

INTRODUCTION TO BOOKS FIVE, SIX, AND THE MUTABILITY CANTOS

Welcome to Volume Three of *The Faerie Queene*! The introduction to Volume One contains important information about the goals, methods, and limitations of this series, as well as explanations of various genres, techniques, and patterns found in this poem. It is important for you to understand how my rendering works and what it can never offer, so I hope you will read that general introduction before progressing too far here.

As promised in Volume One, I lean more into the poet's original language as I render the final books of *The Faerie Queene*. This transition has been gradual, so if you have read Volumes One and Two, you should not feel a huge jolt in Volume Three. Though I have held more tightly to the text and included the most archaic terms in this volume, you will still enjoy the ease of prose syntax here. Because you have gained quite a few skills by this point in your reading, scene-by-scene commentary and footnotes are also sparsest in this last installment, allowing you more room to interpret the text on your own. I have also left plenty of trails for you to follow into Spenserian criticism, should you need more help along the way. As you finish Volume Three, your next step should be graduating into a well-annotated version of Spenser's original poetry, such as A. C. Hamilton's.

COURTESY AND JUSTICE

In Books Five and Six, Spenser continues his exploration of public virtues by attempting to flesh out the obligations of a virtuous government and the civility humans should extend to one another. Book Five follows Sir Artegall on his quest for *justice*, and Book Six tells the story of *courtesy*, primarily through the adventures of Sir Calidore. We have already discussed several shifts in content and style as Spenser has moved from Book One through Book Four, and Spenser's storytelling continues to change as he approaches the end of his poem. As Jane Aptekar notes, Spenser's "moral positions are frequently ironic, paradoxical, and aware of contrarities."¹ She affiliates his labyrinthine writing with James Joyce (known for his experimental language and interconnected symbols), more than the simplicity of *Everyman*.² I find this helpful to keep in mind when approaching the last two complete books of *The Faerie Queene*.

¹ Jane Aptekar 1969:2.

² Aptekar 1969:2.

BOOK FIVE

Spenser uses Artegall's journey to address civic issues of the late 1500s. Book Four has already investigated the ethics governing close-range friendship, so Book Five broadens the theme of relational virtue, delving into "wider and more impersonal matters, the rights and duties of men to the community at large and to individuals as members of that community."³ However, not all readers find Spenser's attempt to define cultural justice satisfactory. In fact, quite a few Book Five commentaries begin by admitting the unpopularity of Artegall's tale, censuring it for overt politics and heavy-handed allegory.

Politics and Allegory

When approaching Book Five, I think it is helpful to ask, "How might I write about justice, if I were living in another country controlled by a powerful sovereign from my native land? What sort of biases might impact me? Whose explanations for current issues and past events would I have heard?"

These questions do not excuse mistakes that Spenser made while writing Book Five, but they can help us understand a bit more about why he fell to error. They can also help us become more aware of blind spots in our own lives. Hamilton deems Artegall's tale "the most problematic."⁴ Humphrey Tonkin describes it as "an apology for Elizabethan policy and a justification and glorification of the triumphs of Protestant *imperium* over the evils of the papacy."⁵ This vision is dependent upon Elizabeth as a "second Constantine," uniting church and governance to create "a single, peaceful, universal rule uniting all nations under Christ."⁶ This obvious politicization is regarded by most critics as "both 'obvious' and 'bad', the two things being closely related, since allegory, if it is to be successful, ought not to be transparent."⁷

While connections to English politics can be found in every book of this poem, as Rosemary Freeman notes, Book Five's cultural references are more flagrant,

not now glimpsed in passing allusions, metaphors, and similes, nor suggested doubtfully as one of the possible points of reference for the moral allegory, but unmistakably as the principal subject for the Book. Here, for the first time, the activity of the Queen's government and the administration of public business at home and abroad, occupies the foreground; and the allegory is bent to the purposes of the pamphleteer and made a channel for the expression of political opinion.⁸

³ Rosemary Freeman 1970:260.

⁴ A. C. Hamilton 2013:13.

⁵ Humphrey Tonkin 1989:151.

⁶ Tonkin 1989:152.

⁷ Willy Maley 1996:304.

⁸ Freeman 1970:260–61.

The main knight of Book Five is Artegall, who almost certainly represents Arthur Grey, Lord de Wilton, Lord Deputy of Ireland. This connection is significant not only because Spenser served as Grey's secretary for a time, but also because the poet was an English citizen living in Ireland, a "colonial official" who was supportive of a government intent on "the imposition of English law on the recalcitrant Irish population."⁹ Abraham Stoll is less restrained in describing this scenario, detailing Grey's brutality toward the Irish and Spenser's role as an accomplice.¹⁰

As Tonkin has noted, Spenser's writing often suggests a long-past "Golden Age" in which the human conscience was decent and tender. Simultaneously, however, he refers to a "savage nature" which must "be brought under control and civilized."¹¹ This inclination to enforce stern governance was, at least in part, due to a bit of national self-reflection. Alexander C. Judson writes: "England, wearied by the fatuous and interminable Wars of the Roses, welcomed [the Tudors'] vigorous, autocratic rule, which brought stability, prosperity, intellectual ferment."¹² It could, therefore, have seemed like a period of heavy-handedness was necessary to bring "civility" to a nation in which law and order seemed to the English mind less than tidy.

