the Beast figures and enacts real wounds, pain, and destruction in the human world.

When Calidore, the nominal hero of book 6, reenters the narrative in canto 9 after an absence of five cantos (4–8), he is still pursuing the Blatant Beast as he was when last seen. His pursuit has taken him from the Court to cities, towns, farms, and eventually into the open fields and a company of shepherds. Effectually, if strangely, chasing the Beast has led him into pastoral. Make of this sequence what we may—truancy, escape, recreation, renewal—it is a radical shift in mode and perspective that enables the Acidalian vision and lasts until the depredations of the brigands destroy the pastoral landscape and send Calidore back to pursuit of the Beast that has been raging through all levels of society, especially the institutional clergy, in this Knight of Courtesy’s absence.

When Calidore at last corners the Beast, the poem describes the knight’s conquest in a dozen stanzas that recall both Redcrosse’s canto-length battle with the dragon of book 1 and the energized, seemingly self-generating description of Slander in book 4 (4.8.23–7), which seeks by imitation to represent her venomous effect. But the description of the Beast’s defeat also comes with important differences. In comparison to Redcrosse’s dragon, this Beast, however monstrous, is a much diminished thing, which the poet tries so hard to aggrandize that his effort ends up seeming half-hearted, unless, the suspicion arises, he actually wants to create this perception or a more interesting, alternative one, a possibility subsequently to be developed. In comparison to Slander, the Beast is also less human, his tongues including those of dogs, cats, bears, tigers, and serpents, in addition to numerous “tongues of mortall men”—of deadly, deathly humans (6.12.27). Slander’s breath is noisome, and her spirit poisonous, but she is never closer to animal-kind than when uttering “spightfull words” that “like the stings of Aspes … kill with smart” (4.8.26).

Recalling Redcrosse’s dragon, Calidore’s raging Beast opens a hell-mouth, in the Beast’s case one full of iron teeth and a thousand tongues, which get two stanzas of heated description. Again, like his monstrous predecessor in book 1, the Beast, his mouth foaming with blood and venom, rears up to seize Calidore’s person, only to be knocked to the ground by the knight’s intervening shield, whereupon
His shield he on him threw, and fast downe held,
Like as a bullocke, that in blodye stall
Of butchers balefull hand to ground is feld.
(6.12.30)

Suddenly, we find ourselves transported to an abattoir, with a memory of Artegall’s parodic imposition of barnyard justice on a murderer, who wears the head of a decapitated lady as if he were a dog that had killed a domestic goose (5.1.28–9), or, nearer to hand, a memory of the artistic slight in the first canto of book 6 by which Calidore’s murderous fury is transmuted to pastoral:

But he them all from him full lightly swept,
As doth a Steare, in heat of sommers day,
With his long taile the bryzes brush away.
(6.1.24)

In both earlier instances and in the present one, the poet expects us to notice the translation, which participates in a formal and thematic pattern of transference.

The Beast, down but not tamed, grinds his teeth in rage and frustration, biting, scratching, spewing venom, and generally faring “like a feend, right horrible in hew” (6.12.31). Tonally, the Beast’s biting, scratching, and spitting resists heroic aggrandizement by comparison immediately afterward to “the hell-borne Hydra, which they faine”

That great Alcides whilome ouerthrew,
After that he had labourd long in vaine,
To crop his thousand heads, the which still new
Forth budded, and in greater number grew.
(6.12.32)

This technique, parodic exposure followed by aggrandizement, is similarly conspicuous in the depiction of Artegall in the early cantos of book 5, a similarity that increases its recognizability in the present context.44

In the next stanza, 33, the Beast’s thousand tongues in stanza 27 are reduced to a hundred, signaling his diminishing strength, yet he continues to spew venom until Calidore first nearly chokes and finally muzzles him, then leads him on a leash. Another epic simile follows, once more evoking Hercules, this time bringing
the Beast’s father-brother Cerberus, “the dreadfull dog of hell” into the light,

Against his will fast bound in yron chaine,
And roring horribly, did him compell
To see the hatefull sunne, that he might tell
To griesly Pluto, what on earth was donne,
And to the other damned ghosts, which dwell
For aye in darkenesse, which day light doth
shonne.
(6.12.35)

