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THE ALLEGORICAL SIGN IN THE FAERIE QUEENE

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The problem, if there is one, with The Faerie Queene is that
we as readers have become squeezed into a position of having to
choose whether the poem is either an allegory or a set of symbols
that have a particularization that in modern times we have come to
associate with poetry and, by extension, to other kinds of writing
that we like to call artistic and poetic. No doubt, some of the
impulse toward naming particulars as a part of poetry came from the
notion of "real character" proposed by the seventeenth-century
rationalists to take care of the language demanded by scientific
discoveries.[1] T. S. Eliot referred to one part of the movement as
the "dissociation of sensibility." It also has come to be
recognized as the allegory-symbol dichotomy, apparently from our
need to build into our thought system sets of oppositions or, as
lateral thinkers would call them, alternate possibilities, which
indeed is a pluralistic way of considering the content of the work
and has the empirical sanctity of the infinite ways to mete out
reality, each item factored into pluses for presence and minuses
for missing. On such we base our aesthetic theories.[2]

Applying a contemporary or synchronic theory to Spenser has
its pragmatic benefits, one of which is the pleasure of indulging
in transactional collaboration between the reader and the text
(read, The Faerie Queene) in which the reader emotionally and
subjectively uses the poetry for an exercise in self-abuse --

mental masturbation. Indeed, The Faerie Queene has such erotic overtones, not only in the seductive rhythms of the verse but also the evocation of intense physical passion, as, which is so often cited, in the description of the Bower of Bliss and of the visually named "lilly paps aloft displayed," "dainty partes," "amorous sweet spoyles," and "snowy" breasts "bare to ready spoyle,"[3] perhaps a bit soft by our standards but enough to arouse the animalism in fervid imaginations.

My purpose here, however, is nothing so anachronistically, and hardly so specifically, appealing as an excursion would be through bowers and entanglings, all rich and rife with irreverent but concupiscient sublimities. Perhaps here I wish to look at the poem in some way that will expose it for something other than crass allegory, which it can be if we so name it. No arguing with a conditioned mental set! One way, then, to hack at what is traditionally believed to be allegorical overgrowth is to look at the names, the signs, that Spenser used.[4] Something about them seems to have escaped commentators, who seldom bother with the names anyway, despite their being created out of or in language. Here, first, is a playfulness with language which is not often associated with Spenser, who is usually accused of loading his lines with loose structures, many particles and auxiliaries, weak epithets, and drippy adjectives.[5] Compression is a poetic device that has gained the imprimatur of modern critics, but this has come at the expense of readability, a quality that Spenser's works have and one that deserves recognition. Watkins rightly notes

that this ability in Spenser was influenced by Chaucer's
unbuttoned style, an ease of dramatic movement, the recognized
value of the short syllable, all a mastery of semantic placement
without being convoluted. Still, the concept of allegory clouds
The Faerie Queene and has exercised the minds of our best critics
and readers, including Hazlitt, Coleridge, and Dryden. Critics
now cannot employ their cryptographic skills on Spenser's works;
hence, they are pretty much disregarded now, and, sad to say, the
critics have gained the day, for Spenser's works, regardless of
relevance, are seldom required study in undergraduate classes and
not exactly relished in graduate schools.

The names used to pin figures to the allegorical wall tend to
form patterns, "fixing significations by transposing them into
terms of other significations."[6] They also possess hidden
meanings, a condition not unfamiliar to persons who study literary
names. Of course, the hidden meanings are not hidden at all,
merely interpretations that can be attached to the sounds of the
names when the reader needs another choice to make more
pleasurable a particular reading, or perhaps more appropriate for
a critic's insight. Spenser, to be sure, is not alone among
authors in rather systematically and tautologically choosing names
as semiotic signs. His procedures can be exhibited.

In the sixteenth century, literary namers had some sources
that generally governed the naming system. These included native
sources, which Spenser used rather freely, examples being the

names in The Shepheardes Calender, Prosopopia: or Mother Hubberds Tale, and Colin Clouts Come Home Againe, where native and folk names reflect conditions usually satirical, self-conscious, derogatory, and manipulative, with Colin Clout leading as the name for the country bumpkin. Another source was classical names, many of which had become stock poetic names, but Spenser does not load his poems with such stocks as Phyllis, Sylvia, Julia, Cordelia, Corinna, Cynthia, Katherine, Psyche, Cleomenes, Cloe, Euphelia, Adonis, and similar ones that became merely empty counter names in the poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially in the Cavalier lyrics. That this sort of count-naming drifted over into the works of Dryden and Pope--and their lessers--is obvious.

