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Wary Boldness:
The Aesthetics of Political Agency in Renaissance England

by

Richard Z. Lee

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University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Joanna Picciotto, Chair

Professor Jeffrey Knapp

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Abstract

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This dissertation argues that foundational works of the English Renaissance, most notably the later books of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, proleptically model a key ambiguity in modern aesthetic theory concerning the work of art's relation to external reality. On the one hand, these texts lay claim to a vital social efficacy, inserting themselves unmistakably into contemporary public controversy and holding out the possibility that imaginative literature could bring about a reformation of political subjectivity more radical and lasting than other forms of expression. On the other hand, the texts also fail to set forth a positive political program that could be translated from aesthetic experience to social activity. Instead, they train readers in a mode of cautious and attentive critical reflection, an interpretive agency that Spenser and others regard as the necessary precondition for enlightened *praxis*, but that falls short of—and, in many respects, actively complicates and confounds—a politics in itself. Such a critical disposition thus maintains a pre- or proto-political character, in which artistic experience becomes the simultaneously enabling and disabling condition for reformatory social action.

The project thus seeks to complicate the longstanding insistence, in early modern literary criticism, on the directly political character of artistic experience. Associating Renaissance literature with immediate didactic and ideological aims, in contradistinction to the putatively de-politicizing tendencies of post-Enlightenment art and aesthetic theory, historicist scholarship in recent decades has perpetuated a reductive narrative about the relationship between the aesthetic and the Real, one that an earlier tradition of Kantian and Marxist philosophy treats with greater subtlety. This dissertation analyzes Renaissance literature from just such a perspective, making the case for the semi-autonomy of *The Faerie Queene* from within an Adornian framework, and stressing the profound but attenuated relationship between the literary and the extra-literary in the early modern period. Through fine-grained analysis of Spenser's Legends of Justice and Courtesy, alongside a number of related texts, I argue that the political and historical content of *The Faerie Queene*—and, by extension, any literary work of sufficient formal complexity and extra-textual ambition—is accessible only through an attentive engagement with the text at the level of the individual word. Such an analytical process, moreover, becomes both the mechanism for training subjects in the critical judgment necessary for redeemed political action, as well as a mode of deliberative caution that re-directs the concentrated urgency required for such action back into the patient work of literary analysis.

For Sarah

*We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough.*
—Wallace Stevens

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Introduction

Aesthetic Theory and the English Renaissance

Perhaps the most striking thing about Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1599) is that much of the play functions as an extended act of literary criticism. The drama's witty characters regularly engage in an expert practitioner's display of taste, most explicitly when Orlando begins sticking his derivative love poems in praise of Rosalind throughout the Forest of Arden. Comparing one of them to the monotonous chatter of "butterwomen[]" on their way "to market," the clown Touchstone parodies its inept metrics by rewriting the text through a series of bawdy puns, before remarking, "This is the very false gallop of verses."¹ Rosalind responds in the same vein to another, which loftily insists that she combines the features of various legendary beauties, by ridiculing it as a "tedious homily" made up of "lame" "feet" (142, 154). Orlando's poetic ineptitude, of course, fails to thwart his courtship of Rosalind: even as she suggests that wooing's most satisfying feature is the "new matter" it provides for artful conversation (a faculty Orlando decidedly lacks), his petition for a hermeneutics of charity, asking auditors to "mar no more [his] verses with reading them ill-favoredly" is ultimately granted, if not by the audience then at least by Rosalind herself (4.1.69-70, 3.2.238-9).² The play's reflexivity about literature's cultural status in Elizabethan England can also be seen at the level of genre. As pastoral, *As You Like It* shows Shakespeare using the mode's heightened "self-consciousness about ... literary form" to interrogate the relationship between aesthetic experience and empirical reality in its broadest scope.³ In associating the pastoral mode with a "voluntary exile" that converts "the stubbornness of fortune / Into so quiet and so sweet a style," for instance, the drama indicates something essential of the artwork's semi-autonomy—its carving out of a space of critically-distant and pleasurable reflection on public affairs—in Renaissance England (1.1.89, 2.1.19-20).

A more explicit articulation of this idea is found in 3.3, in comic dialogue between Touchstone and his unlettered lover Audrey. After Touchstone says that he wishes "the gods had made [her] more poetical," Audrey asks what he means by "poetical," and whether the term refers to an "honest" or "true thing." "No, truly," Touchstone replies, "for the truest poetry is the most feigning, and lovers are given to poetry, and what they swear in poetry it may be said, as lovers, they do feign" (13-7). Shakespeare plays here on two meanings of both "truest" and "feigning." In one sense, Touchstone asserts that the poetry which is most "correct" and "right" (*OED* 4.a) is that which is most "given to inventing"—the most "imaginative," that is (*OED* 1). But "feigning," of course, also means "dissembling" (*OED* 2): Touchstone says that lovers swear in poetry those very things they pretend as lovers, and he opposes "feigning" to truth-as-

¹ 3.2.85-6, 101. All Shakespearean quotations are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al., 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2008).

² Compare the similarly indulgent attitude to poetry and playing at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: responding to Hippolyta's complaint about the mechanicals' ridiculous performance, Theseus replies, "The best in this kind are but shadows, and the worst are no worse if imagination amend them" (5.1.208-9).

³ Paul Alpers, "What Is Pastoral?", *Critical Inquiry* 8.3 (1982), 441. See Alpers' book-length discussion of the same topics in *What Is Pastoral?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). See also Stuart Curran's observation that "because of its removal from the everyday world of its readers, the pastoral retreat is inevitably a locus for allegory," and that its "enduring feature ... is its double vision" on both fiction and reality, in *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 87-8.

“honesty” in the next several lines (19-24).⁴ This exchange would, in fact, seem to represent a strong endorsement of the artistic license that Philip Sidney champions in his *Defence of Poesy* (written c.1580). Sidney’s treatise (to which we will soon return at greater length) famously insists that because the poet “nothing affirms” he also “never lieth.” “[T]he poet,” he continues, “never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes,” but instead pursues what he calls a “good” or “profitable invention.”⁵ For Sidney and Shakespeare alike, poetic “truth” is a function not only of its artistic integrity as expressive style and achieved form, but also of its specifically and self-consciously *fictive* discursive qualities.

This conjunction of the aesthetically compelling and the empirically counter-factual is continuously flaunted throughout *As You Like It*. The best-known instance of this double perspective occurs in the play’s epilogue, where Rosalind (speaking from a liminal space somewhere between character and actor), declares to the audience members her intention to “conjure” them “to like as much of this play as please you.” Deliberately reversing Sidney’s disavowal of literary conjuration, the Rosalind figure now seems to insist on the truth content of her speech in a way that would also unsettle the logic of poetic feigning on which *Touchstone* had insisted. But this playful inversion is further destabilized just a few lines later. “If I were a woman,” Rosalind continues, inviting us to reel at the vertiginous ironies of the play’s gender confusion, its representation of an actor-playing-Rosalind-playing-Ganymede-playing-“Rosalind” (9-15).⁶ In “the play’s infinitely iffy, infinitely conjectural world,” our desire “to draw a line on the fiction” instead only “renews [our] inscription within it,” as attempts to fix the relationship between the theatrical and extra-theatrical are wittily frustrated by these economical formal strategies.⁷ The play generates similar effects when it presents itself as a demystification of the pastoral and courtly love conventions that were often conjoined in Elizabethan literary culture. Thus, when Orlando unimaginationally claims to the disguised Rosalind that he dies of frustrated desire for her, she replies that “[t]he poor world is almost six thousand years old, and in all this time there was not any man died ... in a love cause.” For example: “Leander, he would have lived many a fair year though Hero had turned nun, if it had not been for a hot midsummer night; for, good youth, he went but forth to wash him in the Hellespont, and being taken with the cramp, was drowned; and the foolish chroniclers of that age found it was ‘Hero of Sestos’” (4.1.81-90). But this satirical deflation of Orlando’s hyperbolic despair occurs just moments after another character who has fallen in love with Rosalind/Ganymede proclaims, “Dead shepherd, now I find thy saw of might, / ‘Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?’” (3.5.82-3). Indeed, the play as a whole underscores the aptness of this quotation from Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander*, as multiple pairs of lovers, including Rosalind and Orlando, “no sooner look[] but they love[]” (5.2.29-30). Shakespeare therefore constructs a dramatic space in which the manifestly fictive idealizations of Marlowe’s love poetry are marked as such, but are at the same time endowed

⁴ Compare Celia’s remark, at the start of the play, that those Fortune “makes fair she scarce makes honest, and those that she makes honest she makes very ill-favoredly” (1.2.36-8). See also Sonnet 138, which begins with the ironic lines “When my love swears that she is made of truth, / I do believe her though I know she lies ...”

⁵ See Sidney’s *The Defence of Poesy* and *Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. Gavin Alexander (London: Penguin, 2004), 34-5.

⁶ See 3.2 for “Ganymede’s” suggestion to Orlando that the latter should practice his wooing of Rosalind on Ganymede “himself.”

⁷ Christopher Pye, *The Storm at Sea: Political Aesthetics in the Time of Shakespeare* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 18.

with “might,” a peculiarly literary force that corresponds to the “forcibleness or *energeia*” that Sidney analogously urges authors of “songs and sonnets” to cultivate.⁸

Shakespeare’s allusion to his great forerunner, however, also brings to light another, and more disquieting, aspect of the aesthetic theory that his drama implicitly proposes. For Marlowe is also present earlier in the play, in the aforementioned passage featuring Touchstone and Audrey. First, the clown tells his paramour, “I am here with thee and thy goats, as the most capricious poet, honest Ovid, was among the Goths.” The reference to “honest Ovid,” is fitting, as this most extravagantly fanciful (“capricious”) poet will immediately be identified with the “feigning” that is paradoxically characteristic of “the truest poetry.” Alluding to Ovid also foregrounds the theme of exile: the characters find themselves in Arden, after all, because the legitimate duke and his followers have been banished from court by his usurping brother, much as Ovid himself was expelled from Rome. Touchstone then continues with an apparent *non-sequitur*: “When a man’s verses cannot be understood, nor a man’s good wit seconded with the forward child, understanding, it strikes a man more dead than a great reckoning in a little room” (5-12). The passages, however, are connected through the figure of Marlowe, who was the first vernacular translator of Ovid’s *Amores*, likely dating from his undergraduate career at Cambridge in the mid-1580s.⁹ He was, of course, also killed in a tavern quarrel in 1593, ostensibly over a bill (or a “reckoning”), and the identification is made still clearer by its echo of *The Jew of Malta*, where Barabas glories over his “infinite riches in a little room.”¹⁰ The Ovid and Marlowe gestured to in this otherwise festive scene, therefore, are less passionate shepherds singing to their loves than they are distressing examples of authors who were destroyed by the state—with Ovid sent into exile “among the Goths,” and Marlowe (apparently) assassinated by the Elizabethan secret police.

Shakespeare has come to be regarded as not only the greatest of Renaissance writers, but perhaps the most discreet and circumspect, as well; unlike many of his contemporaries, he never spent time in jail and seems rarely to have been in trouble with government censors. In these allusions to Ovid and Marlowe, however, Shakespeare clearly registers the ever-present menace of a state power seemingly bent on the persecution of its greatest authors. There is also a specifically aesthetic or interpretive violence perpetrated on these poets, as well, since Touchstone insists that the damage done to a writer’s reputation when his “verses cannot be understood” nor read with “understanding” leaves him “more dead” even than physical destruction. *As You Like It* thus suggests that Marlowe’s death warrant was underwritten by acts of bad literary criticism, the failure of a particular audience to appreciate the social and epistemological liberty that “the truest poetry” merits. This implicit reproach of what Shakespeare refers to, in Sonnet 66, as “art made tongue-tied by authority” (9), is further emphasized in the otherwise unmotivated appearance of the local vicar, Oliver Martext, later in this scene. Martext (who is here given only a handful of workmanlike lines and never again appears in the play) is, at this point, the only figure resembling legitimate governmental authority

⁸ *Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, 49.

⁹ Although Marlowe’s translations remained unpublished in his lifetime, they evidently circulated freely in manuscript during this period. For background on this text, see Marlowe, *The Complete Poems and Translations*, ed. Stephen Orgel (New York: Penguin, 2007), ix-xiv.

¹⁰ 1.1.37. Quoted in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington, et al. (New York: Norton, 2002).

in Arden, and Shakespeare goes out of his way to show his antipathy for Touchstone. The clown is called “a fantastical knave,” whose satirical verve is specifically opposed to Martext’s sober “calling” (88-9). “Fantastical” is especially appropriate since the term invokes not only Touchstone’s copious wit, but also George Puttenham’s observation, in *The Art of English Poesy* (1589), that writers “in these days” are often despised as “fantastical.”¹¹ Throughout 3.3, then, Shakespeare thematizes the apparently implacable opposition between artistic license and state power, as well as the ruin that the latter perpetrates on the former when it denies imaginative literature the provisional freedom it requires.

The drama as a whole, in fact, is put into motion by just such a restriction on potentially subversive speech. With the court having been usurped by Duke Senior’s wicked brother, Touchstone observes, “fools may not speak wisely what wise men do foolishly”; Celia concurs, noting that the clown is likely to be “whipped for taxation [slander] one of these days,” and that “since the little wit that fools have was silenced, the little foolery that wise men have makes a great show” (1.2.70-5). The pastoral situation in Arden also mirrors that of Vergil’s first eclogue, with the banished court’s occasions for idyllic conversation a function of its political exile. The equivocal freedoms of expression afforded by this displacement are, moreover, made explicit in the figure of Jaques, the sententious author-figure who “moralize[s]” the scenes he observes “into a thousand similes” (2.1.44-5), most famously in his “All the world’s a stage” speech. Indeed, Jaques makes the case for the very license Shakespeare endorses later in the play: “I must have liberty / Withal, as large a charter as the wind,” he proclaims, “To blow on whom I please.” But, in Horatian fashion, he insists that this expressive freedom is not an end in itself, but a means of ethical improvement. “[G]ive me leave / To speak my mind,” he concludes, “and I will through and through / Cleanse the foul body of th’infected world, / If they will patiently receive my medicine” (2.7.47-61). To this Erasmian validation of caustic wit’s capacity to cure social vice, however, Duke Senior responds that “thou thyself hast been a libertine, / As sensual as the brutish sting itself.” Rather than curing the ills Jaques laments, the Duke predicts that he would instead “disgorge” those very evils “into the general world” with the same “license of free foot” he has used in first catching them (65-9). According to Duke Senior’s hermeneutics of suspicion, the verbal liberty Jaques seeks is merely the cynical justification for libertinism, and the poetic license (the “license of free *fool*”) he endorses has no *telos* beyond being the linguistic equivalent of carnal excess. The Duke thus demystifies the socio-political efficacy that Jaques claims for the critical distance of literary autonomy, evacuating it of any pretense to moral improvement in empirical reality. This diminution of Jaques’ authority reflects his ambiguous presence in the drama as a whole: though “a significant presence in the play,” he also has “no effect on it,” neither changing nor reforming any of the other characters, and his final appearance finds him vowing to remain in the forest, monastically retired in an “abandoned cave” (5.4.185).¹² Indeed, his very name is a tip-off that his “obsession with purging society” makes him an incarnation of a “jakes,” the Elizabethan word for privy or water closet.¹³ If Jaques’ moralistic posturing thus amounts to little more than an aestheticized waste product, it nevertheless harmonizes with the play’s figuration elsewhere of the pastoral (and so poetic) mode itself as a space in which to “waste ... time” (2.4.90).