This simile, a full stanza long, intimates the seriousness of the elevating effort, and yet, to my ear, the end of the next stanza quietly punctures it: Calidore leads the Beast, trembling “vnderneath his mighty hand,” that “like a fearefull dog him followed through the land” (6.12.36). Granted, the Beast is Cerberian, as well as bullock-like and hydra-like, but Cerberus never sounds like a domestic animal brought to heel. Three extended, heroic comparisons in brief compass are marked by excess. They call attention to their own effort, and when the Beast is finally reduced to a cowed cur on a leash, the upshot is cartoon-like. The next stanza only increases this effect by describing Calidore’s triumphant tour through Faerie land, the Beast docilely following him as if he had successfully completed obedience training, and throngs of people not surprisingly wondering at the sight (6.12.37).45

The sequel to Calidore’s tour further deflates it: within another stanza, whether through “wicked fate” or “fault of men,” the Beast has slipped his leash once more to rage through the land, and the poet is one of his victims (6.12.38). But it is not only the ephemerality and seemingly resultant inconsequence of Calidore’s triumph that I would emphasize. It is also the comedy of this triumph, as it plays out for more than a dozen stanzas. This, no more than the Acidalian vision, is simply canceled. Like that vision, moreover, it is a poetic value, and the value of poetry inheres in it, if to a lower degree. Though temporary, Calidore’s comic triumph remains, much as do the other “records permanent” of Faerie land, which paradoxically hold the origin of Mutability herself, the embodiment of restless change that threatens permanence (7.6.2).46

Like book 5, book 6 has a double ending, the first happy, or comic, the second bitter and disillusioned.47 But its ending is not simply dark, although its last words are and, as the note on
which this book ends, they carry extra weight. Like book 6, the Mutabilitie Cantos also end with the poet’s voice, but they reverse the weighting that closes book 6. They continue the pattern of hope and its failure but significantly increase the proportional presence of comedy. Although the sabbatical pun with which they close holds both the possibility of hope and loss, it tilts the scale decidedly toward a comic ending that is divine. With this close, the Beast’s bite at the very end of book 6 fades into a new prospect.

NOTES


4 OED, 3rd edn., s.v. “pun, n.”: “The use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more meanings or different associations, or of two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound with different meanings, so as to produce a humorous effect; a play on words.” I would add that puns are not necessarily humorous. Their tonal range is wide and various.


6 Spenser’s wordplay involves separate Hebrew words, not in themselves constituting a homonymic pun, as Tamara A. Goeglein informed me in private correspondence regarding the Old Testament in Hebrew (25 November 2019). On types of punning, see n4 above. Also see the OED, 1st edn., s.v. “Sabaoth, n.”: “A Hebrew word (lit. ‘armies,’ ‘hosts’), retained untranslated in the English New Testament (as in the original Greek and in the Vulgate) and the Te Deum, in the designation the Lord of Sabaoth, for which in the
original Old Testament passages the English versions have the rendering ‘The Lord of Hosts.’ Etymology: < Latin Sabaoth (Vulgate), < Greek Σαβαώθ (Septuagint and New Testament), < Hebrew çebaôth plural of çábå army.”

As Goeglein explains the OED, “That ‘Sabbathi’/‘Sabaoth’ are near homographic puns happens by tracing, in reverse, the OED’s etymological entry and by pointing to the obviously different alphabets: the Vulgate is written in the Roman alphabet, as is English; the Septuagint is written in the Greek alphabet, which transliterates the Hebrew alphabet. And so the Hebrew words become near-orthographic puns as they are filtered through the Greek Septuagint > Latin > English. The most important letters are those that become the three consonants (in English), the ‘s,’ the ‘b,’ and the ‘th.’”