Does one nation ever occupy another for purely altruistic reasons, however? C. S. Lewis (a native Irishman) loved *The Faerie Queene*, but his criticism of Book Five was severe: "When he wrote of Ireland, Spenser became a bad poet because he was in some respects a bad man . . . Spenser was the instrument of a detestable policy in Ireland, and in his fifth book the wickedness he shared begins to corrupt his imagination."¹³ Plato's Thrasymachus describes this situation well: "[J]ustice is the name given by those in power to keep their power."¹⁴

Spenser also integrates political commentary by the introduction of Queen Mercilla, who administers judgment against Duessa. Mercilla symbolizes Elizabeth while Duessa is modeled after Mary, Queen of Scots—who was executed in 1587 after repeatedly attempting to usurp Elizabeth's rule. In fact, the final five cantos so closely mimic actual events, they are considered direct historical allegory.¹⁵ Even though the relationship between King James VI of Scotland and his mother Mary was not tender, James was profoundly offended by this comparison.¹⁶ As Tonkin points out, by censuring his contemporaries, "Spenser chose to ignore his own principles, expressed in the Letter to Raleigh," selecting Arthurian history as the foundation for his story, as it was "furthest from the danger of envy, and suspicion of present time."¹⁷ Though Spenser certainly referenced current events before Book Five, subtlety disappears in Artegall's tale.

⁹ Michael O'Connell 2014:280.

¹⁰ Abraham Stoll 2006:xiv–xv.

¹¹ Tonkin 1989:156.

¹² Alexander C. Judson 1947:74.

¹³ C. S. Lewis quoted in Maley 1996:306.

¹⁴ Hamilton 2013:14.

¹⁵ O'Connell 2014:280.

¹⁶ Richard A. McCabe 1987:224.

¹⁷ Tonkin 1989:151.

Spenser justified his worst behaviors through the belief that Elizabeth was a sort of second “Emperor Constantine, whose reign united *imperium* and *ecclesia* in a single person.”¹⁸ Those who held to this belief “saw the Tudor union of church and state as a revival,” and Elizabeth’s pro-Protestant activities as “precursors of a greater, apocalyptic glory still to come.”¹⁹ In the 1500s (as is true still today) when a political group presumes that it is singularly responsible for initiating or maintaining the global work of the Divine, functioning as the hand of God, grave wrongs can result.

Despite all this, Book Five does have a few defenders. Willy Maley has challenged several widely-held assumptions about Book Five, arguing that the book is more complex than it has been credited, “more obviously painful than painfully obvious.”²⁰ He warns against allowing Ireland to become “a frame in the pictorial and criminal sense, and a skeleton key that opens all of the doors in the poem.”²¹ His conclusion? “Perhaps, after all, the best way to approach ‘Spenser’ and ‘Ireland’ is to assume, first of all, the enduring complexity and difficulty of both.”²²

Spenser’s political content largely runs beyond the scope of my project, so I will note only the most critical connections in footnotes. However, those who want to understand more about the historical backdrop of Book Five might benefit from reading B. E. C. Davis’s chapter “Life and Works” in his *Edmund Spenser* (1933). The second half of Freeman’s chapter “Justice and Politics,” and the first part of “Humanity and Courtesy” in her *The Faerie Queene: A Companion for Readers* (1970) also provide helpful context. Again, Stoll’s introduction to the Hackett release of Book Five (2006) is wonderful. And as always, I continue to urge you to read Hamilton’s annotated Spenser as you read my writing; it is a masterpiece.

If you find yourself feeling frustrated while watching what William Allan Oram labels “a troubling rigidity to Artegal’s judgment, a tendency to act according to abstract formulae,” perhaps approach this book as a study in how nations often justify their own behaviors.²³ The following excerpt from Oram’s work offers one possible perspective:

At its greatest, the book acknowledges the ambivalences of history, the just ruler’s difficulty in balancing conflicting claims. At its weakest it flattens into a polemical defense of common sixteenth-century positions—justifying the repression of Anabaptists, or women, or Ireland—that leaves modern readers feeling morally uneasy.²⁴

¹⁸ Tonkin 1989:152.

¹⁹ Tonkin 1989:152.

²⁰ Maley 1996:305.

²¹ Maley 1996:319.

²² Maley 1996:319.

²³ William Allan Oram 1997:236–37.

²⁴ Oram 1997:233.