¹¹ From Book 1, Chapter 8; see *Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, 70.

¹² James Shapiro, *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 219.

¹³ *Ibid.*

I have lingered on the verbal details of *As You Like It* at such length for a number of reasons. First, the play amounts to perhaps the most sophisticated articulation of literary theory in early modernity, and so justifies a point once made by Paul Alpers that “[t]he best literary criticism written in the English Renaissance occurs in literary works themselves, not in what officially passes as criticism.”¹⁴ In what follows, I will therefore frequently derive theoretical principles from close readings of the period’s literary fictions themselves, assuming that their elusively complex dramatizations of such issues are capable of telling us more about the critical sensibilities of the era than formal works of poetics often are. Second, and as I argue at greater length in subsequent chapters, it is only through careful attention to what Theodor Adorno calls the “micrological figures” of an artwork’s “technical procedures” that we are capable of grasping of its larger movements of form and content, and its mediation of the historical and political phenomena in which it originally participated.¹⁵ Third, and most importantly, I want to suggest that the dynamics mobilized in Shakespeare’s play are representative not only of Elizabethan literary culture more generally, but of a major strand of post-Enlightenment aesthetic theory, as well—what Robert Kaufman somewhat wearily refers to as “the aesthetics-and-politics story.”¹⁶ For the drama offers two competing, even contradictory, accounts of the relationship between the literary and the extra-literary. On the one hand, Shakespeare asserts the importance for imaginative writing of something very much like the full-blown artistic autonomy that would become the focal point for Kantian aesthetics some two centuries later. This autonomy is rendered as a means rather than an end: as in numerous accounts of poetry’s purpose by Shakespeare’s peers and later theorists alike, the creative and critical freedoms claimed for such liberty are imagined leading to a socio-cultural renovation more radical and far-reaching than any discrete political program could be. On the other hand, however, the empowering ideal of art’s ability to re-shape the political subjectivity of its readers, is skeptically deflated. According to this view, the pretensions of poetry to an active, interventionist capacity in external reality are a delusion, the high-minded veneer covering over the condition of embittered and obstructed agency from which they emerge. Rather than a literary means to a political end, artistic expression is here thought to be opposed to political action, and the fate of the poet is exile to the margins of social life (or worse).

It is this paradoxical and equivocal relationship between the artwork and social reality that I will describe at length in what follows. Focusing primarily on the later books of Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1596), for reasons that will become clear in the subsequent chapter, I claim that aesthetic experience in the English Renaissance becomes the simultaneously enabling and disabling condition for extra-literary *praxis* in the period. The politically ambiguous benefit of the reading process, that is, is to be found in an enhanced *critical*, or interpretive, agency that remains pre- or extra-political. Through fine-grained analysis of Spenser’s *Legends of Justice and Courtesy* (as well as a number of related poetic texts from throughout his career), my project argues that the political and historical content of *The Faerie Queene*—and, by

¹⁴ Edmund Spenser: *A Critical Anthology*, ed. Paul Alpers (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 20; abbreviated in subsequent chapters as *Critical Anthology*.

¹⁵ *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 358, 27.

¹⁶ “Negatively Capable Dialectics: Keats, Vendler, Adorno, and the Theory of the Avant-Garde,” *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2001), 358.

extension, any literary work of sufficient formal complexity and extra-textual ambition—is accessible only through an attentive engagement with the text at the level of the individual word. Such an analytical process, moreover, becomes both the mechanism for training subjects in the critical judgment necessary for redeemed political action, as well as a mode of deliberative caution that re-directs the concentrated urgency required for such action back into the patient work of literary analysis. The result is a readerly disposition that I will call, following Spenser, “wary boldness”—the necessarily *proto*-political attitude that results from aesthetic experience.

The vocabulary that I have relied on in describing the aims of this project will likely cause many a student of early modernity to raise an eyebrow. For several decades now, it has become orthodox among scholars of the period to regard concepts like the “aesthetic,” the “autonomous,” even the “literary,” as alien to the *mentalité* of Renaissance society and culture. Invoking such terminology immediately opens one up to charges of anachronism—and, as Margreta de Grazia notes, “[i]n the field of literary studies, as presently historicized, nothing could be worse than to be accused of anachronism.”¹⁷ As Christopher Pye has recently observed, “the aesthetic has played a significant role in early modern studies largely by virtue of its derogation,” especially since the New Historicism was by and large underwritten by the conviction that “the work of art as an autonomous form did not yet exist historically speaking.”¹⁸ The historicist objection was, of course, based in far more than a sense of misapplied terminology. “For nearly a generation,” Hugh Grady notes, “the aesthetic has been the opposite of the political,” implying a view of “art as transcendent, mystical, or quasi-religious,” and so “decontextualized from its larger social milieu, purposes, and intertextuality.”¹⁹ This particular complex of associations was suggested by Raymond Williams when he defined the aesthetic, in *Keywords*, as that which was “beyond social use and social valuation,” and so opposed to “*practical* or UTILITARIAN considerations.”²⁰ In the same text, Williams also indicated that the institution of “literature,” in the sense of “*art*, [or] *aesthetic*, *creative* and *imaginative*” writing,” only emerged “within the basic assumptions of Romanticism.”²¹ Influential practitioners within the emergent New Historicism in turn drew attention to what they took to be the pronounced rift between two related binaries: the activist prerogatives of Renaissance literature against its aestheticized modern counterpart, and the political orientation of historicist scholarship against the New Critical formalism it sought to supersede. Thus Stephen Greenblatt, in his epochal *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, would stress the importance of “art’s concrete functions in relation to individuals and to institutions,” and warned against “a conception of art as addressed to a timeless, cultureless, universal human essence or, alternatively, as a self-regarding, autonomous closed system—in either case, art as opposed to social life.” For Greenblatt, the literature of sixteenth-century England “does not pretend to autonomy; the written word is self-consciously embedded in specific communities, life situations,

¹⁷ “Anachronism,” in *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History*, ed. Brian Cummings and James Simpson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 13. De Grazia goes on to quote the historian Lucien Febvre’s judgment that anachronism is “the worst of all sins, the sin that cannot be forgiven” in the contemporary academy.

¹⁸ *The Storm at Sea*, 2.

¹⁹ *Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1-2.

²⁰ *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983; orig. pub. 1976), 32.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 186.

structures of power.”²² Rather than hermetically-sealed artistic monads, texts of the period needed to be understood as resulting from a series of horizontal cultural “negotiations,” the imaginative precipitates of “a subtle, elusive set of exchanges, a network of trades and trade-offs, a jostling of competing representations.”²³

Literature was therefore no longer to be understood as what Louis Montrose tendentiously described as “an autonomous aesthetic, moral, or intellectual order that transcends the shifting and conflicting pressures of material needs and interests,” but in and through “the historical, social, and material embedding” of all forms of reading and writing. Shifting attention from “the aesthetic analysis of verbal *artifacts* to the ideological analysis of discursive *practices*,” critical focus was now to be “concerned with writing, reading, and teaching as modes of *action*,” rather than contemplation.²⁴ Commonly placed alongside these more generalized injunctions were ritualistic depreciations of Romanticism as the antithesis of how early modern literature needed to be conceived. Especially in studies of the theater, David Scott Kastan’s shorthand for a naively “romantic conception of writing as individual and originary” was regularly juxtaposed to the correct notion of dramatic authorship as “decentered and dispersed in the communities and collaborations of early modern play and book production.”²⁵ The twin stresses on literature’s social embeddedness and its capacity to instigate action also led to a stronger insistence on the direct social efficacy of textual productions. David Norbrook began his landmark study of *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* by observing that, in spite of a previous generation’s preference for writers of a personal or introspective style, “[s]ome of the greatest English Renaissance poets were politicians, and all of them tried to influence public affairs through their writings.”²⁶ The newfound pervasiveness of what had previously been a minority position among formalist scholarship was further underscored, in the same year, by the laconic spirit in which Annabel Patterson introduced her account of the early modern “writers who aspired (as who did not?) to have some influence, either on the shape of the national culture or more directly on the course of events.”²⁷ The critical perspective implied by these remarks has become only more entrenched in the thirty-plus years since they were initially articulated. Reviewing a number of perfectly unexceptionable recent studies, one is wholly unfazed to encounter statements assuring us that “[a]lthough it is tempting to draw a sharp line between propaganda and literature ... writers of the early modern period did not recognize this distinction,” or that the “conflation of

²² *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 4, 7.

²³ *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 7. An emphatically historicist work of scholarship like the *Cambridge History of Early Modern English Literature*, ed. David Loewenstein and Janel Mueller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), will thus define literature to mean “the domain of all knowledge that has been preserved and transmitted in written form” (6).

²⁴ *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), 7, 6, 2; emphasis in the original.

²⁵ *Shakespeare and the Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 48, 78. As my discussion in the following chapters will make clear, I believe that Romanticism has been given a bad name in early modern studies of the past few decades. In quoting liberally from scholars like James Chandler, Robert Kaufman, Marjorie Levinson, and Steven Goldsmith throughout the dissertation, I seek to make the case for the relevance of Romantic criticism of an “historical formalist” orientation to analysis of Renaissance literature, as well.

²⁶ *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002; orig. pub. 1984), 1.

²⁷ *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 7.

the aesthetically distinctive and the socially disinterested is merely post-Kantian.”²⁸ It is therefore not entirely an exaggeration to say that the state of art in early modern literary criticism, for the past four decades, can be summed up in Greenblatt’s pithy formulation: “What we call ideology, then, Renaissance England called poetry.”²⁹

The New Historicism in early modern literary studies thus presents us with an especially pronounced example of the near-universal rejection, in contemporary academic culture, of what Kaufman describes as “aesthetic ideology”: the putative “*ideological deformation* of the material, the real, the sociopolitical; ultimately, of the historical” for the sake of an “essentialist or transcendental ideology of literary-cultural value.”³⁰ In positively identifying the operations of Renaissance literature with those of “propaganda” or “ideology,” however, New Historicism has perpetuated a reductive narrative about the relationship between artistic experience and the Real, one that the politically-committed Marxist theorists who had inspired the movement in the first place had treated with considerably more subtlety. Williams, for instance, had concluded his discussion of “Literature” by cautiously gesturing to “the whole difficult complex of the relations between *literature* (poetry, *fiction*, *imaginative* writing) and *real* or actual experience.”³¹ In doing so, he was following Louis Althusser, who insisted that “[t]he problem of the relations between art and ideology is a very complicated and difficult one,” and went on to propose a highly mediated and generatively contradictory link between the two.³² I will consider the interpretive distortions to which I believe the historicist tendencies described above give rise at greater length in the following chapters. For now, however, we might question the presumption that “the aesthetic” (and its conceptual correlatives) is indeed an ideologically mystifying or historically anachronistic framework for thinking through Renaissance poetry.

On the first count, as we have seen, the concept of aesthetic autonomy is often denounced in early modern studies for its ostensible “transcendence” of the “material” realities of social existence. The literary historians Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker thus hold that criticism’s recourse to aesthetic considerations sets “genius and partisanship as at odds,” and situates “great art [in] the sphere of the sublime,” in “a realm beyond and above the political.”³³ These are the characteristics that lead many to associate the aesthetic not only with “a certain *fin-de-siècle* mauveness,” as Grady says, but with quietism and withdrawal, as it seems to imply “a radical separation from reality that denies rather than challenges existing reality.”³⁴ It is perhaps only a slight exaggeration to observe that this understanding of artistic autonomy derives almost entirely from Kant’s insistence on the “disinterestedness” of aesthetic experience in his third *Critique* (1790). As theorized most famously in the “Analytic of the Beautiful,” the Kantian

²⁸ John D. Staines, *The Tragic Histories of Mary Queen of Scots, 1560–1690: Rhetoric, Passions, and Political Literature* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 4; Genevieve Guenther, *Magical Imaginations: Instrumental Aesthetics in the English Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 9.

²⁹ *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 46.

³⁰ “Red Kant, or The Persistence of the Third *Critique* in Adorno and Jameson,” *Critical Inquiry* 26.4 (2000), 682; emphasis in the original.

³¹ *Keywords*, 187.

³² “A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre” (1966), in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 221.

³³ “Politics of Discourse: Introduction,” in *Politics of Discourse: The Literature and History of Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 2.

³⁴ *Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics*, 3.

aesthetic pertains entirely to subjective, rather than objective, perception: in determining whether an object is beautiful or not, “nothing at all in the object is designated,” Kant says, but only the way that “the subject feels itself [to be] affected by the representation.”³⁵ As a result, judgments of taste are entirely *disinterested*, “aris[ing] solely from the contemplation of their objects without regard to any purposes that can be fulfilled or interests that can be served by their existence” (xxviii). For Kant, the judging subject therefore has no care whatsoever “whether there is anything that is or that could be at stake, for us or for someone else, in the existence of the thing”: “One only wants to know whether the mere representation of the object is accompanied with satisfaction in me,” he continues, irrespective of how one may or may not “depend on the existence of the object” (90-1). Because apprehensions of beauty are thus based wholly on the pleasurable harmony or “free play” they stimulate among our cognitive faculties (102), any motivation of worldly desire—whether pertaining to bodily pleasures or moral reason—would vitiate the subjective autonomy of the experience and thus render it non-aesthetic.³⁶ Hence Kant’s famous formulation of the *purposiveness-without-purpose* attending judgments of beauty, the generation of a “merely formal purposiveness in the play of the cognitive powers” that is “in no way practical,” but nevertheless produces a subjective and contemplative pleasure (107).