13 For his account of editions consulted, namely, the 1609, 1611, 1617, and 1679 editions, see Upton, preface to Spenser’s Faerie Queene, 1:v–xliii, xxxviii–ix and xli.
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14 This paraphrase, preceded by “i.e.” in the Variorum (6:315), is Upton’s (2:675).
18 Don Cameron Allen, “On the Closing Lines of The Faerie Queene,” MLN 64. 2 (February 1949): 93–4, 94.
19 Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy, trans. V. E. Watts (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969). Treating “[t]he relationship between the ever-changing course of Fate and the stable simplicity of Providence,” the Consolation imagines “a set of revolving concentric circles. The inmost one comes closest to the simplicity of the centre [‘the steadfast mind of God’], while forming itself a kind of centre for those set outside it to revolve round” (p. 136). The relationship of Fate and Providence, moreover, “is like that between reasoning and understanding. … or between the moving circle and the still point in the middle” (pp. 136–7); see also pp. 163–9. On the relation of fortune to fate, see Michael Steppat, Chances of Mischief: Variations of Fortune in Spenser, Anglistische Studien 9 (Cologne DE: Böhlau, 1990), pp. 4–5.
22 As Gordon Teskey characterizes Spenser’s thinking in the Mutabilitie Cantos, the poet “thought in subtle, allusive, indirect, and intuitive ways about problems too complex to be dealt with by entirely rational means, problems we might describe as demanding an associative rather than an algorithmic approach” (Allegory and Violence [Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1996], p. 174).
23 In The Kingdom and the Glory, Agamben makes much of the empty throne, an ancient and later a Christian symbol of sovereignty, which he interprets as a symbol of void: the empty throne symbolizes glory, “in its innermost self-inoperativity and sabbatism,” the latter term obviously deriving from Sabbath (p. 245). Such an extremity is not realized in Spenser, although a seed of this later development arguably is.

26 Boethius notes that “the simple and unchanging plan of events is Providence, and Fate is the ever-changing web, the disposition in and through time of all the events which God has planned in His simplicity” (p. 136). Pertinently, disposition or “dispositio” is a key term in what Agamben describes as Cicero’s rhetorical okonomía, or formally ordered arrangement of verbal material (The Kingdom and the Glory, p. 19).

27 I have omitted the comma after “tickle”: the authority of punctuation in an early seventeenth-century edition, such as the one Hamilton’s edition follows for book 7, is notoriously unreliable and likely to be that of the printing house. This likelihood is increased in a posthumous edition, such as that of the Mutabilitie Cantos.

28 Compare such an outbreak of affection for earthly beauty in John Calvin’s writings: “Shall the Lord haue set in flowers so great a beautie, as presenteth it selfe to our eies: shall he haue giuen so great a sweetenesse of sauour as naturally flooweth into our smelling: and shall it be vnlawfull either for our eies to take the vse of that beautie, or for our smelling to feele that sweetenesse of sauour?” (The Institution of Christian Religion, trans. Thomas Horton [London: Bonham Norton, 1599], p. 192, book 3, chapter 10, section 2; EEBO STC [2d edn.] 4423). On the ambiguities of “loath” and “vaine,” see Harry Berger Jr., Revisionary Play: Studies in the Spenserian Dynamics (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), pp. 268–73, 269.


33 Teskey’s view of Spenser’s final stanzas, 7.8.1–2, is much darker: he concludes that “the ever-whirling wheele / Of Change’ provokes nausea and loathing. The final prayer is an act of rejection” (Allegory and Violence, p. 177); see likewise, Teskey, Spenserian Moments (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard Univ. Press, 2019), p. 429.
20 Sabbath Puns and Okonomia in Spenser’s Faerie Queen


38 Dozens of similar citations from each book in the 1596 installment could be offered.

39 As my phrase “a divinely comic ending” earlier signaled, the terms “comic” and “comedy” apply to humor and to a happy ending.

40 For a review of parody at the tone-setting outset of each book, see Anderson, Spenser’s Narrative Figuration of Women in “The Faerie Queene,” Research in Medieval and Early Modern Culture (Kalamazoo MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2018), pp. 13–8. The comic dimensions of Redcrosse’s dragon and the sequel to his defeat have often been discussed, most recently by Joe Moshenska, “Spenser at Play,” PMLA 133, 1 (January 2018): 19–35.


42 For examples, see Anderson, Reading the Allegorical Intertext: Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2008), chaps. 6 and 9, pp. 91–108 and 135–53; Personal Voice, pp. 154–9 and 164–73; Spenser’s Narrative Figuration, pp. 95–119.


44 On the irony of Artegall’s early exploits, see Anderson, “‘Nor Man It Is’: The Knight of Justice in Book V of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*,” *PMLA* 85, 1 (January 1970): 65–77, 68.

45 Berger characterizes the Beast’s defeat similarly, though to more scornful effect; his concern is psychology (“wish fulfillment”) rather than comedy (p. 221).


47 In book 5.11, Arthur gets a hero’s acclaim from the people that recalls the one for Redcrosse in book 1.12 and stands in contrast to Artegall’s ending in book 5.12, the assault of Envy, Detraction, and the Blatant Beast. Book 5 balances the two cantos’ endings against each other, one idealized and comic, the other not.