The Arthurian legends were nationalistic shapers, background epical material that moved all great English writers, Spenser being foremost, for in his character of Prince Arthur he places all the virtues contained in a person of magnificence (or magnanimity), a perfection. The fact is, however, he does not develop the character, leaves him sort of hanging out, doing nothing much. He draws a few other names from the legends, Tristam being a prominent, but undeveloped one. Guyon derives somewhat from Sir Gawain, but the resemblances end there, since Spenser was not too far into desperate searches, for he was working on an artifact of imagination, not a source material. In addition to these primary sources, he had as models Ariosto's Orlando Furioso and Tasso's Jerusalem Delivered. They contributed

form, setting, action, and tone, the latter being romance, the
easy settling into fantasy, which ultimately is not fantasy at
all, despite all the literary and folk imaginary trappings of
fairyland, in which, lest we forget, all the characters are
supposed to be fairies, and apparently are, although critics are
quick to call attention to the discrepancy in the use of
historical figures, Arthur being one,[7] who, as noted before, other
than symbolic, does not have any place in any history, although
the name is heavy with overtones of nationalistic virtue and
historical majesty.

The survey of sources indicates that Spenser took very little
from them. This leaves a large body of names, many vocabulary
items as it were, that needs examining, for here the poet's
originality and creativity are at stake. The exoticism of the
names doubtless manages to distract the usual Spenserian who reads
for the main chance, the story, and secondarily for the allegory,
seldom for the poetry. Parenthetically, one of the problems
bedevilling the reader is precisely what we call poetry—the
surrendering to the magic and then losing the argument and
infusing the poetry with a sweetness and smoothness that are not
always buttering the text. The signs along the way keep a sanity
of readability if they are attended to.

The names are mostly coinages, particles taken from other
words and bent to fit the needs of the poet, whatever they may be
at the moment. A few samples are illustrative: Archimago,

Argante, Bacchante, Basciante, Bellisont, Blandina, Blatant, Brigadore, Bruncheval, Calidore, and a few hundred others as we need. In this set, a sense of familiarity can be sensed, that is, until the samples are examined further and are recognized as formed from parts of languages. The only other writer to do such on a scale so large was James Joyce in Finnegan's Wake. Without scanting other samples, I will center on Calidore as a specimen of Spenser's method. The Sixth Book contains the legend of Sir Calidore, the champion of courtesy. The name must reflect the theme, that of positive virtue and Christian charity, involving kind treatment and defense of all creatures. It also alludes to Kaledor, thane of Cawdor. It is consciously formed from Greek kalli 'beautiful,' 'beauty,' and dora 'gift,' to give 'beauty's gift,' the kind of name now called a charactonym.[8]

Spenser uses several techniques in his coinages. The most obvious one is the capitalization of a concept (Scorn, Care, Cruelty, Force) to create a straight personification, the overuse of which has contributed to the intensity of allegorization, but probably should be considered no more than what they are, abstractions that can occur anywhere in writing. Another changes a common form, such as abbess to Abessa, crude to Crudor, humility to Humilitä, Ignaro as a back-formation of ignorance, or Ollyphant from elephant. Each name, however, has other overtones than the ostensible one, such as Abessa, which Spenser derives from Absent and abbess to bring together the absence of judgment and understanding, the absent church (Roman Catholic). But the

complications go beyond. An argument can be made that the name
was borrowed completely from French abbesse, with influence from
the Italian cognate abbadessa, out of Latin abesse 'to be absent.'
On the other hand the name is affected by Old French abester
(Modern French abetir) 'to stupify,' and Latin bestis, 'beast.'

Spenser also links together a concatenation of names by
allowing similar sounds to cause allusions to other similar ones.
One such is Abessa, Charissa, Fraelissa, Duessa, Elissa, Melissa,
and Perissa. Other sets are Sansfoy, Sansjoy, and Sansloy;
Pyrocles and Cymochles; Priamond, Diamond, and Triamond; and the
famous set of Gardante 'ogling,' Parlante 'talking,' Jocante
'jesting,' Basciante 'kissing,' Bacchante 'drinking,' and Noctante
'night orgying.' Condensation of a phrase into one form is common
enough, creating a blend or at most a compound, as in Calidore,
already examined. Besides several already listed are such as
Belphoebe, Britomart, Bellodant, Blandamore, and similar ones.