It is, of course, not hard to understand why Kant’s dicta would prove anathema to a critical practice that self-consciously attends to the historical, material, and political effects of cultural artifacts—to the “deep functional utility” of early modern literature, as Greenblatt puts it.³⁷ According to Kant, any subjective experience marked by the presence of social content or that seeks to exert an ethico-political effect on an audience is not an aesthetic one; against the literary model of social negotiation, imaginative circulation, and subject formation, the Kantian model seems to demand an absolutely closed system of response, taking place entirely within the isolated individual consciousness. The indifference to extra-subjective circumstance and consequence that Kant mandates for authentic judgments of taste would become even more pronounced in the work of his followers, in a way that rendered the whole tradition repugnant to literary historicism. For Friedrich Schiller, probably Kant’s most influential immediate successor, the ratio of aesthetics and politics shifts even further toward the necessity of the artist’s social autonomy. In his *Aesthetic Letters* (1794), Schiller tells us that in contemplating a work of fine art, the subject’s capacities of feeling and reason, body and mind, individuality and universality, are all “tuned up” in what he calls the “happy medium” of the “play-drive.”³⁸ This is the only state of being capable of restoring a paradisaal wholeness to the fragmented modern psyche, since, for Schiller, man “is only fully a human being when he plays” (107). The aesthetic alone is what enables man “to make of himself what he will,” to experience the condition of psychic and

³⁵ *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 89. Cited parenthetically hereafter by page number, and abbreviated (where necessary) as *CPJ*.

³⁶ As Kant remarks, a judgment of beauty is a “free satisfaction; for no interest, neither that of the senses nor that of reason, extorts approval” (95). The rigorously *mental* aspect of the Kantian aesthetic, based on the assumption of human beings’ identical cognitive features and severed from any sensory satisfactions, is what distinguishes his account from the empirically-based theories of Alexander Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* (1750) or Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry in the Origins of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), for instance.

³⁷ “What Is the History of Literature?”, *Critical Inquiry* 23.3 (1997), 462.

³⁸ *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 21, 105, 97. Cited parenthetically hereafter.

spiritual potentiality that is lost “in practice with every determinate condition into which he ... enter[s]” (147). In consequence, if we were to feel ourselves “disposed to prefer some one particular mode of feeling or action” after contemplation of an artwork, we would know we had failed to have a “purely aesthetic experience” (153). “The notion of a fine art which teaches (didactic) or improves (moral)” is, Schiller declares, entirely “self-contradictory”—“for nothing is more at variance with the concept of beauty than the notion of giving the psyche any definite bias” (157). This prejudice against the interventionist mode in artistic or intellectual experience would soon migrate into the English critical tradition in the nineteenth century. It is detectable, for instance, in Shelley’s proclamation in “A Defence of Poetry” (1821) that the “bold neglect of a direct moral purpose is the most decisive proof of the supremacy of Milton’s genius,” or in Matthew Arnold’s ridiculing “ideas transported out of their own sphere, and meddling rashly with practice.” For Arnold, “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” (1864) is to pursue “the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind.”³⁹ From here, it is but a short step to the New Critical formalism of the mid-twentieth century, with its strictures against intentional and affective fallacies, and concentrated focus on formal structure.

Historicism of recent decades has, therefore, by no means been wrong to identify Kantian aesthetics as largely antithetical to the evident socio-political orientation of much early modern literature. But it is also worth pointing out that its practitioners have, in a sense, taken the claims of the third *Critique* rather too literally in taking up such a persistently oppositional stance to Kant-inspired theory. For one thing, it is not entirely clear that *any* work of human art could actually satisfy the rigorous strictures that Kant places on judgments of taste. This inadequacy explains, at least in part, his selection of flowers as the paradigmatic example of a “free beauty,” the purest and most self-sufficient type of aesthetic pleasure (114), as well as the extended set of additional definitions and distinctions he is forced to offer when he turns his attention to the fine arts later in the text.⁴⁰ More importantly, though, the continuous repudiations of aesthetic autonomy in Renaissance New Historicism misrepresent the broader relationship between the aesthetic and the socio-political that Kant develops. The whole purpose of the third *Critique* in Kant’s larger philosophical system is to bridge the rift between the inflexible demands of moral law and the enlargement of human freedom. His account of aesthetic judgment—that which “pleases universally without a concept” (104), and so holds out the possibility of organically produced collective assent—must therefore insist on the integrity of the autonomous subject while still finding, in the exercise of taste, a tendency of ethical improvement in the human race. Because Kant sees “human moral development as the ultimate end of nature,” Paul Guyer explains, exercises of aesthetic judgment assume a crucial importance in proving the *a priori* principle that “nature is hospitable to human morality” (xxvii). As Kant says after the conclusion of the “Analytic of the Sublime,” “The beautiful prepares us to love something ... without interest; the sublime, to esteem it, even contrary to our ... interest” (151). More specifically, the

³⁹ Shelley, *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2002), 527; Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 35-6. Arnold all but paraphrases Kant in the essay, insisting on the importance of critical “disinterestedness,” which is obtained only by thought’s “following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches” (37).

⁴⁰ See *CPJ*, 182-207.

faculty of taste becomes the ground of a “common human understanding” or “*sensus communis*,” the “faculty for judging” that allows a subject simultaneously to “think for oneself” and to “think in the position of everyone else” (173–4).⁴¹ Aesthetic experience thus becomes the open-ended but generative middle ground between a purely self-contained, autonomous judgment of taste and the progress of humankind toward a realm of utopian freedom.⁴²

A similar logic also governs Schiller’s work. Even as he claims that instructive art is a contradiction in terms, he begins his treatise by proclaiming that “[t]he most perfect of all the works to be achieved by the art of man [is] the construction of true political freedom.” “[I]f man is ever to solve that problem of politics in practice,” Schiller continues, “he will have to approach it through the problem of the aesthetic, because it is only through Beauty that man makes his way to freedom” (7, 9). Schiller thus attenuates the link between the moral and the aesthetic fully as much as Kant does, but, like his predecessor, he insists on the intimate connection between the two, as well as the world-historical potentialities of using art to achieve political progress. In Shelley’s “Defence,” as well, imaginative literature’s disavowal of the cruder mechanisms of didacticism allows for a more radical renovation of subjectivity than any discrete political program would: “strip[ping] the veil of familiarity from the world,” poetry “can render men more amiable, more generous, and wise, and lift them out of the dull vapours of the little world of self” in much the same way as does Kant’s “common human understanding.”⁴³ As Arnold recognizes, this kind of commitment to the pre-political, “disinterested” free play of mind amounts to “a very subtle and indirect action,” and restricts itself to “a slow and obscure work.”⁴⁴ But it is precisely the subtlety and indirection of such work that theorists in the Kantian mode privilege as the means to a redeemed critical judgment that would be capable of *subsequently* engaging in direct political action.

As I suggested above, then, the New Historicist and cultural materialist modes of inquiry that have held sway in early modern literary studies for the past generation have been overly tendentious in the anti-aestheticizing attitudes they have assumed, ignoring the mediated but nonetheless quite pressing relationship that the Kantian tradition poses between aesthetic judgment and social reality. Further, as I will demonstrate in the what follows, I believe that the attenuated relationship between these realms, as theorized in post-Enlightenment philosophical aesthetics, generally provides a more responsive account of the links between art and politics in the English Renaissance than our reigning historicist paradigms have tended to provide. We saw in the case of *As You Like It* that artistic experience in the period assumes a constitutively ambiguous stance toward public affairs, alternately identifying its provisional autonomy as the means of generating social progress *and* as that which disables its interventionist capacities, forcing the artwork into an exclusively subjective realm of the apolitical. So far from being equivalent to a straightforward expression of “ideology” or “propaganda,” early modern fictions instead occupy something close to the liminal territory that Kantian theory and post-Romantic

⁴¹ The *sensus communis* thus suggests, as Terry Eagleton says, that human life, “for all its apparent arbitrariness and obscurity, might indeed work in some sense very like a rational law.” See *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Malden: Blackwell, 1990), 17.

⁴² Kant will thus remark that, in spite of the severe constraints he placed on the aesthetic earlier in the work, that beautiful art “is purposive in itself and, though without an end, nevertheless promotes the cultivation of the mental powers for sociable communication” (185).

⁴³ *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 533, 525.

⁴⁴ *Culture and Anarchy*, 41.

artworks do, as well. Without putting too fine a point on it, I would suggest that Renaissance literature's relation to empirical reality fluctuates between the two of the most famous and mutually contradictory articulations of poetry's relation to empirical reality: Shelley's claim that "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World" and Auden's insistence that "poetry makes nothing happen."⁴⁵

Additionally, the assumption in so much contemporary scholarship that bringing post-Kantian philosophical aesthetics to bear on early modern literature necessarily constitutes an anachronistic imposition seems mistaken to me. The objection is often based on the idea that "interpretation [must] take place within the meanings capable of being performed within the confines of [early modern] discourse," and insofar as early modernity occurs "in advance of [aesthetics'] appearance as an articulated philosophical category," it would be invalid to press the latter's conceptual resources into service when investigating the former. This line of thinking leads Greenblatt, for example, to observe that "Shakespeare did not need the whole philosophical apparatus that surrounded aesthetics in the eighteenth century to imagine the claim that the literary artist was at liberty to live after his own law," but that since concepts pertaining to aesthetic autonomy "depend for their full meaning on the Kantian formulation of art's 'purposefulness without purpose,'" they are of limited value for Renaissance culture.⁴⁶ From this perspective, social phenomena are presumed to be operative only in the presence of an explicit and more or less fully developed conceptual articulation of those same phenomena.⁴⁷ But there is good reason to be suspicious of the notion that artistic practice (in this case) must necessarily move in lockstep with the philosophical theory that would illuminate it. In any event, as a number of critics have observed, even though the Elizabethan period did not have access to the rhetoric of aesthetics, it did have a number of correlative terms to describe the privileged and semi-autonomous status of imaginative literature—*eloquence*, for instance, which Sean Keilen conceives as the Renaissance equivalent of our "literariness," or *poesy*, which Stephen Cohen equates with "creative writing," set apart from other discourses by its "figurative language and fictionalized content."⁴⁸

A potentially more serious objection to discussing literary autonomy in the sixteenth century, however, would be the claim that the historical conditions for the concept's arrival were not yet in place. A conventional understanding of philosophical aesthetics is that it develops in

⁴⁵ Shelley's *Poetry and Prose*, 535; Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," in *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage, 2007), p. 89.

⁴⁶ *Shakespeare's Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 113-4, 138.

⁴⁷ Greenblatt's analysis is a soft version of the "relativist and constructivist model of historical culture" scrutinized by Steven Justice. It claims that "[e]very period ... develops a conceptual repertory adequate to its needs and structures, which constitutes the closed system of that period's 'reality' ... Language does not approximate, but constitutes, what it describes, and so concepts have no application until they are formulated... Interpretation conscious of the limits of understanding should restrict its analysis to the terms by which a culture explains itself." As Justice points out, according to such a methodology "the conditions of thought [in a period] become identical with its content," and "the period itself does the thinking that its literature instantiates." See "Who Stole Robertson?", *PMLA* 124.2 (2009), 611.

⁴⁸ Keilen, *Vulgar Eloquence: On the Renaissance Invention of English Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 22-6; Cohen, "Between Form and Culture: New Historicism and the Promise of a Historical Formalism," in *Renaissance Literature and Its Formal Engagements*, ed. Mark David Rasmussen (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 31. See also Catherine Nicholson, *Uncommon Tongues: Eloquence and Eccentricity in the English Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

tandem with the halting rise of possessive individualism, liberal democracy, and political economy in the mid-eighteenth century. As Eagleton describes it, aesthetic theory is at first a mediation between the powers of the absolutist state and an emergent bourgeoisie that requires a new degree of social and economic liberty. But “once the bourgeoisie has dismantled the centralizing political apparatus of absolutism, either in fantasy or reality,” the question arises “as to where it is to locate a sense of unity powerful enough to reproduce itself by,” since

at the political level there would seem nothing but abstract rights to link one subject to the other. This is one reason why the ‘aesthetic’ realm of sentiments, affections, and spontaneous bodily habits comes to assume the significance it does. Custom, piety, intuition and opinion must now cohere an otherwise abstract, atomized social order ...⁴⁹

With the evolution of the liberal bourgeois subject, the task for Enlightenment aesthetics becomes that of harmonizing the requirements of a universalizing morality and the imperatives of individual freedom—a process whose fulfillment is symbolized by the work of art, with its organic fusion of whole and part. Prior to the ideological dismantling of absolutism and the emergence of an autonomous market for economic and cultural capital, the argument runs, philosophical aesthetics simply cannot be brought to bear. But this injunction only makes partial sense, since the late-sixteenth century, with its robust book trade and theatrical entertainment industry, witnesses the rise of markets for both real and symbolic goods.⁵⁰ Further, as historians like Patrick Collinson and Steve Hindle have argued, there are grounds for regarding the political settlement of early modern England as a monarchical republic, rather than an absolute monarchy, and for seeing not only the gentry but the “middling sort” as citizens, rather than mere subjects.⁵¹ It is at least plausible to argue, then, that the economic and political conditions commonly associated with notions of aesthetic autonomy were emergent, if not fully present, by the end of the Elizabethan era.

Indeed, a number of critics have recently begun to make the case for the presence of something very much like the provisionally autonomous status of aesthetic experience in the early modern period.⁵² Gordon Teskey argues that “the peculiar sense of the literary as constituting an

⁴⁹ *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 14–5, 23.

⁵⁰ On the relationship between early modern drama and the market, see especially Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage 1574–1642*, 4th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009); Kastan, *Shakespeare and the Book*; Jeffrey Knapp, *Shakespeare Only* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing*.

⁵¹ See Collinson, “The Monarchical Republic of Queen Elizabeth I,” in *Elizabethan Essays*, 31–58 (London: Hambledon Press, 1994); Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, 1550–1640* (New York: Palgrave, 2000).

