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## "To Overgo Ariosto": *The Faerie Queene*, Book Four

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## The Faerie Queene, Book Four

Louis A. Marre

Spenser's "Legend of Friendship" might well be accused of false advertising, for the events of that book have very little to do with that virtue. Rather, we see almost every conceivable form of discord and enmity. Discord herself is personified in the Book, and her presence is considerably more vivid than that of the titular heroes, Campbell and Triamond. Here Spenser seems to be following the path of the satirist, insofar as he is more interested in showing us deviations from the norm, rather than holding up the norm itself for emulation. The Narrator of this Book seems to be aware of its peculiar nature, and his presence in it is of a different sort than in the other Books of *The Faerie Queene*. Indeed, an examination of the ethos of the Narrator in this Book is our best guide to understanding it, and it is precisely as a Guide that this Narrator most often appears.

Aware of the nature of the events to be chronicled, the Narrator comes to his own defense before he undertakes the Legend of Friendship. He sets up a straw critic, the "rugged forehead" of the serious, statesmanly reader, who has heretofore been critical of the rimes of love, presumably an allusion to the subject matter of the Third Book, Chastity. The Narrator's defense is the simplest one: he denies aiming his lines at such an audience. In terms of Sidney's *Defense*, he cannot be called a liar, for he has no intention of affirming anything to an unsympathetic audience. His frequent addresses to the ladies of the court and to Elizabeth, scattered so liberally throughout the entire poem and in particular through Book Three immediately preceding, have clearly established the dramatic audience that the Narrator has in mind. He is, at the outset of Book Four, reminding us that he is above the criticism of the unworthy—which is not to say that he is not to be taken seriously by his chosen audience. The usefulness of his maneuver becomes clear when we note that the position and effectiveness of a satirist depend in part on his ability to establish an identity for himself that protects him from criticism, and presents him as an honest and clear-sighted man, writing for a select circle of readers, and one who is not subject to the same shortcomings that he is satirizing. If the satirist himself were the legitimate object of criticism, then the moral basis for his negative judgment of society would be eroded. The Narrator for Book Four arms himself against criticism at the outset, protesting that if one does not approve of his subject, then the argument is not intended for that one anyway. Just to be sure, he requests the protection of the great and powerful: his appeal to Elizabeth, and to those more learned than he in the art of love, strongly suggests that what is to follow is more important than the Narrator's disclaimer of broad appeal might lead us to believe initially:

...who so list looke backe to former ages,  
And call to count the things that then were donne,

And brave exploits which great Heroes wonne,  
In love were either ended or begunne.

(IV, Proem, 3)

Love can be the mainspring not only of heroic actions, but of writing about them. Thus the Narrator's established ethos of one who is learned in heroic lore becomes a defense against "these Stoicke censours" who might not share his view on the role of passion in the classics. There is also not a little exploitation of the reader's curiosity: what can be in store if the Narrator is so defensive at the beginning of the Book?

Immediately visible evidence of the unusually satiric character of Book Four is provided by the Narrator's stock in trade: his narrative transition links between Canto and Canto. For example, the transition between Canto II and III runs as follows:

The which for length I will not here pursew,  
But rather will reserve it for a Canto new.

(IV, ii, 54)

O why doe wretched men so much desire,  
To draw their dayes unto the utmost date....

(IV, iii, 1)

Therefore this Fay I hold but fond and vaine....

(IV, iii, 2)

The Narrator is aware of his story as artifice, divided at his will into Cantos, and at the mercy of his commentary on the events he has narrated or is about to narrate. He is even able to express a sort of detached amusement at his relationship to the narrated events, as when he concludes the Fourth Canto thus:

Then shrilling trumpets loudly gan to bray,  
And bad them leave their labors and long toyle,  
To joyous feast and other gentle play,  
Where beauties prize should win that pretious spoyle:  
Where I with sound of trompe will also rest a while.

(IV, iv, 48)

The account which has just been concluded with the sound of trumpets was the three-day tournament for the magic cestus of Florimell, and the jousts are justly exhausted; but the Narrator is here responding to the call for a rest along with his characters. Clearly his relationship with his narrative is not always grave.

Besides showing an occasional flash of humor at his own construct, the Narrator of the Fourth Book also takes explicit credit for his sense of decorum. Beginning the Fifth Canto, after the customary stanza of moralizing which opens it, he points to the decorum connecting the plot and his treatment of it, in words which apply equally to both:

So fitly now here commeth next in place,  
After the prooffe of prowesse ended well,  
The controverse of beauties souveraine grace;

(IV, v, 2)

This ~~Marre~~ ~~To Overgo Ariosto~~ ~~The Faerie Queene~~ ~~Book Four~~ ~~in this Book~~, for he again takes note of the close alliance between martial and amorous pursuits. When the heroes make the transition, the Narrator must, in all decorum, follow along the same track. Many other Canto transitions in which the Narrator comments on his relationship to his work are evident as the Book progresses. Indeed, they are the most identifiable element of the Book from a formal standpoint, and Canto transitions from Book Four may be identified out of context by the visibility of the Narrator's awareness that he is constructing an artifice from which he has artistic detachment at all times, and frequently ironic detachment as well.<sup>1</sup> Book IV is not particularly well-knit, from the misnomer of its heroes in the title to the inexplicable disappearance of Amoret from the Ninth Canto; but the sustained identification of the Narrator with commentary, moralizing, and even playfulness throughout gives the Book a unity which is denied to it on other levels. This display of Narrative persona is concentrated at points of formal transition, between Cantos generally, and is so important to the sense of form in the Book as a whole that an annotated outline of transitions in Book Four will show a consistency of pattern that belies other evidence of haste or incomplete construction in this Book.