In the end, I think some of the greatest lessons on justice we can derive from Book Five are to be found in Spenser's distortions of it. Artegall's tale shows us what happens when a writer's nationalism meshes with his fears that law alone might never succeed in establishing "order and justice to his adopted home."²⁵ We, too, should be on guard against those who claim domination by brute force remains the solitary venue for answering the fears of our own time and land. Using this lens, even the weaknesses of this tale can lead us to examine the stories of justification we, too, have built—driving us onward and upward to true virtue.

The Plot

Spenser's fifth book opens with the goddess Astræa, the goddess of Justice, exasperated by human corruption. Unable to bear the wickedness of earth a moment longer, she entrusts her protégé Artegall to work in her stead, leaving him with a man of iron (Talus) to serve as his strong arm. Yet, if a goddess could not repair what is broken here, how could a mortal? In light of this question, the moral complications that unfold in Book Five seem inevitable.

Artegall's more specific quest has been given to him by the Faerie Queene, a commission to rescue the lady Irena from oppression.²⁶ While pursuing this end, the knight faces societal corruptions of many sorts. Breaks in chivalry, economics, and general discernment are addressed. Elizabethan expectations for gender are upended; vengeance is misapplied; mercy is attacked; poetry is used for harm; advantage is taken after help has been offered. Oppression runs rampant; family and lovers are betrayed, and slander flourishes. Most of these evils fall into the categories of "the twin evils of force and fraud,"²⁷ and Angus Fletcher lists "chivalry, culture, and empire" as the trinal ideals of Spenser's justice.²⁸ However, Artegall's attempts to tame and subdue evil are often severe, leading modern readers to question whether the hero exercises true justice or merely dominance.

What is Justice in Spenser?

Aristotle wrote that "the unjust is that which violates proportion," referencing the golden mean—the concept of a perfect middle ground between extremes.²⁹ According to Stoll, Spenser relied upon two specific types of justice outlined in Aristotle's *The Nicomachean Ethics*—"distributive, which deals with the honor and wealth due to members of a society; and corrective, which

²⁵ O'Connell 2014:280.

²⁶ Irena is most likely connected allegorically to Ireland, a nation that Spenser had helped England overpower.

²⁷ Aptekar 1969:7.

²⁸ Angus Fletcher 1971:189.

²⁹ Stoll 2006:xii.

operates to make sure that, in exchanges such as business transactions and theft, each individual gets a fair share.”³⁰

You may remember the dual roles Arthur and Guyon held in Book Two while demonstrating temperance (Guyon defeats Acrasia while Arthur is defeating Malegar). I think something similar happens at the end of Book Five: Artegall saves Irena while Arthur saves Belge. Both stories contain instances of distributive and corrective justice, though Arthur’s victory shows honor and wealth restored more clearly: “He remained there a while with Belge, making great feast and joyful merriment until he had restored her reign with safe assurance” (V xi 35). In contrast, Artegall’s demonstrates more clearly the consequences of unfair business transactions:

During his visit, he [Artegall] focused on how to administer true justice, day and night employing all his efforts in how to reform the ragged, common folk. He also sent the iron man throughout the land, for he had the ability to reveal all hidden crimes. Artegall commanded him to find everyone who robbed and stolen from others, as well as anyone who had rebelled against lawful government. On these, he inflicted the most grievous punishment. (V xii 26)

Stoll does not mention this duality, but he does unearth specific plot elements that align with each type of justice, revealing historical connections germane to Elizabeth’s reign, and he also cites classical and Renaissance texts that likely played into Spenser’s ideas on justice. I think it would be worth your time to find and read the entirety of what he has written.

While many have criticized Book Five as haphazard,³¹ James Phillips (among others) suggests Spenser structures this book around three categories of Justice: Justice Absolute (or law), Equity, and Mercy/Clemency.³² He argues that understanding how “Renaissance theorists on Justice arranged and developed their points according to accepted principles of logical analysis” will help us realize that Spenser’s story elements have been “consistently selected and arranged to develop analytically the idea of justice as he and his age understood it.”³³ Tonkin defines these three categories as: “justice proper, or the application of particular laws to particular cases; equity, or the evenhanded dispensing of justice, to obviate the shortcomings or inequities of particular laws; mercy, or the remission of punishment for humane reasons.”³⁴ He

³⁰ Stoll 2006:xii.

³¹ “The Legend of Justice, if not the ‘riot of formlessness’ which Book IV has been called, nonetheless presents problems of plan and structure troubling to critical readers. Some, like H. S. V. Jones, find the first three exempla ‘in no way connected with the objective or subsequent developments of the plot’ and the Radigund-Britomart episode ‘quite independent of what precedes and follows.’ Others are concerned about what Kathleen Williams, in her recent study of the epic, terms the ‘irrelevance’ of the last six episodes. Almost all are inclined to agree with Leicester Bradner that the book is a patchwork arrangement and hence an artistic failure” (James Phillips 1970:103).

³² Phillips 1970:103–120.

³³ Phillips 1970:104.