⁵² It is interesting to note that scholars of the medieval period have generally been less worried about designating its textual productions as “literary” or “aesthetic” than their early modern peers. Christopher Cannon, for one, has recently argued that it was “Middle English literature [that] actually pulled free from the ‘jurisdiction’ of other areas of culture, actively working to define itself as an autonomous practice, [and] thereby giving us the notion of ‘literature’ that we still use today.” It is to the medieval period that we owe the idea, Cannon says, “that ‘art’ is a separate and independent cultural sphere.” See *Middle English Literature: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 6. James Simpson, meanwhile, has claimed that “the beginnings of British literary history itself” are to be found in the cataloguing labors of John Leland and John Bale in the middle decades of the sixteenth century, when they produce, for the first time, “an identifiable national tradition of letters.” See *The Oxford English Literary*

autonomous world, one that might be related to ours ... but that is wholly distinct nevertheless, was something new in the long Tudor century.” “Kant’s famous definition of the aesthetic as purposiveness without purpose,” he goes on to say, “is a modern idea that has its origin here, in London, in the second half of the sixteenth century.”⁵³ Others have, of course, explained the emergence of literary autonomy in the period as a function of developments in other cultural spheres, most prominently politics and religion.⁵⁴ Grady, meanwhile, situates his study in the tradition of Frankfurt School critical theory, arguing that “the separation of art from the real is in fact the enabling basis for a myriad of connections to it,” in the Renaissance and modernity alike.⁵⁵ The two most recent studies that have made the case for the emergence of an early modern aesthetics in the most theoretically sophisticated and rigorous manner, however, are those by Victoria Kahn and Pye, both of whom link the stress on artistic autonomy to the novel historical situation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the political sphere ceases to ground itself on religious foundations, and instead has to conceive of itself in terms of an analogous autonomy. As Kahn explains, whereas medieval political theology had presumed “the theological legitimation of the state,” the early modern state is instead predicated on “a secular notion of human agency,” the Hobbesian and Viconian “notion of man-made authority” that

History, Volume 2. 1350-1547: Reform and Cultural Revolution (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 8, 11. Justice, meanwhile, has found in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* the “invention” of what he calls the “subjectivity-effect,” through which character is lent a “richly individuated subjectivity,” and we witness “the presence of a feeling and thinking self with heft and texture.” While Justice’s vocabulary bears a striking resemblance to standard narratives of the eighteenth-century emergence of novelistic character, he insists that the “subjective presence of character is there in the *Troilus*.” See “Chaucer’s History-Effect,” in *Answerable Style: The Idea of the Literary in Medieval England*, ed. Frank Grady and Andrew Galloway (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013), 169, 173, 171, 178, 172. Maura Nolan, finally, has urged medievalists to make an “aesthetic turn” to Adorno, using the temporal discontinuities of critical theory to understand the place of the medieval in a longer literary history. See “Making the Aesthetic Turn: Adorno, the Medieval, and the Future of the Past,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 34.3 (2004): 549-75.

⁵³ “Literature,” in *Cultural Reformations*, 388. Teskey is here updating a similar point once made by Alpers, who identified *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579) as the first text to evince no need to account for poetic utterance by establishing its social and dramatic motivation; Spenser’s eclogues, he argues, establish for the first time in English literature “a domain of lyric,” a relatively autonomous “aesthetic ‘space’” where the poet stakes out a qualified but very real authorial independence from external reality. See “Pastoral and the Domain of Lyric in Spenser’s *Shepheardes Calender*,” *Representations* 12 (1985), 94.

⁵⁴ Patterson, for example, once suggested that “it is to censorship that we in part owe our very concept of ‘literature,’ as a kind of discourse with rules of its own,” as authors and readers alike were forced to devise “a system of communication in which ambiguity becomes a creative and necessary instrument.” See *Censorship and Interpretation*, 4, 11. More recently, John Parker has suggested that “something like aesthetic autonomy” emerges from out of a “religious framework,” where representations of extravagant transgression can be claimed to produce “a renewal of innocence.” See “Faustus, Confession, and the Sins of Omission,” *ELH* 80 (2013), 31. See also the illuminating essays by Heather James and Zachary Lesser and Peter Stallybrass on the rise of English-language printed commonplace books, which signal the rapid increase in prestige of vernacular writing from 1598-1600. See “The First English Printed Commonplace Books and the Rise of the Common Reader,” in *Formal Matters: Reading the Materials of English Renaissance Literature*, ed. Allison K. Deutermann and András Kiséry (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 15-33, and “The First Literary *Hamlet* and the Commonplacing of Professional Plays,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 59.4 (2008): 371-420, respectively.

⁵⁵ *Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics*, 28-9. The aesthetic realm is thus, for Shakespeare and his contemporaries, “a free ... and a privileged zone” in ways that have been marginalized by historicist emphases on literature’s discursive embeddedness (*ibid.*).

depends on *poiesis* in much the same way as literary making does.⁵⁶ Pye similarly contends that “[t]he aesthetic was in fact fully engaged during the era,” and that “it is precisely in relation to the question of the autonomy of the work that art engaged the political most profoundly.”⁵⁷ The result, for Pye, is “the development of something like an aesthetic consciousness” among the major figures of the Renaissance, a development “that cannot be easily reduced to ... a historicist narrative” of gradual change and topical reference.⁵⁸ In her reading of *Hamlet*, moreover, Kahn finds that artistic experience and political engagement in the period are neither equivalent nor antithetical to one another; rather, “aesthetic form ... allows for (but does not guarantee) political action,” and “the ‘aesthetic’ autonomy of art lies its potential for both ideological closure and critical power.”⁵⁹

As we will see in the following chapters, this final formulation is especially congenial to my aims in the rest of the dissertation, bordering closely as it does on a similar argument advanced by Kaufman in his reading of Adorno, and Marxist aesthetics more generally, as a species of “Left Kantian” theory.⁶⁰ Kaufman’s account stresses the ways that Adorno, like Kant before him, conceives aesthetic reflection as free “from preexistent concept, purpose, law, or object,” providing the “formal means for allowing new ... aspects of contemporary society to come into view.” Artistic experience thus becomes “a stimulus to the [very] possibility of critical thought and discovery, which is not so much a guarantor of any particular ethics, politics, and/or agency, as their necessary prerequisite.”⁶¹ Nevertheless, like Kahn, Kaufman also recognizes that “aesthetically derived critical thought” maintains a merely “protopolitical vocation,” a result of which novel forms of *praxis* “may be constructed,” but not necessarily.⁶² As this turn to Adorno suggests, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) will play a major role in the chapters to follow. Adorno famously insists that “Art is autonomous and it is not; without what is heterogeneous to it, its autonomy eludes it.” From this apparently simple observation—with its assumption of the “double character as both autonomous and *fait social*”—emerges the most dialectically generative account of the relationship between artistic experience and social reality, one that would be of great use to early modernists were they to engage it more robustly than they have up to now.⁶³

⁵⁶ *The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 3, 15.

⁵⁷ *The Storm at Sea*, 2. “With the loss of extrinsic or transcendental referent,” he goes on, “the early modern socius became the problem of ... its ability to constitute itself as an immanent, self-creative domain”; “the appearance of the aesthetic as a self-conscious formation,” therefore, “is indissociable from that problem of autogenesis of the social domain as such” (2-3).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁹ *The Future of Illusion*, 47.

⁶⁰ “Red Kant,” 709. As Kaufman explains, “Kant remains vital to Adorno... In a cultural-political signification Adorno shares with various Left allies and interlocutors, he often invokes Kant as the sign of bourgeois formalism, even where it is manifest that, logically speaking, Adorno’s position is virtually indistinguishable from Kant’s” (*ibid.*).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 711, 719.

⁶² “Negatively Capable Dialectics,” 384. Kaufman asserts that “If there is an Adornian legacy today, it would seem to entail the notion that literature, art, and philosophical aesthetics find their vocation in the critical thought they enable” (“Red Kant,” 724). See also Guenther’s argument that Renaissance English literature was concerned with “the instrumental ends such effects *might* have in social and political life,” and that an instrumental aesthetics was valuable to Spenser because “it *can* produce in the reader the habit of mind that enables ideologically minded action” (*Magical Imaginations*, 9, 52; emphasis added).

⁶³ *Aesthetic Theory*, 6, 5. See also Adorno’s “Draft Introduction”: “That art on the one hand confronts society autonomously, and, on the other hand, is itself social, defines the law of its experience. Whoever experiences only

As with philosophical aesthetics in general, of course, critics have perhaps been hesitant to leverage Adorno's insights about the mediated relationship between art and politics because of his text's orientation toward modern art, post-Enlightenment theory, and what he sourly refers to as "the administered world" of the later twentieth century.⁶⁴ Sianne Ngai, for instance, quotes Adorno when she remarks that "bourgeois art's reflexive preoccupation with its *own* 'powerlessness and superfluity in the empirical world' is precisely what makes it capable of theorizing social powerlessness in a manner unrivaled by other forms of cultural praxis."⁶⁵ Ngai specifically states the relevance of Adorno's work to "the bourgeois revolution," and her assertion that the artwork's politically restricted situation "ramif[ies] beyond the domain of the aesthetic proper" into that of "social powerlessness" as such clearly pertains to modernity.⁶⁶ But her account also chimes with the insightful narrative of Elizabethan literary achievement proffered long ago by G.K. Hunter. Hunter conventionally characterized the cultural outpouring of 1580s and 1590s England as one of extraordinary formal achievement and artistic self-consciousness, but he also suggested that it resulted from the obstructed social agency to which ambitious writers of the period found themselves reduced. Literary production in the era, Hunter states, was "largely a product of frustration," with well-schooled and politically ambitious authors blocked from court advancement and "reduced to communicating furiously to the margins of [their] books."⁶⁷ From this still bracing perspective, the literary flowering of Renaissance England, with all of its attendant proclamations of the salvific powers of poetry, is merely a sublimation of civic humanism's failure to achieve the social renovations it had once promised. If Adorno's analysis of the simultaneously enabling and disabling effects of aesthetic experience for political activity has purchase for the post-Enlightenment period, the analogously restricted positions in which Ngai's and Hunter's writers often found themselves would indicate the pertinence of that analysis to early, as well as late, modernity. Indeed, Adorno echoes (consciously or not) the most famous passage from Sidney's *Defence* on the first page of *Aesthetic Theory*. Sidney, of course, proclaims that it is "[o]nly the poet" who, "lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth or, quite anew ... not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts but freely ranging within the zodiac of his own wit." Adorno likewise declares that "art's autonomy remains irrevocable," since "[a]rtworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth

the material aspect of art and puffs this up into an aesthetics is philistine, yet whoever perceives art exclusively as art and ensconces this as its prerogative deprives himself of its content... [The artwork's] inner construction requires, in however mediated a fashion, what is itself not art" (348).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶⁵ *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 2; Adorno's quote is taken from *Aesthetic Theory*, 104.

⁶⁶ *Ugly Feelings*, 2.

⁶⁷ *John Lyly: The Humanist as Courtier* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 33-4. Hunter sees this authorial marginalization bound up with the transition of intellectuals from humanists to courtiers, when idealistic state servants are forced "to contain their sense of divine mission within the bounds of a poor pamphlet. The eventual result of this union of learning and the need for popularity, of moral zeal and profane forms, is the greatest literature our language has known; but it was a product that theory could hardly account for, so opposed were the worlds it sprang from ..." (34; see esp. 14-35 for the extended discussion). On "the distance between humanist promise and humanist reality," and "the limited use of a humanist education" by the end of Elizabeth's reign, see also Robert Matz, *Defending Literature in Early Modern England: Renaissance Literary Theory in Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 12.

another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this other world too were an autonomous entity.”⁶⁸

In the chapters that follow, I will delineate the critically-productive tensions of aesthetics-and-politics by dialectically reading the late installments of *The Faerie Queene* against the tradition of philosophical aesthetics, primarily that of Adorno. In doing so, I seek not only to produce more adequate and comprehensive readings of Spenser’s *Legends of Justice and Courtesy* than have recently been offered, but to indicate some of the ways that Renaissance poetry and post-Kantian theory might become more mutually illuminating for one another. Before proceeding, I would simply observe, albeit briefly, that the equivocal conception of art’s relationship to public affairs in Shakespeare and Spenser is, indeed, a structural feature undergirding the whole corpus of early modern English literature.⁶⁹ It is visible in the setup of Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), where More asserts that a “philosophical nature” should be devoted to “public affairs,” only to have Hythloday insist on the intractable opposition between “contemplative leisure” and “active endeavor” in a hopelessly corrupt political environment. The ambiguity of their exchange is also reproduced in the opening letter that More writes to his friend, Peter Giles, which describes how his worldly responsibilities have precluded all opportunity for “writing,” and so leaves us unsure which mode of engagement contributes more to the common good. Hythloday’s projection of the ideal commonwealth, meanwhile, in all its visionary experimentalism, is a function precisely of his remove from worldly affairs and exclusive

⁶⁸ *Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, 8-9; *Aesthetic Theory*, 1. The utopian critical function that Sidney ascribes to poetry, the “golden” world of which serves as a serial rebuke to the injustices of reality’s merely “brazen” one, is similarly confirmed by Adorno, for whom the artwork’s imaginative autonomy means that they “tend a priori toward affirmation.”