### Annotated Outline of Narrative Transitions The Faerie Queene, Book Four

Canto and Stanza	Precis
i,1	Narrator expresses sympathy with Amoret and Florimell for past adventures, and wishes it had not been written. No formal transition to new action.
ii, 1-3	Denunciation of Discord; its history; application to the current plot, with direct reference to events just narrated.
ii, 32-32	Interruption to praise Chaucer as source of inspiration for present work. Praise of him as writer, assumption of his spirit.
ii, 54.9	"But rather will reserve it for a Canto new." The first transition in the Ariostan manner.
iii,2.1	"Therefore this Fay I hold but fond and vaine" is the Narrator's comment on the immediate past action.
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iv, 1-2	Paranetical comments on general behavior (enemies often become friends) and application to characters in previous Canto — especially Cambell and Triamond.
iv, 48.9	"Where I with sound of trompe will also rest a while."
v, 2.1	"So fitly now here commeth next in place"
v, 46.	"But here my wearie teeme nigh over spent Shall breathe it selfe awhile, after so long a went."

- vi, 1. Rhetorical questions about Scudamour's cares, based on *Orlando Furioso* 31:1.
- vi, 47.809. "...Therefore I here will stay / Until another tyde, that I it finish may."
- vii, 1-2. Invocation to Love, based on preceding events.
- vii, 47. "Which for it is too long here to abide,  
I will deferre the end untill another tide."
- viii, 1-2. The effect of the displeasure of the mighty considered, both generally and in its application to Timias in the preceding Canto.
- viii, 64.9 "...as shall appeare by his event."
- ix, 1-3. Three kinds of love weighed, with prize awarded to Friendship. The present story held up as proof to anyone who reads it.
- ix, 41.9 "...I will them in another tell."  
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- x Scudamour's narrative, not the Narrator's.
- x, 58.9 "So ended he his tale, where I this Canto end."
- xi, 1.1-2 "But ah for pittie that I have thus long  
Left a fayre Ladie languishing..."
- xi, 53.9 "Unto another Canto I will overpas."
- xii, 1.1 "O what an endlesse worke have I in hand."
- xii, 35.9 "Which to another place I leave to be perfected."

Three subdivisions are indicated in the Outline: one which is by way of introduction to the Narrator's new manner, running from i,1 through iii, 2, starting with close identification and sympathy with the action, and breaking out into direct acknowledgement of the poem as artifice, with variable relationships possible with it; a second from iv, 1 to ix, 41, completely unified by transitions which take note of the poem as artifice, summarize economically the moral of the preceding action, and tie that moral explicitly to the character and actions of the coming Canto; and finally the interruption of this pattern by Scudamour's narrative of an entire Canto, with the Narrator breaking in only at the very last line to remind us that this was not his own narration, from which point until the end the close linkage of the Narrator continues unbroken. Then the entire Book is left open-ended, with implications of more similar actions to follow.

For comparison, look at typical transitions between Cantos of the *Orlando Furioso*:<sup>2</sup>

- I, 1xxx1. "But what ensued between the haughty pair  
I in another canto whall declare."
- II, i. "Injurious Love, why still to mar accord  
Between desires has been thy favourite feat?  
Why does it please thee so, perfidious lord,  
Two hearts should with a different measure beat?  
Thou wilt not let me take the certain ford,

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Dragging me where the stream is deep and fleet.

- Her I abandon who my love desires,  
While she who hates, respect and love inspires  
ii. Thou to Rinaldo show'st the damsel fair,  
While he seems hideous to that gentle dame..."

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- V, xcii. "Him the good king entreated to declare  
His name, or, at the least, his visage shew;  
That he might grace him with such guerdon fair,  
As to his good intent was justly due.  
The stranger, after long and earnest prayer,  
Lifted the covering casque, and bared to view  
What in the ensuing canto will appear,  
If you are fain the history to hear.

- VI Wretched that evil man who lives in trust  
His secret sin is safe in his possession!  
Since, if nought else, the air, the very dust  
In which the crime is buried, makes confession,  
And oftentimes his guilt compels the unjust,  
Though sometimes unarraigned in worldly session,  
To be his own accuser, and bewray,  
So God has willed, deeds hidden from the day."