³⁴ Tonkin 1989:152–53.

affiliates the first with common law and judicial roles, the second with courts of prerogative (Courts of Chancery/Star Chamber) in which the king or queen distributed rulings. The sovereign likewise determined the third—outworkings of mercy.³⁵ As Stoll writes, “not all mercy serves justice.”³⁶ Michael O’Connell ties these categories specifically to Elizabethan politics, Cantos One through Four, Stanza Twenty “illustrating what we call the Common Law,” Cantos Four, Stanza Twenty-One through Canto Seven investigating “the limitations of law and the necessity of its being supplemented by equity,” and Cantos Eight through Twelve “demonstrat[ing] the role of the Queen’s justice beyond the borders of England, in the conflict with Spain in the Netherlands, in Ireland, and in the trial of Mary, Queen of Scots.”³⁷

But is Artegall’s Justice Just?

O’Connell refers to Spenser’s take on justice as “hard-edged and uncompromising,” for it is ruthless and violent in places—in others, tone-deaf and entitled.³⁸ Davis takes issue with the Artegall/Talus dynamic, claiming the knight “embod[ies] merely the abstract principle of justice, giving instructions to Talus and calling him off when he has done enough,” thereby playing “the inglorious part of headquarters staff.”³⁹ Perhaps such censure is too severe? In some sense, the dilemmas of Book Five are timeless. Every governing body must explore moral uses of power, deciding what injustice is and how to deal with infractions—and every governing body has made grave errors while attempting to mete out justice.

Artegall’s solutions, however, can be quite abrasive. If you were put off by Sir Guyon’s obliteration of The Bower of Bliss at the end of Book Two, you should steady yourself for an even greater severity in Artegall’s tale. Most punishments of Talus are administered without emotion or mercy, and obliteration is presented as the only possible solution to the threat of certain societal evils. As a reader, I struggle to watch mass slaughter, even when a text tells me it is deserved.

According to O’Connell, severity and justice are inherently intertwined: “The operations of justice, or at least of the law, are most often negative: it must punish and correct the failures of people to live together in civilized harmony.”⁴⁰ Richard Neuse writes that in Book Five, “the chief recourse in the attempt to establish justice remains violence. This is due, in part, to the kind of problems and antagonists that the agent of justice has to deal with. For in this book there emerges an anarchic social type dominated by impersonal drives and scarcely susceptible to the

³⁵ Tonkin 1989:153.

³⁶ Stoll 2006:xiii.

³⁷ O’Connell 2014:281.

³⁸ O’Connell 2014:280.

³⁹ B. E. C. Davis 1933:125.

⁴⁰ O’Connell 2014:280.

power of reason.”⁴¹ In other words, a barbaric world calls for forceful domination—a convenient angle for an imperial state. If you are familiar with the complexities of British politics in the Elizabethan era, you will likely have opinions on the necessity of the regal flex.

Iconography

Many of the images and events of Book Five can be taken at face value, so it *is* possible to enter the tale like a child, simply following a knight on his quest. If you attempt this, you will likely be shaken out of the story trance here and there as Spenser flagrantly points to someone or something specific. However, large swaths of plot could stand pretty well on their own. If you enjoy a formal exploration of textual elements, Aptekar moves carefully through core images (from the classical era through the Renaissance) contained within Artegall’s tale. Some scholars have found her approach too extreme, but if you are interested in iconography, her book *Icons of Justice: Iconography & Thematic Imagery in Book V of The Faerie Queene* (1969) might at least serve as a launchpad into further research.

Unique Strengths

These complications acknowledged, there are certainly positive aspects to Book Five. Most of it works as a fast-paced, stand-alone adventure story. Stylistically, economy takes precedence over poetic indulgence, and as Freeman writes, “each episode is recounted with a brisk competence which leaves little room for description of scenery or for reflection. . . . The vocabulary is often colloquial, the imagery brief and unheroic, the movement of the verse sharp and incisive.”⁴² There is almost a sense of parable to many punctuated episodes in Book Five. By stringing these together, Spenser allows his plot to do the work, perhaps a jolt for readers who enjoyed his more descriptive, wandering episodes.

Britomart’s vision in the temple of Isis is also worth noting, for it stands as the book’s visionary core. She stops at the temple of Isis while traveling to rescue her fiancé from Amazon captivity, and as she sleeps, a prophetic dream reveals the role her life will play in the establishment of English royalty. Here, Spenser acknowledges the need for *equity* (Isis/Britomart) to rule where *justice* was limited (Osiris/Artegall). Certainly, the allegory here is complex, likely involving the sexual fears of a virgin warrior, a civic commission, and a general statement on universal ethics. However, Britomart’s victory over Radigund and union with Artegall presumably lead to the establishment of a properly balanced civil law—a gift to all the world.⁴³ Through this image, we gain understanding of the Elizabethan sense of divinely-ordained justice tempered with equity via sovereign governance.