⁶⁹ While it is beyond the scope of this project to offer a fuller consideration of the larger cultural-historical causes that led to this situation, the paradoxical classical commonplace that poetry must both please and instruct, in Horace’s canonical formulation, clearly played an important role. Going back to Plato and Aristotle, “didactic” and “formalist” perspectives on artistic experience have, in fact, *always* been in tension with one another. Plato, in the *Republic*, famously denigrates the arts on (primarily) socio-political grounds: because the primary demand of any regime is “the implanting of virtue,” its inhabitants must not be exposed to “unprofitable stories” that rouse disruptive passions and “produce[] a bad government in the individual mind.” See *Classical Literary Criticism*, ed. D.A. Russell and Michael Winterbottom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 16, 18, 47. For Aristotle, however, Plato’s discussion of the arts is compromised by a category mistake, and in the *Poetics* he says that “the subject I wish us to discuss is *poetry itself*,” later affirming that “correctness in poetry is not the same thing as correctness in morals” (*ibid.*, 51, 84). The bulk of the treatise is accordingly devoted to formal considerations like dramatic probability and consistency; Aristotle’s concern with dramatic poetry was as a more or less autonomous experience. Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, meanwhile, which was *the* representative work of classical theory well into the sixteenth century, urged that poets must “say things which are both pleasing and serviceable for life” (*ibid.*, 106), a dictate that fit awkwardly with Aristotle’s formalist orientation. In the course of the century’s literary-critical flourishing, primarily in Italy, these emphases would be variously stressed by theorists like Castelvetro, Tasso, Ronsard, Puttenham, and Minturno. See *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: The Renaissance*, ed. Glyn P. Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and M.A.R. Habib, *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 229-72. It seems quite plausible, however, that the rediscovery of Aristotle’s *Poetics* c.1500 spurred a renewed focus on formalist qualities, and made clearer the fault lines between this kind of orientation and a more “rhetorical” one. As Michael McKeon has observed, “There is some justice ... in a view of the *Poetics* as a long-term sanctuary for the secular conception of the creative spirit, faithfully storing and preserving, in the sheer persistence of the text, the ancient discourse of the aesthetic until the secular world was ready to make use of its recovery.” See “Politics of Discourses and the Rise of the Aesthetic in Seventeenth-Century England” in *Politics of Discourse*, 50.

pursuit of the *via contemplativa*.⁷⁰ The same tension is detectable in Thomas Wyatt's verse satire, "Myne owne Jhon Poins" (c.1536), which posits an equivocal relationship between the speaker who abandons court for the solitude of contemplative isolation, "Among the Muses, where I reade and ryme" (101), and the idealized figure of Cato, who in actively defying Caesar "the common wealth appl[ies]" (42). Wyatt concludes the poem by inviting his addressee to "judge, how I do spende my time" (103), a provocation to which no clear-cut answer is applicable.⁷¹

Sidney's *Defence*, of course, figures poetry as "the first light-giver to ignorance" (4) and the discourse capable of leading readers to "the ending end of all earthly learning," "virtuous action," above all others (13). But it also characterizes itself as the product of its author's "idlest times" and "unelected vocation" (4), and is finally referred to as an "ink-wasting toy" (53).⁷² The text also closes with the irony of Sidney repeatedly "conjur[ing]" his audience "to believe" all that he has said is true (53), in direct contradiction of his earlier assurance that "the poet never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes" (34).⁷³ The conclusion thus speaks to the ambiguous status of literary autonomy, underwriting the poet's efficacy as the imaginatively liberated progenitor of "another nature," but also that which needs to be disavowed as a counter-factual fiction. Only by seeking to act directly on extra-textual reality, that is, can the author perform the interventionist labors that would make his vocation seem less idle, less wasteful. Another contemporary example is found in Samuel Daniel's *Musophilus, or Defence of all Learning* (1602-3). When the title character's skeptical interlocutor, Philocosmus, argues that subjects should spend their time pursuing active virtue rather than "an vngainefull Arte" (7), Musophilus responds with the familiar defense of the literary: eloquence, he tells us, can "draw, diuert, dispose and fashion men / Better then force or rigour can direct" (947-8). Earlier, however, Musophilus had said that even if *nobody* were ever to read his words, there would still be a subjective purposiveness fulfilled by his authorial exertions: "This is the thing that I was born to do," he insists, "This is my scene, this part must I fulfill" (560-8). The profitable aesthetic indeterminacy of these lines then returns at the conclusion, with a socio-political *telos* gestured to but ultimately deferred: "who can tell for what great worke in hand / The greatnesse of our stile is now ordain'd?" (963-4), Musophilus wonders.⁷⁴

Meanwhile, in the memorable conclusion to Thomas Nashe's last anti-Marprelate pamphlet, *An Almond for a Parrot* (1590), Nashe's speaker articulates the desire for a kind of privileged aesthetic space in which he and his Puritan antagonist could give unmitigated vent to their colorful rhetoric: "O God, that we two might bee permitted but one quarter, to try it out by the teeth for the best benefice in England, then would I distill my wit into incke, and my soule into arguments, but I would driue [him] from his dunghill, and make him faune like a dog for fauour at the magistrates feete."⁷⁵ Nashe projects a vision of subversive autonomy here, where

⁷⁰ *Utopia*, trans. Clarence H. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 16, 4.

⁷¹ Quoted in *Tottel's Miscellany: Songs and Sonnets of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, Sir Thomas Wyatt and Others*, ed. Amanda Holton and Tom MacFaul (London: Penguin, 2011).

⁷² *Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, 4, 13, 53.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 53, 34.

⁷⁴ Quoted in *The Complete Works in Verse and Prose of Samuel Daniel*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart, 5 vols. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963).

⁷⁵ Quoted in *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. Ronald B. McKerrow (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), III.369.

“authority” would be unable to “moderate the fiery feruence” of his virtuosic gutter “stile.”⁷⁶ Crucially, though, Nashe’s desire here is not simply to “speak the same language” as Marprelate, as though his objective were to aestheticize politics out of this imagined confrontation; instead, Nashe exhibits a vague faith that the loosening of his unfettered abuse will ultimately lead his interlocutor to “the magistrates feete.” Artistic license becomes the enabling condition for political agency, even as mere “stile” threatens to become an end in itself, with Martinists and anti-Martinists condemned to rail at one another from the margins of acceptable society. Finally, in a far different vein, and at the end of the period I have been surveying, is Milton in his nineteenth sonnet, “When I consider how my light is spent” (c.1652). Reflecting on a career of artistic and political labor that seems to have been irremediably damaged, he declares that those “who only stand and waite” in contemplative stillness serve the godly cause just as well as those who actively “post o’re Land and Ocean without rest” (13-4).⁷⁷ It is an assertion of mingled hope and skepticism—one that, rendered in aesthetic form, reflects back a vital aspect of artistic experience in the English Renaissance.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* As Charles Nicholl remarks of this passage, “one observes a kind of covert allegiance between the antagonists... ‘We two’ fight and find life in the fight. The real enemy is ‘authority,’ moderating its fervence and wit.” See *A Cup of News: The Life of Thomas Nashe* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 77.

⁷⁷ Quoted in *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

Chapter 1

Poetry and Politics in *The Faerie Queene* and Spenser's Critics

Consciousness of the antagonism between interior and exterior is requisite to the experience of art... All works are formed in themselves according to their own logic and consistency as much as they are elements in the context of spirit and society.

—Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*⁷⁸

The generall end therefore of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline: Which ... I conceiued shoulde be most plausible and pleasing, being coloured with an historicall fiction ... To some I know this Methode will seeme displeasaunt, which had rather haue good discipline deliuered plainly in way of precepts, or sermoned at large, as they vse, then thus clowdily enwrapped in Allegoricall deuises. But such, me seeme, shoulde be satisfide with the vse of these dayes ...

—Spenser, "Letter to Raleigh"⁷⁹

I. Spenser's Plantation Poetry: History and Politics in *The Faerie Queene* V and VI

Spenser begins his Legend of Justice with a nostalgic reflection on "the antique world," the Ovidian "golden age" in which "Iustice sate high ador'd" and "Peace vniuersall rayn'd" (proem.1-2, 9). This utopian landscape is one of absolute fecundity, where "all the world with goodnesse did abound" and "all things freely grew out of the ground." As if carried away by the force of the trope, however, Spenser adds that "then likewise the wicked seede of vice / Began to spring which shortly grew full great, / And with their boughs the gentle plants did beat" (i.1). This transition between Book V's proem and the Legend proper is initially puzzling, since it is not clear how or why vice would have been generated in a world where "All loued vertue" (proem.9). But we are hurried past this confusion when we are told that the spread of primal wickedness was checked by "some of the vertuous race," who "cropt the branches of the sient base, / And with strong hand their fruitfull rancknes did deface" (i.1). In the metaphorical epitome of justice with which Book V begins, therefore, criminal depravity is figured as a malign arboreal growth, and civilization is safeguarded through the vigorous warlike shearing. It is precisely this kind of regenerative violence, cropping away the luxuriant diffusion of social vice, that will be the hallmark of Artegall, Spenser's "Champion of true Iustice," throughout the ensuing narrative (i.3).

But the emblematic logic of Book V is later subverted with unmistakable precision at the start of the Legend of Courtesy. Spenser now describes virtue, rather than vice, as a cosmic garden, a "sacred nursery," "Planted in earth ... / From heauenly seedes of bounty soueraine." Growing within this "bowre" is the "bloosme" of courtesy, whose humble placement "on a lowly

⁷⁸ *Aesthetic Theory*, 349.

⁷⁹ *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A.C. Hamilton, et al., rev. 2nd ed. (Harlow: Longman, 2007), 714-6. All quotations of the poem are taken from this edition and quoted parenthetically by book, canto, and stanza number hereafter; citations of paratextual material are preceded by the abbreviation *FQ*, and cited by page number.

stalke” belies its importance as a uniquely “fayre[] flowre” that “spreds it selfe through all ciuilitie” (3-4). Whereas social preservation in the Legend of Justice depends on pruning and uprooting the “fruitfull rancknes” of vice, luxuriant vegetable growth is here equated with the civilizing process itself. Courtesy, “the ground, / And roote of ciuill conuersation” (i.1), thus depends for its dissemination not on militarized force, but on the “carefull labour” of heavenly cultivators, who “nurs[e]” the virtue “to ripenesse” until it “branche[s] forth in braue nobilitie” (proem.3-4). No longer threatening the *polis*, organic diffusion now figures the preservation and distribution of collective life, and Calidore, the book’s protagonist, is tasked not with cutting down, but with nursing up.

It is not immediately apparent what Spenser wishes his readers to make of this deliberate incongruity in the symbolic economy of *The Faerie Queene*. In fact, even a small amount of reflection indicates that this metaphorical opposition between Books V and VI has potentially debilitating implications for both the poem’s allegorical logic and its extra-literary *telos* of “fashion[ing] a gentleman.” For by opposing these archetypes of justice and courtesy, Spenser suggests less the divergent personal styles of Artegall and Calidore and more the fundamental incompatibility between the virtues of which the knights are mere “patrones.”⁸⁰ Those virtues’ coordination within the mind of Spenser’s fit reader is a foundational assumption of the author’s didactic project: the poem’s disparate legends are said to coalesce as parts of the larger “historye of king Arthure,” who becomes our model of interpretive synthesis as the incarnation of “magnificence,” “which vertue ... is the perfection of all the rest, and containeth in it them all.”⁸¹ The mutual antagonism between justice and courtesy would therefore threaten “the eventual disruption of the structure of the poem itself,” and leave its audience stranded in irreconcilable contradiction.⁸²

How, then, might this seeming clash of virtues be resolved into conceptual coherence? For the past generation of Spenser critics, the answer has been found in the context of Spenser’s career as a colonial administrator, or “planter,” in Elizabethan Ireland. Scholars have thus come to see *A View of the State of Ireland*, the poet’s notorious *apologia* for the military suppression and cultural reorganization of the island, as the key intertext for historically-informed readings of Books V and VI. Written simultaneously with one another, the three works now are thought to constitute a unified Spenserian discourse on the Irish controversy, with the treatise forcing into view the discomfiting historical Real toward which his poetic fictions only gesture.⁸³ From this

⁸⁰ “Letter to Raleigh,” *FQ*, 716.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 715-6.

⁸² *FQ*, p. 714; Elizabeth Fowler, “The Failure of Moral Philosophy in the Work of Edmund Spenser,” *Representations* 51 (1995), 49. Fowler focuses on the tension that she finds between ethics and political philosophy in *The Faerie Queene*, which she believes undermines the coherence of the poem’s moral philosophy. See also the analogous argument put forth in Gordon Teskey’s magisterial essay on the clash between metaphysical and genealogical discourse that he discerns in *The Mutability Cantos* in his *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 168-88.

⁸³ *A View* was composed between c. 1590 and 1596, when the most complete manuscript version of the text was finished, thus making it almost exactly contemporaneous with the 1596 second edition of *The Faerie Queene*. It was not entered in the Stationer’s Register until 1598, however, when it was denied publication for reasons that remain unclear. It finally reached print only in 1633, some three-and-a-half decades after Spenser’s death. To these texts might be added Spenser’s “A Brief Note of Ireland,” a short prose treatise that echoes *A View* in advocating a policy of enforced famine for the island, and the *Mutability Cantos*, whose digression on Faunus and Diana sets forward an

perspective, the seemingly incongruous associations of vegetable growth in the Legends of Justice and Courtesy are to be identified with the two-stage process of reform urged in *A View*, where “the military subjugation of [Ireland’s] rebellious inhabitants” prepares the way for “the reconstruction of civil society within the island.”⁸⁴ Thus, in one of the dialogue’s many invocations of metaphorical planting, the character Irenius proclaims that Ireland’s reformation must begin “by the sword”: “for all these evils,” he continues, “must first be cut away by a strong hand, before any good can bee planted, like as the corrupt braunches and unwholesome boughs are first to bee pruned ... before the tree can bring forth any good fruite.”⁸⁵ Rather than an atemporal opposition between the virtues, Spenser can instead be seen urging that the “strong hand” of justice first crop the diseased tree of Irish vice, at which point the “good fruite” of courtesy might be hospitably nourished.⁸⁶ Indeed, Richard McCabe expresses the now-commonplace judgment that “the movement of *The Faerie Queene* from justice to courtesy describes the progress from military conquest to civil reclamation” that *A View* explicitly outlines.⁸⁷ The three texts, from this perspective, are components in a generically mixed attempt to confer moral legitimacy and literary prestige on the colonial enterprise, as Spenser urges the dissemination Anglo-Protestant civility amongst an Irish populace previously subjugated through armed force.

This alignment of poetic fiction and prose treatise, with both situated in a determinative historical-political context, typifies the progress of Spenser studies—and early modern literary criticism as a whole—over the past few decades. Establishing *The Faerie Queene* as a work saturated with political content and polemical intention, Spenserians have reproduced in unusually concentrated form the New Historicist refusal of “traditional distinctions between literature and history,” and the movement’s embedding of “canonical literary texts among the multiple forms of ... discursive practices and institutions” from which they were created.⁸⁸ As scholars have reconstructed the political landscape of the 1580s and 1590s in ever greater detail, Spenser’s attachment to the militant circle around the Earl of Leicester, Philip Sidney, and the Earl of Essex in England, and the New English colonizers loyal to Lord Grey in Ireland, has become more evident. Emerging from within the “activist forward Protestant party,” which agitated against what it took to be the queen’s insufficiently militant stance toward Spain on the Continent and rebels in Ireland, Spenser’s mature work now reads to most as “a sustained

etiological myth of Ireland’s devastated condition. See *The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Edwin Greenlaw, et al., 11 vols. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1932-57), X:236 and *FQ*, VII.vi.36-55, respectively.

⁸⁴ Ciaran Brady, “Spenser’s Irish Crisis: Humanism and Experience in the 1590s,” *Past and Present* 111 (1986), 27.

⁸⁵ *A View of the State of Ireland*, ed. Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 93. Quotations from this text will be cited parenthetically by page number hereafter.