Belphoebe and Britomart can be used to illustrate the density
of allusion and meaning that Spenser manages. Others could be
chosen as well, but these two have character roles that make them
somewhat more important. Belphoebe appears first in Book II,
Canto iii, where she is described in Spenser's inimitable,
emblematic, yet erotic manner. Her name is a combination of bel-
'beautiful,' and the name of the moon goddess Phoebe, also
identified with Diane. Bel- carries additional connotations of
'radiant' and 'pure,' while Phoebe has a Greek meaning of 'shining

one.' To complicate matters further, she obviously represents
Queen Elizabeth I and as a consequence embodies chastity and
abstinence. Belphoebe has a twin sister, Amoret, 'sweetheart,'
'loved one,' or 'little (small body) love,' representative of
chaste sexual love in contrast to Belphoebe, chaste spiritual
love, both born of Chrysogne 'gold-producing,' who was impregnated
by the golden sun's rays. The cluster becomes a plot of its own.

Britomart is akin to Belphoebe in both name and character.
In her case, however, the allusions are overt and in the text to
the champion of Chastity but yet capable of powerful sexual
attachment, even infatuation, in this instance with Artegall (art
+ gall = 'art of equality or justice'). Britomart then can be
accepted as chastity within marital sex, but this has to be
gleaned from the text, not from the name itself, which means
'martial Britonesse,' a phrase which Spenser reversed to form the
blend Britomart (with combining -o- form). She too overlaps
Belphoebe and alludes to Diana and to Queen Elizabeth I 'the
Breton mayd.' Although the meaning and interpretation are changed
radically, Spenser took the shell of the name and the character
from that of Bradamante, heroine of Orlando Furioso, thus tying
his epic to the earlier one from another culture and language in
an early instance of intertextuality.

The coining playfulness of Spenser's imagination can be
exemplified in many other yoked together forms, such as the
automobile-type. Trompart, combination of the Greek tromeo 'to
tremble' + English art, influenced by Middle English trumpette

'trumpet,' gives the character of a trumpeter with ability to deceive, 'a trembler.' Spumador combines Latin spuma 'foam,' with French or 'gold' to create something like 'golden foam,' the sign of a spirited horse. Sanglamort easily enough translates into 'bloody or cruel death,' literally, 'blood of death.' Scudamore forms from Italian scudo 'shield' + Italian diminutive of Latin amor (amore) 'love.' A telescoping of two lingual terms, Latin pollens 'powerful' + English poll 'head,' 'to behead,' creates Pollente, a nest of meanings, 'powerful, despoiler, shearer, beheaded.' Panope brings together Greek pan 'all' + Latin opis 'help' to give an allusion of influence of temptation. Malecasta 'unchastity,' as a character represents one who is injurious to chastity, one who is evil cast, an evil model, and evil trick, an evil grace, all somehow feminized and worked from male 'bad' and Latin castus 'chaste' + English cast 'model.'[9] Hellenore is another complex name, derived first from Greek 'elēne 'torch' and then collapsed in meaning into the English torch 'fire.' The name naturally alludes to Helen of Troy and possibly to other Helens. Hellenore inflames Paridell, burns Malbecco's castle, and is a regular incendiary, a fire bug. She is lust in action, the old flame.

One of the characters should detain us longer. Radigund is glossed by Dodge (p. 820) as "an early form of the doctrine of women's rights." This, published in 1908, is rather startling. The text provides an explanation. Radigund was an Amazon warrior

who loved Bellodant (Latin <u>bellum</u> 'war' + Latin present participle
of <u>dant</u> 'giving,' or 'one given to warring') but she was rejected.
The result was that she developed an intense hatred for all men
and would capture them and force them "To spin, to card, to sew,
to wash, to wring" to earn their keep.

Those who

> through stout disdaine of manly mind,
>
> And her proud observance will withstand,
>
> Uppon that gibbet, which is there behind,
>
> She causeth them be hang'd up out of hand;. . .