⁴¹ Richard Neuse 1970:227.

⁴² Freeman 1970:261–62.

⁴³ Tonkin 1989:160.

BOOK SIX

After the political heavy-handedness of Book Five, Book Six turns to a gentler theme—courtesy. The subject was interesting to middle-class readers as well as the nobility, for many believed it transcended simple propriety or manners, a virtue capable of offering universal “social harmony.”⁴⁴ Quite a few books on courtesy were in circulation during Spenser’s era. In 1487, Caxton offered his translation of *Book of Manners* by Jacques le Grand. Later volumes included “Alexander Barclay’s *Mirror of Good Manners* (1523), Elyot’s *Governor* (1531), the *Institution of a Gentleman* (1555) and William Segar’s *Book of Honour and Arms* (1590). *Nennio, or a Treatise of Nobility* was published a year before Book VI and included a commendatory sonnet by Spenser.”⁴⁵

But how could an Elizabethan become courteous? Is courtesy a natural virtue? Is it the result of courtly training? Spenser seems intentional about obfuscating the answer. Without apology, he claims that courtesy originates both in nature and in the court—even as he sets these two claims at odds. He tells us that Calidore appreciates “simple truth and stedfast honesty” (I iii 9), yet he also shows this knight bending the truth, speaking what is most socially acceptable or persuasive, even if this misleads others.⁴⁶ Then, while testing the essence of courtesy, Spenser elevates persuasive ability, character, courtly manners, and noble birth. So, while the plot of Book Six is enchanting, understanding what Spenser is trying to teach us as he shifts from position to position is a bit tricky. Tonkin suggests that Spenser is not giving simple lessons about a known virtue here (as he did in Book One), so much as chasing “a virtue whose nature must be discovered as the hero moves along.”⁴⁷ As a result, Book Six can feel more like exploration than instruction.

The archenemy of courtesy in Book Six was introduced at the end of Book Five, a vile creature known as The Blatant Beast. This is one of the most horrifying monsters Spenser creates, and Neuse explains why it is so terrifying: “There is its uncertain genealogy: Calidore and the Hermit give different accounts of it (6.1.8;6.6.9–12); its elusiveness; the mysterious wounds it inflicts; and its many tongues, varying in number from one hundred to one thousand (5.12.41; 6.1.9; 6.12.27–8).”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Tonkin 1989:174.

⁴⁵ Tonkin 1989:173.

⁴⁶ Hadfield 2007:vii–viii.

⁴⁷ Tonkin 1989:174.

⁴⁸ Neuse also connects the Beast with “the Great Beast of Plato’s *Republic*” (1970:228).

We have already seen lesser characters with libelous traits in *The Faerie Queene*—characters like Occasion, Ate, and Slaunder—but this final generator of slander represents the darkest powers of the tongue. Eloquence was admired in the Elizabethan court, and yet the beast shows us how the very “skill that makes civilized intercourse possible can also destroy it.”⁴⁹

Eloquent enemies were a particularly serious threat in the Elizabethan era, because these were years rife with accusation, often driven by political motives and religious biases. Such rhetoric “made Elizabeth’s position, as head of a schismatic church and inheritor of a kingdom through a condemned adulteress, peculiarly vulnerable. Her reign was a long struggle with her calumniators” and Merritt Y. Hughes names several specific detractors, offering a brief overview of the key conflicts facing Spenser’s culture. He also argues that Spenser might have intended a connection between the Blatant Beast and certain Puritans.⁵⁰ Andrew Hadfield suggests, “Spenser is making a neat link between criticism of the hard-line policies of his erstwhile patron, the Lord Deputy of Ireland, Arthur, Lord Grey de Wilton . . . and the abuse of language itself.”⁵¹

Who is Calidore?

Calidore is the chief knight of Book Six. He is introduced as the most admirable and adept of all Spenser’s knights, and yet, he is also confused about his mission from its onset. He admits this confusion openly to Artegall (VI i 6), then he stumbles along on a rocky journey. Tonkin names four early episodes that reveal Calidore’s “gradual decline . . . in which he applies received notions of courtesy and they prove less than adequate.”⁵² In these encounters, Calidore does not mete out pure justice like Artegall did; instead, he often attempts compromises and diplomacy to find resolution. For example, he overlooks a strict chivalric code by siding with a good-hearted squire (Tristram) who has fought against a wicked knight. Then, he defies both parental authority and class conventions by helping Aladine and Priscilla avoid the consequences of a forbidden tryst.

When he does apply standard courtesies, sometimes he lacks the sensitivity and intuition to serve others well. For instance, when he accidentally stumbles upon two lovers in the wood, Calidore barges forward to attempt casual, man-to-man dialogue instead of politely and quietly slipping away. Calidore then disappears for a large section of the book, and when he finally returns, he abandons his quest to dally with a noble community of shepherds. He enjoys their rural life but fails to protect them from demise. Then, he ruins a rare appearance of the Graces with his impatient bumbling. In the end, he catches the Blatant Beast, but his work will

⁴⁹ Oram 1997:249.