⁸⁶ This passage constitutes the culmination of the tract’s numerous invocations of cropping and re-planting. Early in the text, Eudoxus will remark on the difficulty of “plant[ing] any sound ordinance” “without first cutting of[f]” the island’s many evil practices, and he will aver that “the redressing of those evils” must be followed by England’s “planting some good forme or policy therin” (18, 26). Irenius will likewise insist that, given the warlike tendencies of the rebellious Irish and corrupt Old English, “it is vaine to speake of planting lawes, and plotting pollicie, till they be altogether subdued,” or, rather, “cut off” (21, 101).

⁸⁷ *Spenser’s Monstrous Regiment: Elizabethan Ireland and the Poetics of Difference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 239.

⁸⁸ Louis Montrose, “The Elizabethan Subject and the Spenserian Text” in *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, ed. Patricia Parker and David Quint (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 304.

defence of the Leicester-Essex foreign policy.”⁸⁹ As this last quote suggests, for these critics the poet’s aesthetic and political motivations have come to seem wholly congenial, the twin halves of a single historical enterprise. Surveying the criticism today, one regularly finds references to “Spenser’s artistic-colonial project(s) in Ireland,” where the artistic and the colonial are enterprises so harmonious with one another that the hyphen joining them seems to indicate a functional equivalence, rather than mere continuity.⁹⁰ This line of thought has led many critics to maintain that Books V and VI should be read as something very much like a poeticizing of the dialogue. They become, in McCabe’s terms, “a fictive reenactment of the act of plantation,” and in Norbrook’s a part of the “process of imaginative colonization.”⁹¹ Most memorably, the Legends amount to a promulgation of what Anne Lake Prescott calls “Foreign Policy in Fairyland.”⁹²

I will show in the following chapters, however, that this unswervingly instrumental understanding of the final books of *The Faerie Queene* misconstrues the social implications of Spenser’s mature poetry in an important way. For by often treating “the poem as [an] empirical catalogue” of political content more clearly set forth in (and readily explicable through) *A View*,⁹³ and thereby assuming “that there is nothing to interpret” in the legends, contemporary Spenser criticism has regularly committed the error that Adorno warns against in seeking to “erase the demarcation line between art and nonart.”⁹⁴ In doing so, it has taken up the reductive stance toward artistic experience that marks much recent historicist scholarship on Renaissance England. Against the prevailing notion that Elizabethans could not differentiate between “propaganda and literature,” such a distinction being “merely post-Kantian,”⁹⁵ I argue instead that Books V and VI of Spenser’s poem proleptically model a key ambiguity in modern aesthetic theory concerning the work of art’s relation to external reality. On the one hand, these texts lay claim to a vital social efficacy, inserting themselves unmistakably into contemporary public controversy and holding out the possibility that imaginative literature could bring about a reformation of political subjectivity more radical and lasting than other forms of expression.⁹⁶ On

⁸⁹ Staines, *Tragic Histories*, 117; Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics*, 118. In 1579, Spenser gained employment in the household of the Earl of Leicester, and also claimed to have become familiar with Philip Sidney; in the same year, he dedicated *The Shepheardes Calender* to Sidney. He was appointed a secretary to Lord Grey the following year, probably traveling with him to Ireland; he would later serve as Grey’s amanuensis, as well. In *A View*, Spenser’s speakers offer a loyal defense of Grey’s scorched-earth policies, and the text ends with an endorsement of the Earl of Essex for the position of Lord Lieutenant of the island. For a brief overview of Spenser’s associations with these figures, see Hamilton’s “Chronological Table of Spenser’s Life and Works,” *FQ*, xiv-ix.

⁹⁰ Thomas Herron, *Spenser’s Irish Work: Poetry, Plantation and Colonial Reformation* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 3.

⁹¹ McCabe, *Spenser’s Monstrous Regiment*, 229; Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics*, 131.

⁹² Prescott, “Foreign Policy in Fairyland: Henri IV and Spenser’s Burbon,” *Spenser Studies* 14 (2000): 189-214.

⁹³ James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 24.

⁹⁴ *Aesthetic Theory*, 128.

⁹⁵ Staines, *Tragic Histories*, 4; Guenther, *Magical Imaginations*, 9.

⁹⁶ I use “political” here and in what follows expansively, referring to the organization and administration of society—to the question of how subjects are to live together in relative stability. This emphasis on the ultimately collective, rather than individual, orientation toward social action informs my vocabulary of the “political” over the “ethical” or merely “social” (although I will also use the terms interchangeably at times). See Teskey’s foundational point that “secular life” is “identified unambiguously with political life” throughout *The Faerie Queene* (*Allegory and Violence*, 78).

the other hand, the texts fail to set forth anything like a positive political program that could be translated from aesthetic experience to social activity. Rather, they train readers in a mode of cautious and attentive critical reflection, an *interpretive* agency that Spenser regards as the necessary precondition for enlightened *praxis*, but that falls short of—and, in many respects, actively complicates and confounds—a politics in itself. Such a readerly disposition should therefore be construed as having a pre- or proto-political character, in which artistic experience becomes the simultaneously enabling and disabling condition for reformative social action.

As these claims imply, I do not believe that recent historicist criticism has erred in detecting in the *Legends of Justice and Courtesy* a uniquely urgent polemical subtext (chiefly in relation to Irish policy), nor in regarding political engagement as the *telos* toward which Spenser's poetry ultimately aims. Ireland is, indeed, all over these poems; *A View* is indisputably a key intertext for revealing the texts' immersion in colonial activity; and, as Sidney maintains, Spenserian aesthetic education continues to find its "ending end" in "virtuous action."⁹⁷ Criticism's mistake, however, has been to regard *The Faerie Queene* as an *immediately* political artifact, presuming that the reading experience channels us straight into the realm of *praxis*. The reason why Spenser's late poetry fails of such direct translation has to do, I will suggest at some length, with the kind of interpretive engagement it elicits from its audience. Aesthetic experience became, for Spenser, a form for engaging historical contingency—a means of training readers in the supple analytical responsiveness necessary for navigating the fraught complexity of public affairs.⁹⁸ But since, for both Spenser and Sidney, "the poet ... nothing affirms," fictional discourse frees the author of the obligation to propound coherent policy,⁹⁹ and one result of this provisional autonomy is that Books V and VI frequently register the inadequacy of seemingly *any* political program to redress the social ills on which the texts fixate.¹⁰⁰ In this respect, the *Legends* are as much an instance of artistic pessimism and a sense of restricted political efficacy as they are of visionary empowerment. For the ambiguous social agency that Spenser's poems finally offer is mediated through the critical stance that I will later call *wary boldness*: a mode of critical

⁹⁷ *Defence of Poesy*, in *Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, 13.

⁹⁸ Training readers in this kind of critical judgment is, in fact, the modest objective that Spenser claims for *A View* in its concluding paragraphs. Irenius claims that his discourse has sought to show "what [Ireland] is, and also what it may bee," but then insists, "Not that I take upon me to change the policy of so great a kingdome ... but onely to shew you the evils" he has observed firsthand. His "simple opinion for the redresse thereof," he goes on, is offered so that "who so list to overlooke [it] ... may perhaps better his owne judgement" (160-1). There is, of course, an element of the modesty *topos* audible here, but Spenser's culminating emphasis on the "better[ment]" of "judgment" as the *telos* of his text (rather than altering "policy" directly) is, I will argue, a fitting account of *The Faerie Queene*'s poetic program, as well. On the text's provision of a formal means of navigating sociopolitical contingency, see Robert Kaufman's description of the quasi-conceptual quality of Kantian aesthetic experience as "provid[ing] *the form for conceptual, purposeful thought or cognition*" in "Red Kant," 711.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 34. Ironically, Spenser echoes Sidney's formulation in *A View*, when Irenius remarks that his diagnosis of Ireland's ills seek to "gather a likelihood of truth, not certainly affirming any thing, but by ... hunt[ing] out a probability of things, which I leave to your judgement to believe or refuse" (46).

¹⁰⁰ As McCabe observes, Spenser's mature poetry can be seen to "draw[] power from ideological contradiction" and "interrogate [the] politics" he endorses in *A View* because, in early modernity as now, the "implications of narrative are harder to contain than those of deliberative rhetoric." See *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment*, 4-5. Brady remarks of *A View* that it bears the marks of an author "unwilling to make sacrifice of those intellectual and moral values which experience seemed to demand" ("Spenser's Irish Crisis," 49). I would suggest that it is in the semi-autonomous realm of *The Faerie Queene* that Spenser finds the most fitting environment for expressing the conflict between those values and the policies he elsewhere advocates.

engagement that is charged with political urgency, but that defers social action through the cautious and painstaking work of readerly analysis. Such is the mixed mode of the final books of *The Faerie Queene*, which, rather than being immediately given catalogues of policy and historical content, instead demand to “be read ... not merely seen.”¹⁰¹

II. Spenserian Artistic Detail and Contemporary Critical Paradigms

In demonstrating how the interpretive paradigm I have just described functions as practical criticism, we should return to the imagery of arboreal growth and organic process in Books V and VI with which we began. Before doing so, however, it will be worthwhile to elaborate further on the scholarly consensus that my own study seeks to modify. As I have already indicated, a broadly political, historical, and post-colonial perspective has dominated recent accounts of Spenser's career-long authorial enterprise. This course was charted for a generation of critics when Stephen Greenblatt insisted, in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, that “Ireland is not only in book 5 of *The Faerie Queene*; it pervades the poem,” a belief that soon became all but interchangeable with the equally commonplace notion that, as Louis Montrose says, “the corpus of Spenser's poetry [is] pervaded by the workings of the Elizabethan political imaginary.”¹⁰² Nevertheless, it has long struck readers that the orientation of Spenser's epic-romance shifts (in degree, if not in kind) with the appearance of Books V and VI in the 1596 second edition of the poem.¹⁰³ Scholars as far back as C.S. Lewis had remarked (usually with disdain) on what he calls “the very high proportion of pure allegory” in Book V, by which they meant its easily identifiable representations of near-current events in Britain and the Continent.¹⁰⁴ With the rise of New Historicism in the later twentieth century, the Legend's status as “the most overtly historical of all the sections of the poem” was given a considerably more positive valuation, and the text's “more overtly interventionist” ambitions achieved a new level of appreciation, as did Spenser's willingness to articulate his “own position on a particular and divisive public controversy.”¹⁰⁵ The Legend thus associates Artegall not only with justice in the abstract, but with the divisive policies of Lord Grey, in particular; it presents thinly veiled re-imaginings of contemporary national history in the Low Countries, France, and Ireland; and it satirizes the queen herself, on topics ranging from Irish colonization to her treatment of Mary Stuart, in all these ways “express[ing] a vision of the English state that looks very much like the interventionist ideal” of the Leicester-Sidney-Grey circle.¹⁰⁶ Book V, most everyone now agrees, not only invites readers “to situate [it] within the important vigorous political debates” of these

¹⁰¹ Chandler, *England in 1819*, 31.

¹⁰² Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 186; Montrose, “Spenser and the Elizabethan Political Imaginary,” *ELH* 69.4 (2002): 908.

¹⁰³ See, for instance, Teskey's discussion of “the most important event in [Spenser's] poetic career: the movement, in the middle books of *The Faerie Queene*, from an essentially cosmic perspective to one that foregrounds explicitly social and political concerns.” See *Allegory and Violence*, 175.

¹⁰⁴ Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 353.

¹⁰⁵ Brady, “Spenser's Irish Crisis,” 18, 45.

¹⁰⁶ Gregory, “Shadowing Intervention: On the Politics of *The Faerie Queene* Book 5 Cantos 10-12,” *ELH* 67.2 (2000), 366.

decades, but positively “*demands* to be read as an intervention into Elizabethan political thought.”¹⁰⁷

A more uneven but broadly similar trajectory governs the recent critical history of Book VI. For much of the twentieth century, it was conventional to regard courtesy as the antithesis of justice: Lewis famously contrasted the “stony plateau” of Book V to the “gracious valley” of its successor, with “the loose texture” of the sixth book “a suitable relief” after what he considered the savagery of the fifth.¹⁰⁸ An earlier phase of New Historicism would do likewise. Richard Helgerson, for instance, similarly insisted on the contrast between the two texts, designating Book V “the most uncompromisingly public book” of *The Faerie Queene*, and Book VI “the most private.”¹⁰⁹ Toward the end of the century, however, the poststructuralist practice of ideology critique and its focus on forms of cultural-historical complicity brought about a stark alteration in appraisals of the text’s politics.¹¹⁰ No longer taking the Legend’s celebrations of beauty and introspection at face value, critics like Robert Stillman linked the shift between Books V and VI to the progress, in *A View*, whereby “the radical, scorched-earth policy of military conquest” is succeeded by “a programmatic plan of customary reform that provides the necessary ethical legitimacy for an exercise of mass terror.”¹¹¹ In these studies, Spenser’s courtesy conveys nothing so much as the historical bad faith of plantation, the graceful veneer on what amounts to “a moral justification for the relentless use of force and terror in bringing Ireland to order.”¹¹² Few would now agree with Michael O’Connell that the Legend finds “Spenser turn[ing] inward, away from history.”¹¹³ Rather, Book VI is now understood, per McCabe, “to interrogate the folly of escapism by illustrating the urgency of ‘history,’” infused with all the “political urgency” and “immediacy of current events” as Book V is.¹¹⁴ As Jane Grogan remarks, telescoping the longer critical trend, the “Irish subtext to the Book ... launches Spenser’s poetic accommodations of

¹⁰⁷ Hadfield, *Edmund Spenser’s Irish Experience: Wilde Fruit and Salvage Soyl* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 52, 125 (emphasis added).

¹⁰⁸ Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, 353.

¹⁰⁹ *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and the Literary System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 89.

¹¹⁰ On the “complicity” of Spenser’s poetry in the colonial project, see, for example, Thomas Herron: “Spenser’s poetry has only begun to reveal to the modern reader the full extent of its complicity with the profound and alarming transformation of Irish culture in the early modern period... All six Books (and the fragmentary seventh) of the epic as well as many of Spenser’s later, shorter poems focus, in some regard, on this narrative of adventurous conquest (and failure) and remain fixated on the reformation of Irish land and polity as an apt subject for verse.” See *Spenser’s Irish Work*, 2.

¹¹¹ “Spenserian Autonomy and the Trial of New Historicism: Book Six of *The Faerie Queene*,” *English Literary Renaissance* 22.3 (1992), 303. Book VI thus represents for Stillman “a political survey for future reform—one that supplies ... ethical legitimacy, in its presentation of that abstract, mythologically conceived virtue, civility, for renewed exercise of the sword” (306). Paul Stevens similarly suggests that “the redeeming idea of civility” encouraged English planters “to see themselves as other than ... the poor, the superstitious, the rude, the mad, the savage”—the Irish, that is—and thus justified the violence of invasion and occupation. See “Spenser and Milton on Ireland: Civility, Exclusion, and the Politics of Wisdom,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 26.4 (1995), 152–3.