Book V, Canto IV xxxii (<u>FQ</u>)

Spenser chose a name that had some currency as a personal and
Christian name during the late sixteenth century, but it had not
been commonly used earlier. No reason can be found for its
appearing in parish registers in the 1580s--as a name for both
sexes. Definitely feminine in origin, it derives from Old German
<u>Radagundis,</u> a compound of <u>radi</u> 'counsel' + <u>gundi</u> 'war.'[10] Spenser
had to have been aware of the etymology. It is possible that he
was aware of St. Radegund, a sixth-century queen of Clothaire I, a
Frank. Several church dedications are to her. Jesus College,
Cambridge, in 1490 took over the property and dedication of the
nunnery of St. Rudegund. Her being such a representative of the
church may have caused Spenser to place her as the Queen of the
Amazons and to make her the violator of the authority of males.
For her crime against men, she is beheaded by Britomart, who
administered justice in the extreme and rapidly. Whatever the

reason for the character of Rudigund, Spenser certainly believed that a society ruled by women was not natural. Could it be that this attitude played some part in his lack of advancement at the Court of Elizabeth? The case of Radigund needs further investigation and commentary.

The interpretation of the onomastic signs that Spenser placed in The Faerie Queene would probably not be an endless task, but it would lead into realms of the imagination that are not ordinarily attributed to him. The modern interpreter--sometimes a reader-- has trouble with epic, mostly because of pictorial sightings, somewhat tautalogous but revelatory. The names intrude into the pictures, cut across the plentitudinous verses and pin the reader to a spot, violating subjectivity, for the name has to be accepted. For this intransigence, it is usually relegated to the allegorical structure, dismissed, conveniently forgotten.

The names pinpoint the text to character, place, and cognitive structure, for they carry much of the plot within themselves. For Spenser, they must have been created entities necessary to carry whatever symbolism he wanted to give to any particular incident. The device he used, as has been illustrated, is the expanding etymology, "an exploration of words or names in terms of words to which they seem similar without regard to the laws of linguistic change or facts of history."[11] Although Spenser chose a name to reflect a text, he did so with an immediacy to assign it with reference to its actions and nature.

In other words, a figure will have several natures, all deriving from an obscurity of the etymology. Claribell, for instance, can be derived from Latin clarus + bellus 'clear or famous in beauty,' as the wife of Bellamoure. The name can also be derived from clarus + bellum, the knight who fought against Britomart and is famous in war. Other instances, rapidly, would be Una 'one' and 'truth'; Irene (Irena, Eirena, Eirene) from Greek eirêne 'peace,' but also alludes to Ireland; or Alma 'calm' (Cotgrave's definition) or 'the soul.'

In working through the possibilities of a name, then, Spenser added to its range of meaning, enriching the text, and roughening up the allegory, perhaps to the point that allegory becomes poetic thought again with all the baggage that that entails: philosophical detail, onomastic extension, poetic devices, free etymological association, and systematic delights. The originality of Spenser has in recent years been buried beneath the weight of allegorical insistences, ignoring the play with and of language. Let us begin with the names; and through studying them first, let them show how the vision unfolds for and in the reader.

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NOTES

[1] John Wilkins, An Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophic language (London: Printed for S. Gellibrand, 1680).

[2] Neil M. Flax, "The Presence of the Sign in Goethe's Faust," PMLA, 98 (1983), 183-203, begins his argument with a distinction between symbol and allegory as Goethe defined them.

[3] R. E. Neil Dodge, ed., The Complete Poetical Works of Spenser (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1936), Book II, Canto 12, lxiii, ff.

[4] A good defense of Spenser's concreteness is W. B. C. Watkins, "The Kingdom of Our Language," The Hudson Review, II (August, 1949), 343-376, reprinted in William R. Mueller, Spenser's Critics" Changing Currents in Literary Taste (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1959), 233-256. My thesis, however, does not depend on Watkin's excellent defense.

[5] Watkins, 237-8.

[6] Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Savage Mind (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962, 1966), tr. from the French, La pensée sauvage, classifies names as an integral part of systems.

[7] John Hughes, "Remarks on the Fairy Queen," reprinted in Mueller, 18-27.

[8] For the etymologies, I am indebted to Joel Jay Belson, The Names in the "Faerie Queene." New York: Columbia University, Ph.D.,1964; University Microfilms, Inc., Ann Arbor, MI.

[9] Belson, glossary.

[10] E. G. Withycombe, _The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names_, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1950, 1963), p. 237.

[11] Belson, p. xi.