⁵⁰ Merritt Y. Hughes 1918:268.

⁵¹ Hadfield 2007:viii.

⁵² Tonkin 1989:176.

ultimately prove futile, as the creature will soon escape after being captured. Neuse describes this unreliable hero as:

radically inadequate to his task. He never penetrates to the essence of courtesy, seems in fact incapable of doing so. And his conquest of the Blatant Beast, if it is not meaningless, fails to have exemplary value because he never comes to an understanding of its nature. He is incapable of dealing with the social evil it represents, being himself one expression or symptom of that very evil.

Not that Calidore is a villain. He is, rather, in the class of the anti-heroes. His courtesy might better be called civility, a matter of 'skill' in that you have to know the right things, how to conduct yourself to people of different 'degrees,' for instance. And Calidore possesses and exercises this skill to a consummate degree. What he lacks, in spite of all his gifts, is the spiritual faculty that would allow him to sense the mystery of courtesy.⁵³

During Calidore's long absence, a sub-protagonist is introduced, Calepine, lover of Serena. Spenser uses this couple's journey to explore several courtesy-based themes: the consequences of a discourteous host, the innate power of uncultured, natural courtesy in a "savage man," the wounds of slander, a man-versus-bear battle that results in a courteous provision of a child to a barren woman, and an encounter with the discourteous adored woman, Mirabella. In the end, Serena is also endangered by a host of cannibals who demonstrate a bizarre mix of courteous restraint and horrific plans. Long gone is the simplicity of Book One, a single knight on a single quest.

The Chivalric and the Pastoral

In many chivalric tales, a knight trained in a court goes out from civilization to tame a danger in the wild. This hero operates by a code of honor established in culture (often driven by love) to bravely defeat an evil opponent, usually encountering supernatural phenomena along the way. From early in the story, he understands his commission and how he is to behave achieving it, and he completes his quest by the end of the tale. Conversely, the pastoral is a world in which "nature is benevolent, and has positive lessons to teach us."⁵⁴ Tonkin writes:

The hero of the pastoral romance (in so far as pastoral can have heroes) leaves a corrupt court and finds order and harmony in uncorrupted nature. He returns to society not with

⁵³ Neuse 1970:245.

⁵⁴ Tonkin 1989:172.

the carcass of a dragon but with a richer and more coherent idea of order and beauty, which in turn enriches society itself.

Chivalric romance, then, depends upon guidance, on forward movement through a perilous countryside. Pastoral romance depends upon redemption, the healing powers of the natural world, on passivity in the midst of plenty, the circle of the enclosed garden.⁵⁵

So, the order and wisdom of chivalry are products of developed human culture. In a pastoral tale, however, there are inherent principles embedded in Creation capable of providing instruction. To study courtesy, we are given “twin symbols of the age, the Quest (chivalric) and the Garden (pastoral),”⁵⁶ and there is a natural tension between these two perspectives. Edmund Spenser includes both throughout *The Faerie Queene*, though as Tonkin has noted, he seems to lean most heavily on the pastoral in Book Six.

Interestingly, of all the knights Spenser gives us, it is easiest to see Calidore’s failures in the chivalric quest. But if we start to work our way backward through *The Faerie Queene*, we begin to notice more fumbles. Artegall’s failures nearly allowed Irena to perish in Book Five. There is not a singular knight on a chivalric quest in Book Four (it is “lacking the end-directed line of the chivalric quest,” according to Tonkin, and the title knights of Book Four would have killed one another, had not their lethal conflict been resolved through a magic potion inaccessible to the average reader.⁵⁷ (Spenser has claimed the Faerie Queene instructs readers how to live virtuously. Where does he expect them to find such a potion?) Though Book Four ends with a symbol of union in a marriage of rivers, Neuse argues that this connection shows union and harmony in nature that we have not quite found in human connection.⁵⁸ Moving back once more to Book Three, we find Spenser ripping off his first (1590) ending of marital unity between Scudamore and Amoret, only to replace it with a longer and more frustrating period of isolation for both Amoret and Britomart. In Book Two, as Tonkin points out, “Grill remains Grill despite Guyon’s success,” and in Book One, the Red Cross Knight does not ultimately defeat Archimago.⁵⁹ Book Six provides the biggest failure of the chivalric quest, but no success in Spenser’s epic can be considered perfect. So, is *The Faerie Queene* a tale of chivalry, or does it deconstruct chivalry?

Such questions make Book Six one of the most intriguing of the entire poem. Stylistically, it is unique among the other books, containing less magic and a plot that holds to the earth. Freeman notes that Book Six characters “are much more realistic, not only in

⁵⁵ Tonkin 1972:18–19.