¹¹² Brady, “Spenser’s Irish Crisis,” 18.

¹¹³ Michael O’Connell, “Historical Allegory,” in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A.C. Hamilton, et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 24.

¹¹⁴ *Spenser’s Monstrous Regiment*, 234, 251.

courtesy directly into the political sphere,”¹¹⁵ much as *A View* itself had yoked its promotion of “civility” to that of “better government” (11).

Indeed, as this last comparison suggests, historicist scholarship of this period has made brilliantly clear that the final books of *The Faerie Queene* not only interrogate issues relating to colonial plantation with keen energy, but often correspond with striking precision to the analyses laid out in *A View*. Just as the dialogue advances from a diagnosis of the island’s “inconveniences in the lawes” to its “abuses of customes” (43), for instance, so Book V will concern itself with legal criminality (as we see in the name of its culminating villain, Grantorto) while Book VI operates within the domain of “habit” (46), “speech, manners, and inclynation” (71). The texts be mapped onto each another not only in broad strokes like these, but through more precise textual resonances, as well. Thus, when Spenser meditates, in an apparently generalized fashion, on a world “grow[ing] daily wourse and wourse” at the start of the Legend of Justice (proem.1), knowing readers are directed back to the complaints in *A View* that the Anglo-Norman, “Old English” colonists have “degenerated and growne almost mere Irish” (54). Just as these “English in Ireland ... have degendred from their auncient dignities” (70), so Spenser predicts that the “stonie” men of Book V will likewise become “degendered” before long (proem.2). Analogously, the abstract cultivation of “ciuill conuersation” (i.1) that we find in the Legend of Courtesy is given a specifically Irish coloring, as well, when compared with Irenius’ instructions for bringing the rebels “to labour or ciuill conversation” (101). Calidore’s singular “gentlenesse of spright / And manners mylde” (i.2), meanwhile, become a model for the “planting of religion” that Irenius advocates, which he would see “intimated with mildnesse and gentlenesse” (153), and the civility the knight incarnates can be localized as the “sweet civility [that] England affords,” in contrast to the “barbarous rudenes” of Ireland (54). Finally, the two books’ frequent depictions of lawless multitudes—the “tumultuous rout” that gathers around the Egalitarian Giant in Book V (ii.51), for instance, or the Salvage Nation of Book VI that lives “by stealth and spoile” (viii.35)—assume specifically Irish connotations when set aside the “barbarous nations” that *A View* repeatedly attacks (17), who similarly subsist on “stealthes and spoyles” (55). Recent scholarship has made such connections between fiction and treatise inevitable, not only blurring the line that once separated text from context, but forcing into stark relief the politicizing tendencies of Spenser’s late poetry.

This alteration in critical consensus toward the Legends of Justice and Courtesy over the past few decades thus represents one of the most emphatic triumphs of the New Historicism writ large. From its beginning, the practice was centrally predicated on attending to what Greenblatt described as the “deep functional utility” of literature in the early modern period.¹¹⁶ Stressing the “reciprocal relationship between the literary and the social,” influential practitioners of the method like Montrose continually rejected the notion of fictional discourse “as an autonomous aesthetic order that transcends the pressure and particularity of material interests”; rather, they emphasized and (at least implicitly) celebrated its “capacity to impact upon the social formation, to make things happen by shaping the consciousness of social beings.”¹¹⁷ This insistence on poetry’s

¹¹⁵ *Exemplary Spenser: Visual and Poetic Pedagogy in The Faerie Queene* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 163.

¹¹⁶ “What Is the History of Literature?”, 462.

¹¹⁷ “The Elizabethan Subject and the Spenserian Text,” 305–6; emphasis added. This essay, along with Greenblatt’s chapter on the Bower of Bliss in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, remains the most influential example of New Historicist readings of Spenser from the heyday of the movement. For an especially noteworthy postcolonial

heteronomy and its directly transitive work on readers continues to define the broader movement in its long-term reaction against the New Critical and deconstructive “formalisms” it saw itself succeeding.¹¹⁸ For many commentators, newly appreciative readings of *The Faerie Queene* explicitly took aim at the putatively commonplace assumption in Spenser studies that “poets should not meddle in politics” (David Norbrook), or that “poetry and politics should be kept separate” (Andrew Hadfield).¹¹⁹ Discussions like these thus continue to shore up, in an especially self-conscious manner, the near-universal rejection today of what we heard described as so-called “aesthetic ideology” in the Introduction.

As familiar as such rhetoric has now become, especially in early modern studies, this attitude is in fact quite novel when set against the longer critical tradition of *The Faerie Queene*. In fact, by stressing the overwhelming importance of historical and political imperatives to Spenser’s poem, these critics have sought to demolish the image of an aestheticizing, “Romantic” Spenser that had prevailed among readers for centuries. We might recall that for Hazlitt, “Spenser’s poetry is all fairy-land,” a purely fictive realm in which readers wander only “among ideal beings” and over which the writer has thrown “a delicious veil,” distorting our perception of “all actual objects.”¹²⁰ Coleridge likewise observed the “true imaginative absence of all particular space or time in *The Fairy Queene*”: “It is in the domains neither of history or geography,” he declared, since the “land of Fairy” is an exclusively “mental space.”¹²¹ In a complete inversion of this rhetoric, Spenser’s Legends of Justice and Courtesy are now understood to be *all* “history and geography”; their shared fictional landscape no longer “ideal” but all-too-real; and Fairyland fully hospitable to the “actual objects” of late-sixteenth-century Britain and Europe. And whereas Spenser’s views on Ireland had been a source of deep embarrassment to the author’s devotees even from the initial publication of *A View*, plantation is now eagerly asserted as a determining context for his verse.¹²² Graham Hough was representative of earlier attitudes when he remarked, simply, that Spenser “was the defender of a hateful policy in Ireland,” echoing Lewis’ comparably terse comment that “Spenser was the instrument of a detestable policy in Ireland, and in his fifth

account of Spenser’s poetry, see also Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993), which links *The Faerie Queene* to the author’s “bloodthirsty plans for Ireland” as a signal instance of “the involvements of culture with expanding empires” (5).

¹¹⁸ See Richard Strier’s clear and concise overview of “How Formalism Became a Dirty Word, and Why We Can’t Do Without It” in *Renaissance Literature and Its Formal Engagements*, ed. Mark David Rasmussen (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 206–15. As Strier explains it, “formalism” goes hand in hand with “aestheticism” in most accounts (positive or negative) of the methodology, and implies “the view that literature, like all other arts, is best studied by the detailed observation of what is taken to constitute the formal structure of individual works... The critic’s aim is to reveal the significant patterns within the work, and the assumption is that the revelation and ‘explication’ of these patterns will serve to demonstrate ... the aesthetic value of the work in question... This kind of criticism is also committed to an interest in what makes works of art special—in the case of literature to some conception of ‘literariness’” (208–9). This definition will inform my subsequent uses of “formalism” and its variants.

¹¹⁹ Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics*, 14; Hadfield, *Spenser’s Irish Experience*, 51. Hadfield’s remarks are a rejoinder to Lewis’ curt dismissal of Book V. Hadfield takes Lewis to mean that political poetry is necessarily “bad poetry which students should not bother to study” (*ibid.*).

¹²⁰ *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818). Quoted in *Critical Anthology*, 131.

¹²¹ From Coleridge’s notes for lectures and marginal notes in a copy of *The Faerie Queene* (1818), in *Critical Anthology*, 144.

¹²² Even the admiring James Ware, who first published *A View* in 1633, felt obliged to disclaim apologetically of the treatise, “although it sufficiently testifieth [to its author’s] learning and deepe judgment, yet we may wish that in some passages it had bin tempered with more moderation.” See *A View*, 6.

book the wickedness he had shared begins to corrupt his imagination.”¹²³ It is only in the last thirty-plus years, in contrast, that the absorption of Books V and VI in the “material realities” of their historical moment, and the objectives they share with Spenser’s prose tract and administrative career, are widely taken as a sign of the poet’s political seriousness rather than his artistic decline.

But the question with which we began nevertheless remains: is the reduction of the Legends of Justice and Courtesy to a fictionalization of *A View* adequate to what actually transpires in these poems at the level of artistic detail? To venture an answer, let us return to the imagery of vegetal profusion with which we began. We recall that vice is first figured in Book V as an augmenting “seede” that soon grows to “fruitfull rancknes” (i.1). This vocabulary only occurs, however, after “faire vertue” itself is characterized as a “blossome,” the natural mark of “mans age ... in his freshest prime” (proem.1). As this initial instance of metaphoric instability suggests, the arboreal symbolism is never fixed within the Legend of Justice as a whole. Thus, in a passage from canto x (to which I will return at greater length in the next chapter), Spenser speculates on the relative merits of mercy and justice and aphoristically concludes that “it is greater prayse to saue, then spill, / And better to reforme, then to cut off the ill” (2). Whereas social reformation in the book’s first canto seemed to equate with regenerative cropping, the two operations have now been split off from one another and opposed, with the impulse to “spill” found wanting. To complicate matters further, the apparently unimpeachable actions of Arthur, in the very next canto, bring about another reversal in the moral valence of this image cluster. In his duel with Geryoneo at the start of canto xi, the prince cuts off two of the monster’s arms “like fruitlesse braunches, which the hatchets slight / Hath pruned from the natieue tree, and cropped quight” (11). Arthur’s defeat of Geryoneo places him in line with the rough justice of the “vertuous” in canto i, and leads to Belge’s figuration of her progeny’s restoration to the royal succession as an act of “replant[ing]” (16). Even at this point, however, the blossoming of just sovereignty that Arthur’s “prun[ing]” makes possible needs to be safeguarded once and for all by the prince’s destruction of Belge’s “chiefest foe,” the “Idole” that occupies her church: Belge insists that “peace” will not be firmly established until Arthur has “rooted all the relickes out / Of that vilde race” (18-9). In Arthur’s liberation of Belge’s kingdom, then, the metaphysical significance of these recurring arboreal tropes fluctuates rapidly from social crisis to restorative justice and back again, and all in the space of fewer than ten stanzas.

The most provocative of these confusions occurs at the start of canto xii, however, as Artegall and Talus make their way to Irena’s kingdom for the knight’s climactic duel with Grantorto. As the duo is set on by Grantorto’s minions, Talus attacks and exectures all who approach, leaving “on the ground ... full many a corse.” The iron man’s extermination of Artegall’s enemies is then rendered in now-familiar terms: “they lay scattred ouer all the land,” we are told, “As thicke as doth the seede after the sowers hand” (7). The aptness of the simile lies in the verbal proximity of “the seede” of Grantorto’s soldiers to the “wicked seede of vice” with which Book V began. The specific terms of the comparison, however, should again give us pause. Talus is here troped as the sower of death, much as he is near the end of canto xi when he disperses another mob with “his huge flaile,” “diffus[ing]” it “Like scattred chaffe, the which the wind away doth fan” (47). But unlike the infertile chaff, the seeds he later spreads as “thicke” as that disseminated from “the sowers hand” suggest that he is not only diffusing righteous

¹²³ Hough, *A Preface to “The Faerie Queene”* (London: G. Duckworth, 1962), 192; Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, 349.

vengeance, but the very wickedness he and Artegall seek to root out, as well.¹²⁴ This reading, which apparently cuts against the grain (so to speak) of Spenser's polemical intentions in urging the subjugation of Ireland's natives, in fact accords with a suspicion that comes to shadow the entirety of Book V: that the unyielding brutality and intellectual compromises of Artegall's campaign ends up causing as much harm as good, and spreads injustice as often as justice.

This anxiety might also point us back to Spenser's baffling remarks at the start of the Legend. How is it that in the age when "All loued vertue" it is also "then *likewise* [that] the wicked seede of vice / Began to spring" (emphasis added)? What, exactly, is the nature of the similitude that leads from universal goodness to the emergence of pervasive depravity? Does Spenser's odd construction insinuate, counter-intuitively, that there is something in the operation of justice that *necessarily* leads to its failure, to the efflorescence of its seeming antithesis? Such questions might also direct us to the seemingly odd fact that Book VI, though ostensibly invested in the delicate cultivation of sociable habit, contains fully as much violence as its predecessor.¹²⁵ Why does the text require so much bloodletting if courtesy is merely supposed to prop up "the bloosme of comely courtesie," nursing it with "carefull labour"? If this organic nurturing is the representative action of virtue in the Legend, why do the agents of courtesy need to repeat the invasive violence so characteristic of Artegall—specifically when they need to "hew" their enemies with "wrathfull hand" (viii.49), or "scattre[]" and "strow[e]" the ground not with heavenly seeds, but "with bodies" (xi.48-9) at key moments of the narrative? Do these paroxysms of martial destruction in fact suggest that "ciuill conuersation," like Artegall's justice, eventuates in the spread of its discourteous opposite, or (to put the idea another way) in the uncontrolled liberty of the Blatant Beast?

As it is likely clear, these questions are largely rhetorical, and in the chapters that follow I will answer them in the affirmative, doing so with considerably more detailed analysis of the two Legends. The point I wish to make here is that such questions about Spenser's intents and effects must be answered vis-à-vis the opacity of artistic detail. Montrose astutely argues, in an article from late in his career, that the "pressure of history and of politics" is registered in *The Faerie Queene* not only "in large movements of narrative but also as sedimented into the text at the level of individual words and figures."¹²⁶ What we need to be alert to, however, is the way that "individual words and figures" complicate those "large movements" as often as they telescope them; in doing so, they frequently exert a counterthrust to the extra-literary social programs for which the text might seem to call. Indeed, the interpretive process I have been describing is analogous to that recounted by Paul de Man at the start of *Allegories of Reading*, which he claims began "in preparation for a historical reflection on Romanticism," but which was "unable to progress beyond local difficulties of interpretation" and necessitated a "shift from historical definition to the problematics of reading."¹²⁷ In the remainder of the dissertation, I will urge something of the same process of readerly entanglement, treating the historical-political content

¹²⁴ As Angus Fletcher long ago observed, the "allusion to Talus's destructive winnowing ... actually becomes a kind of seed sowing." See *The Prophetic Moment: An Essay on Spenser* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 201.

¹²⁵ See McCabe, *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment*, 232: "The words 'wild' and 'salvage' occur more often in the sixth book of *The Faerie Queene* than any other, and its visions, or illusions, of pastoral tranquility invariably degenerate into scenes of carnage."