Shared characteristics with Spenserian transitions in Book Four of *The Faerie Queene* become evident from this sample. One unit ends, usually at a point of high narrative interest, where the Narrator breaks in to point out that he has decided this is enough for one unit. He promises to continue in the next unit, "if you are fain the history to hear" and then begins it with a generalization or moral about the quality of the events just described. He usually links this moralizing with either the experience of the characters or with his own, in the latter case tightening his relationship with the "history" that he narrates.

In addition, we are aware that the relationship between general types of human behavior and the specific examples being shown to us by the Narrator are entirely within his control. He manipulates us to a point of high interest, breaks off, and takes the center of the stage as it were for himself. If there follows a digression, he is responsible—"But ah for pittie that I have thus long / Left a fayre Ladie languishing." Frequent use is made of such devices of direct appeal to the audience as rhetorical question, notably at FQ, IV, vi, 1, which was long ago pointed out as deriving from OF 31.1

Furthermore, the Narrator in Spenser's epic reminds us that he is connected with the events he is describing in only a technical manner, as "antique Historian", and so if he has any feelings about the events, he must verbalize them. When he does so, those feelings become a part of our experience of the events, and a part of our relationship with him as well. Exclamations of pity or rhetorical questions are obvious means of solidifying our identification with the Narrator, not with the narrated events. But the singular *difference* from Ariosto, and the difference that has caused so many readers to conclude that

Spenser overlies the absence of any direct ironic comment on the quality of the action. This is not so much a matter of absolute difference as it is one of degree. Spenser's Narrator is not so interested in his own reactions as Ariosto's, but he does have that capacity to enter in to his work when moved by sympathy, as in the case of Amoret and Florimell; or by criticism, as in the instance of Triamond's Faerie mother. Spenser's Narrator is primarily Historian, as he often reminds us, and is also very much aware of his moral intention—many transitions are the baldest kind of moralizing, e.g.

Well said the wiseman, now prov'd true by this,  
Which to this gentle Squire did happen late,  
That the displeasure of the mighty is  
Then death it selfe more dread and desperate.

(IV, viii, 1)

He, too, is strongly aware of his poem as artifact, and his transitions frequently serve to acknowledge that fact, and in doing so to remind of his detachment from it, not, perhaps, always an ironic detachment, but then we must give some thought to the kind of events pictured in this peculiar Book. In this one case, wherever the simulacrum of reality is strongest, the Narrator need not always make use of direct verbal irony. Comments on the order of "O goodly usage of those Antique times" (which is used in fact in Book III) are rarely useful, because they would interfere with a higher duty of the Narrator: his usefulness to us as guide, mentor, friend. He is free in that capacity to point out the vanity of some actions, and he does. But he abstains from running ironic commentary on it, because he shows us how to deal with character motivation in the introductory transitions. They are largely negative. Apostrophes to the destructive power of love, or discord, or anger, or displeasure of the mighty are frequent and vehement. This is in keeping with the essentially satiric mode of this entire Book, wherein the Narrator directs our attention to the divisive and chaotic forces which upset the society of which he is the chronicler. It is hardly necessary for him to go beyond this and offer overt ironic judgments on the failure of ideals even in the Antique world. He gives us instruction, as it were, in ironic vision early in the Book, and leaves much of the subsequent action palpably open to the same treatment on our own.

Therefore this Fay I hold but fond and vaine,  
The which in seeking for her children three  
Long life, thereby did more prolong their paine,  
Yet whilst they lived none did ever see  
More happie creatures, then they seem'd to bee,  
Nor more ennobled for their courtesie,  
That made them dearly lov'd of each degree;  
No more renowned for their chevalrie,  
That made them dreaded much of all men farre and nie.

(IV, iii, 2)

The clearness of the Narrator's ironic vision exposes the irony of a request for longer life. Furthermore, the Narrator places us in a position to enjoy dramatic irony during the battle which is about to be described, for, though the spectators

are a man. To Overgo Ariosto" <em>The Faerie Queene, 7em> Book Four know that long life is vanity, and that the Narrator thinks that the action he is busily describing is foolish, and so we have an ironically divided vision in which we see the action, the Narrator, and ourselves as all at slightly different relations to the event. That is irony enough, and continual commentary is unnecessary.

Alvin Kernan, in his study of Elizabethan satire *The Cankered Muse*, points out that the canvas of satire is usually very crowded, involving large numbers of actors, so that the picture of the damned society may be a full and multifarious one. Book Four is certainly crowded in this sense, featuring two large tournaments with hordes of participants in the first three cantos alone, and all of that action is vain. The Narrator gives us our cues in his introductory transitions, and we view the spectacle with an ironic detachment that we learn from him, our guide in a bewildering pageant of events that do not live up to the ideals of which he is custodian. He lets the irony of events speak for itself, but only after giving us repeated instructions at those points most calculated to remind us that we are dealing with an artificial representation of a society.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of specific verbal echoes, see the article by R. E. N. Dodge, "Spenser's Imitations of Ariosto," most easily consulted in *The Variorum Spenser*, III, 317ff.

<sup>2</sup>This and subsequent quotations are from the literal translation of the *Orlando Furioso* by William Stewart Rose, Stewart A. Baker and A. Bartlett Giamatti, eds. (Indianapolis and New York, 1968).