⁵⁶ These twin symbols relate to a debate common in the Renaissance, the question of how history worked. Is history cyclical (as the classicists taught), or does it move toward an eschatological end? If you have made it this far in the poem, you probably remember moments in which Spenser refers to “a perfect past,” and yet, he also looks toward the “promise of a second Golden Age” (Tonkin 1972:5–8).

⁵⁷ Tonkin 1989:136.

⁵⁸ Neuse 1970:245.

⁵⁹ Tonkin 1989:141.

individual detail but also in their presentation. They are *not* personified abstractions, apart from Mirabella and her companions, *Disdain* and *Scorn*, but real human beings.”⁶⁰ While the heroes of Book Six are not exactly average, neither are they supernatural, for they have “no cloaks of invisibility o[r] invincibility, no shields that blind the enemy”⁶¹ and “there are no magical weapons, or enchantments, or witches, or the like.”⁶² Characters in Book Six win their battles by skill, not by the miraculous.

The most transcendent scene of Book Six involves a dance of the Muses, the pinnacle “of social order, natural order and poetic order.”⁶³ Here, Spenser’s autobiographical character Colin Clout, a poet, connects with a breathtaking symbol of truth, goodness, and beauty before Calidore rushes forward and the participants vanish. This is the vision episode of Book Six, similar to the House of Holiness in Book One or the Temple of Isis in Book Five—but Calidore is too oblivious to grow from it.

Disillusionment/Escapism

Stylistic and thematic shifts of Book Six have also been connected to Spenser’s personal life. Perhaps he was increasingly disillusioned with the urban court. Perhaps he was increasingly at home in rural Ireland. Or perhaps some combination of the two drove his changing poetry.

By the time he was writing Book Six, Spenser had spent years living in the rural Irish countryside, far from the hub of Elizabethan society. After decrying the nation’s wild “savages” in Book Five, Book Six romanticizes uncultured, pastoral beauties. Spenser never fully recants his promotion of a salvific British imperialism. He also shows us the violence and vulnerability of the uncivilized in Book Six. Still, it is hard to deny a shift in tone. In fact, Lewis describes the poet behind this last tale as a man “gradually turning into an Irishman.”⁶⁴ Hadfield offers an opposing perspective, connecting the events of Book Six to the failures of justice in Book Five, as well as to Spenser’s presumed belief that only forced civilization could subdue savage lands enough for beauty and culture to triumph.⁶⁵ If this is true, Book Six is not about an escape from the disappointing world of imperialism, but a final attempt to defend it.

I think Spenser was likely wrestling with some disillusionment while creating Book Six. In Book One, he breezily assumes the role of a moral mentor, offering a tale capable of training his readers in virtue. By Book Six, he seems to realize these aspirations have fallen upon an audience more willing to be entertained than directed. Early praise from the court likely made this fall harder. Spenser’s 1590 release of the first half of *The Faerie Queene* had met with grand

⁶⁰ Freeman 1970:305.

⁶¹ Arnold Williams 1967:31.

⁶² Williams 1967:29.

⁶³ Tonkin 1989:176.

⁶⁴ Lewis quoted in Tonkin 1989:28.

⁶⁵ Hadfield 2007:viii.

approval, Elizabeth granting Spenser “an annual pension of fifty pounds . . . the only poet ever so honoured by Elizabeth.”⁶⁶ As time passed, however, exchanges with the queen’s court dampened his idealism. He realized his dream of being invited back to the English court was not coming to pass. According to Neuse, Spenser displays an “increasing inability to deal with contemporary reality,” leading him to escapism in Book Six—expressed in a “repeated motif of retirement from court to a greener world.”⁶⁷ Spenser was already familiar with this greener world, for Paul Alpers writes, Spenser “began his career as a writer of pastoral.”⁶⁸ In Book Six, he returns to nature.

Lewis sees some artistic advantage to Spenser’s distance from the English court, as this space, “removed him perforce from the rapid changes of fashion, the ephemeral hopes and fears, the petty intrigues, and the time-wasting attendance upon great persons, which would almost certainly have been the portion of a literary man hanging upon the fringes of the court: it forced him to sink deeper and deeper into the world he was creating.”⁶⁹ Lewis remarked that “the poem begins with its loftiest and most solemn book and thence, after a gradual descent, sinks away into its loosest and most idyllic.”⁷⁰

Colin Clout and Melibœ

⁶⁶ Tonkin 1989:11.

⁶⁷ Neuse 1970:227.

⁶⁸ Paul Alpers 1989:797.

⁶⁹ Lewis 2013:125.

⁷⁰ Lewis quoted in Hamilton 2013:14.

Colin is not a knight but a simple, rural poet who seems to abide in perfect courtesy—even while Calidore bumbles his way through Faerie Land. Could Spenser have picked a more autobiographical hero? Even more interesting—not only does Spenser’s poet trump his knight, a country maid shines brighter than the British Queen he has glorified repeatedly through every previous book.⁷¹

Balancing Colin Clout is an old, wise shepherd named Melibœ who lived a while at court before realizing how flawed it was, then returning home. Alpers explains that Colin and Melibœ balance one another, the younger a love-struck idealist and Melibœ the sage.⁷² The type of pastoral these two men represent, according to Alpers, is not simply the rustic life, but a “mode of courtly and humanist self-representation.”⁷³ And though Book Six wanders from the perfect epic ending, it provides “a viable romance ending. Love can compel the romantic hero instead of simply quest.”⁷⁴

A Sort of Completion

It is possible that Spenser intended Book Six to complete Book Five in a similar manner to Book Four’s completion of Book Three. Courtesy “is a prerequisite for justice” just as “the chastity of Book III is not possible without the mutual respect and support of friendship.”⁷⁵ And yet, the ending to the last complete book of *The Faerie Queene* is not altogether hopeful or positive. Pastorella’s adoptive family is slain. The Blatant Beast is only temporarily contained. The future looks rather glum.

Perhaps Spenser intended to bring up the mood of his message in subsequent books of the poem that he never lived to complete. Perhaps he intended to rewrite the end of Book Six, just as he rewrote the ending to Book Three after its first publication. Or, maybe after working through the grand, earth-shaking, idealistic aspirations of his initial vision, the poet is coming to terms with the reality of broken humanity, longing simply for the lowest virtue on the stalk—humans attempting to be decent to one another. Regardless, the core theme of this four-hundred-year-old poem is relevant to the modern mood, for how many of us living through the tumult of a culture “run quite out of square” would be grateful for the presence of basic courtesy?⁷⁶ And while the beasts of horror rage, can we also find a way to extend love to a broken society?

⁷¹ Hadfield 2007:xi–xii.

⁷² Alpers 1989:798.

⁷³ Alpers 1989:813.

⁷⁴ 1989:814.

⁷⁵ Tonkin 2014:284–85.

⁷⁶ My rendering of Spenser’s words in his proem to Book V (Hamilton 2013:507).

THE MUTABILITY CANTOS

The fragments of Book Seven are unlike anything else in *The Faerie Queene*. They were not published until 1609 (Spenser died in 1599), and were probably found by the printer Matthew Lownes during an acquisition of Spenser's papers from William Ponsonby.⁷⁷

While the rest of *The Faerie Queene* takes place in Faerie Land, the inciting incidents of Book Seven occur in the celestial realm. Instead of a new knight sallying forth on another quest, Mutability (also known as Change), a descendant of the Titans, challenges the planetary gods for supreme rule of the universe. A trial before personified Nature ensues, during which Mutability cites changes present in key elements of earth before summoning the grandest pageant of the entire poem.⁷⁸ Arguments accompany each member of the processional as Mutability declares her present mastery and right to future sovereignty.

After the initial challenge to Jove, and before the trial, Spenser places a strange interlude. Faunus tricks Molanna (a river nymph) into betraying Diana so he might spy on the goddess and see her naked. Upon doing so, Faunus laughs in delight, revealing his presence. He is then punished soundly by Diana and her nymphs. Lewis claims this relatively comedic insertion is a countermovement, allowing a contrast between crude, rustic perceptions of Nature and her perfect celestial form that permits the "union of opposites."⁷⁹

In Book Six, Spenser brings a new pathos to the age-old debate between presocratic philosophers Heraclitus and Parmenides by placing the tension between flux and stasis inside of a living context. Mutability is brazen, audacious, severe, reckless—and yet, like Jove, one cannot help but feel a measure of tenderness for her. The pantheon, in comparison, feels a bit aloof and entitled in light of this fearless challenge of a single opponent. Toward the end of the trial, I find myself uncertain about who should win, though Nature's wisdom about the goodness of balance and the ultimate end of change bring deep comfort. And Spenser's final two stanzas seem to emerge from a heart that has been completely shattered before at last finding an anchor that cannot be moved. We find also that "[c]hange and permanence when carried up to the cosmic level are not really opposed, but involve one another. Both exist now in mutual dependence; and both, one day, will be annihilated."⁸⁰

This final fragment might be my favorite part of the entire epic. Book Six ends in futility and disillusionment. Many of Spenser's virtues seem scattered, disconnected, unattainable. The role of the poet seems meaningless. All feels like vanity. But through this final, metaphysical

⁷⁷ Colin Burrow 2015:41.

⁷⁸ Nature is also an interesting creature. A veiled hermaphrodite like Venus in IV x 41, she is "the *natura unialis*, the ultimate unity that underlies all being" (Lewis 1967:42).

⁷⁹ Lewis 1967:78.

⁸⁰ Lewis 1967:76.

journey, we are at last able to contextualize the jarring injustice of a disjointed world. The seventh book, like the seventh day of the creation narrative, at last brings rest. Lewis wrote, “So far as we know, he had no intention of ending *The Faerie Queene* at this point. But has any poem ever had a better end?”⁸¹

⁸¹ Lewis 1967:77.