¹²⁶ "Spenser and the Elizabethan Political Imaginary," 916.

¹²⁷ *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), ix.

of Books V and VI as a function of the “local difficulties of interpretation” that de Man posits. Operating on the assumption that, as Richard Strier puts it, *the work provides the initial context* for understanding the significance of any particular item in a text,” this study will be an exercise in historically-responsive formalist interpretation, pursuing “the uses,” rather than mere “mentions,” “to which details in literary ... texts are put.”¹²⁸

III. Close Reading and Adorno’s Proto-Political Aesthetics

As these remarks suggest, and as subsequent chapters will make clearer, the insights of an earlier, broadly formalist tradition of Spenser criticism often strike me as more fully in touch with “the texture as well as the content of ideas” in Spenser’s poem than most contemporary historicism tends to be.¹²⁹ Spenser’s oeuvre has become a paradigmatic example of the dubious identification, in much current academic thought, between the imperatives of close reading and those of extra-literary *praxis*. The association is fully present, for instance, in Norbrook’s claim that “for Spenser the poet’s imaginative visions can be justified only if they can be translated into political action.”¹³⁰ This sentiment, contentious when first articulated in 1984, now represents an almost unassailable orthodoxy. It might be argued, of course, that emphasizing the social *telos* of Spenser’s poem only returned readers to the author’s own conception of his work. The “Letter to Raleigh” famously aligns itself with the rhetorical function of literature as theorized in Sidney’s *Defense of Poesy*, where the purpose of artistic experience is not “well-knowing only,” but “well-doing.”¹³¹ Finding in *The Faerie Queene* an aesthetic means to a political end, Norbrook stressed that “[t]he enormous self-consciousness of the poem is designed to reinforce the didactic aim of fashioning a gentleman, not to undermine it,” forcing the rigorously attentive reader “to keep experience under constant rational scrutiny.”¹³² This conception of Spenser’s extra-literary objectives in filling his text with all manner of “alienation effects” is similar to Greenblatt’s account in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*,¹³³ which claims that Spenser’s poem “constantly calls attention to its own processes” and “announces its status as art object at every turn” not to prolong the process of interpretive reflection indefinitely, but rather to compel state-sanctioned political activity. “It is art whose status is questioned in Spenser, not ideology,” he famously declares, a conclusion that undergirded by Greenblatt’s emphasis on the formal sophistication and critical reflexivity of *The Faerie Queene*.¹³⁴

¹²⁸ Strier, “How Formalism Became a Dirty Word,” 212-3. Strier explains that, for formalism, the first question to ask of any textual phenomenon is “How is feature X used in this text?” For both old and new historicisms, however, “[t]he fact that some item that is taken to be culturally or politically significant is mentioned in a text—in passing, in a metaphor, it doesn’t matter how—is sufficient to get the machinery of ‘archaeology’ and archive-churning going” (213). This account is necessarily reductive, but not without merit as a broad delineation of grounding principles for the two strains of criticism as they have developed in the last several decades.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Poetry and Politics*, 130.

¹³¹ See Sidney’s “*The Defence of Poesy*” and *Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. Gavin Alexander (London: Penguin, 2004), 13. As Helgerson described the characteristic Elizabethan “ideology” of poetry, “Though the poet may not himself be an actor in the world, his poetry does make others act.” See *Self-Crowned Laureates*, 64.

¹³² *Poetry and Politics*, 99.

¹³³ For Spenser’s “alienation effects,” see *ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 190, 192.

But the tenor of these remarks points us in the direction of another commonplace of Spenser studies, as well, one with an equally venerable lineage that at least potentially jars with the politicizing orientation exemplified by Norbrook and Greenblatt. As David Lee Miller recently observed in a forum that reiterated the question, “How to Read *The Faerie Queene*,” the educative capacity of Spenser’s poem has often been thought to inhere in its metacritical qualities—its inducement of “self-recognition” in subjects who become trained “to read themselves allegorically.” Prescott intended a similarly uncontroversial effect when she observed, as part of the same panel, that “it is the *process* [of reading] that is pedagogical,” a process that continually “resists [and] complicates judgment.”¹³⁵ This belief—that Spenser’s allegory generates critical distance for a freshly attentive perception of reality—was codified for academic criticism at least as far back as the 1970s, in the work of Isabel MacCaffrey and Maureen Quilligan.¹³⁶ But if Spenserian form eventuates in the production of a self-aware reader, one whose faculty of judgment is subject to an illimitable process of interpretive re-calibration, it is not clear how or when his energies are to be directed out into the broader world. The comments of Miller and Prescott, in fact, make it clear that the accents of a contemplative, even “non-purposive,” aesthetics remain audible in much orthodox Spenser criticism today. But whereas an earlier phase of New Historicism might have taken issue with the vaguely New Critical gestures toward the ambiguity, paradox, and interpretive impasse to which Spenser’s poetry apparently gives rise, readers today instead wrest these formal features to an experiential trajectory that harmoniously culminates in political action, or in what Prescott herself describes as a kind of aestheticized implementation of policy.

But as I have argued above, attending sensitively to the formal processes that complicate interpretation also frustrates the transition from *gnosis* to *praxis*. This understanding of the conflictual relation between aesthetics and politics in *The Faerie Queene* was an important aspect of the New Critical formalism that held sway for much of the earlier- and mid-twentieth century in Spenser scholarship. For many of the period’s most prominent critics, Spenser’s verse was marked precisely by its establishment of “a certain quiet in our minds,” a “still, brooding attention” and “robust tranquility” (Lewis) that produced in readers “no need to concentrate the elements of the [textual] situation into a judgment as if for action” (William Empson). The non-purposive and “radically undramatic” style of his poetry, the formal analogue of “a poised intelligence seeing all around a spiritual phenomenon” (Paul Alpers), thus demonstrated that, for Spenser, literature’s “true work and pleasure require detachment rather than involvement” (Harry Berger).¹³⁷ This kind of emphasis on what I.A. Richards described as the “balanced poise” of

¹³⁵ See “How to Read *The Faerie Queene*: A Forum,” *Spenser Review* 44.3.56 (2015). <http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/spenseronline/review/item/44.3.56>

¹³⁶ MacCaffrey speaks of the ways that Spenser’s “self-conscious allegory” makes readers “aware of fictiveness itself” so as to illuminate the “unapprehended reality that invisibly surrounds and controls our lives.” See *Spenser’s Allegory: The Anatomy of Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 9, 81, 86. Quilligan takes her account a step further, arguing that “after reading an allegory”—Spenser’s in particular—“we only realize what kind of readers we are,” and that the locus of meaning inheres in “the self-consciousness of the reader, who gradually becomes aware, as he reads, of the way he creates the meaning of the text.” See *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 24, 28.

¹³⁷ Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 392-3; Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 3rd ed. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1953), 34; Alpers, “How to Read *The Faerie Queene*,” *Essays in Criticism* 18.4 (1968), 436-7; Berger, “A Secret Discipline: *The Faerie Queene*, Book VI” (orig. pub. 1961), in *Revisionary Play: A Study in the Spenserian Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California

“opposed impulses” in good poetry, arresting the unidirectional pressures of instrumental discourse, has been remarkably durable in the reception history of *The Faerie Queene*.¹³⁸ In its analogous articulation by the Romantics—against whose assumptions the New Critics so often reacted—Spenser’s poetry detains its readers in “a labyrinth of sweet sounds” (Hazlitt), placing them in “a charmed sleep” during which “you neither wish, nor have the power, to inquire where you are” (Coleridge).¹³⁹ Even for Yeats, the rare figure to straddle Romantic and High Modernist poetic traditions, the Spenserian legacy was that of “a beauty so wholly preoccupied with itself that its contemplation is a kind of lingering trance.”¹⁴⁰ In more recent decades, these sentiments were perhaps only superficially updated in the rhetoric of deconstruction, which highlighted *The Faerie Queene*’s “seemingly endless acts of undoing, denial, and frustration,” acts which are once again thought to undermine any teleological “progression toward a conclusion” in both the poem and external reality (Jonathan Goldberg).¹⁴¹ Eventuating in impasse and cognitive stasis, these accounts of Spenser’s poetics specifically deny the mode’s efficacy for promulgating a coherent politics.

Whatever their shortcomings for us now, the practitioners of these earlier phases of formalist criticism were exceptionally sympathetic readers of *The Faerie Queene*’s stylistic properties, and their insights deserve fresh attention today. At a more fundamental level, however, we also need to register more strongly than we tend to the prodigal expenditures of time and intellectual energy required of a text as long and elaborately enriched as *The Faerie Queene*. Obliging us, more than any other work of the Elizabethan age, to apply all the “patience,” “bibliophilic discretion,” and “estoeric rarity” that Jacques Derrida ascribes to responsible literary analysis,¹⁴² Spenser’s epic-romance remains exemplary of the numerous ways that sophisticated artworks undermine their readers’ confidence in ever being adequately “studied for action.”¹⁴³ If almost any act of reading involves a constitutive tension between horizontal application and vertical comprehension, as de Man believed it did,¹⁴⁴ then determining formal structure in *The Faerie Queene*—“the relation of [the poem’s] parts to each other and to the

Press, 1988), 220; emphasis in the original. As Alpers explains elsewhere, “Since [Spenser’s] poetry does not attempt to depict dramatic action, it could hardly arouse the feelings of emulation or rejection that Sidney envisages in the reader of a heroic poem.” See *The Poetry of “The Faerie Queene”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 286.

¹³⁸ I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1925), 248, 251. The fact that most of the aforementioned critics were not doctrinaire New Critics in the way that Richards was only highlights the extent to which the practice’s basic tenets proved especially congenial to readings of Spenser.

¹³⁹ Hazlitt, *A Critical Anthology*, 138; Coleridge, *A Critical Anthology*, 144. For a classic forerunner of the New Critical reaction against Romantic poetics, see T.E. Hulme, “Romanticism and Classicism” (c. 1911) in *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art* (London: Kegan Paul, 1924), 111–40.

¹⁴⁰ From the preface to Yeats’ edition of the *Poems of Spenser* (1902), in *A Critical Anthology*, 177.

¹⁴¹ Jonathan Goldberg, *Endlesse Worke: Spenser and the Structures of Discourse* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 8.

¹⁴² *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (New York: Verso, 1997), 79.

¹⁴³ I allude here to Jardine and Grafton’s classic study of the reading habits of Renaissance humanists. See “Studied for Action: How Gabriel Harvey Read His Livy,” *Past and Present* 129 (1990): 30–78. On the depersonalizing and decontextualizing aspects of early modern reading practices, see also James, “The First English Printed Commonplace Books,” 24–7.

¹⁴⁴ See de Man’s anatomy of “a simple phenomenology of reading,” in which “the mind has to combine vertically the cumulative understanding of what has been apprehended” such that “comprehension will [eventually] reach a point at which it is saturated and will no longer be able to take in additional apprehensions.” See *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 77.

whole, and as the elaboration of details,” as Adorno puts it¹⁴⁵—becomes a singularly daunting interpretive mandate. While Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton long ago showed how sententious and pragmatically end-directed early modern reading habits could be, stressing the tension between reading and acting is far from an anachronistic imposition of “postmodern” academic critical protocols on unreceptive materials. For instance, Kenelm Digby, one of the Spenser’s earliest commentators, asserted that “if one heed him not with great attention, rare and wonderful conceptions will unperceived slide by him that readeth his works ... but let one dwell awhile upon them and he shall feel a strange fullness and roundness in all he saith.”¹⁴⁶ Against the urgent interventions demanded by political crisis, Digby describes a reading practice that instead requires one to expend “great attention” and to “dwell awhile” in patient deliberation. This tension between cautious reflection and vigorous action is, of course, also inscribed at the very heart of the English Renaissance in Hamlet’s suspicion that the “scruple” of “thinking too precisely on th’event” inevitably dulls the “spur” to action otherwise demanded by “cause, and will, and strength.”¹⁴⁷ Further, we might also recollect Fulke Greville’s telling remark that Sidney’s *Arcadia* was most useful in showing that when political actors, “to play with their own visions, will put off publique action, which is the splendor of Majestie ... even then they bury themselves ... [to] the ruine of States and Princes.”¹⁴⁸ If Spenser’s verse contains at least some of the qualities of visionary abstraction, interpretive obscurity, and “contemplative indolence” that Yeats, the Romantics, the New Critics, and deconstructionists were so sure it did,¹⁴⁹ then it stands to reason that the “most refined spirits” of the Elizabethan era might have recognized them, too, along with the ways that such qualities exert a check on “publique action.”¹⁵⁰

What I am trying to show is that antithetical conceptions of literary experience as being *either* the obstacle of *or* the conduit for extra-literary activity both fail to appreciate the dialectical tension that gives life to Spenser’s poetic enterprise. Each, that is, gets the dynamic exactly—but only—half-right. To make this point clearer, we should recognize that the countless cognitive re-adjustments Spenser’s poem demands will be familiar to critics of canonical authors who similarly claim a high degree of aesthetic complexity and political ambition for their work. Joanna Picciotto, for instance, speaks of the “repeated acts of re-reading and re-seeing” that Milton elicits in *Paradise Lost*, acts that “retard[] our movement down the page” even as the verse’s “headlong forward momentum” propels us forward into a utopian realm of redeemed

¹⁴⁵ *Aesthetic Theory*, 144.

¹⁴⁶ “Concerning Spenser that I wrote at Mr. May’s Desire” (1638). Quoted in *Spenser: A Critical Anthology*, 60.

¹⁴⁷ *Hamlet*, IV.iv.9.23-36 (Q2 passage only).

¹⁴⁸ See Greville, *Life of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Nowell Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907), 11-3. Quoted in Alpers, *The Poetry of “The Faerie Queene,”* 289-90.

¹⁴⁹ Yeats, *Poems of Spenser*; cited in *Spenser: A Critical Anthology*, 177.

¹⁵⁰ The reference to the “most refined spirits of the age” is also Greville’s. I would add that, in any event, I am not particularly troubled by potential charges of anachronism on this count. As T.J. Clark has suggested, almost any work of art in any period “is defined by the fact that it does not exhaust itself ... on first or second or subsequent reading.” “Art-ness is the capacity to invite repeated response,” he continues, a capacity that “just *is* the aesthetic” as such. These remarks appear essentially accurate to me, and they underscore the ways that a particular kind of interpretive repetition-compulsion resists the move from reading to acting: from “well-knowing” to “well-doing” in Sidney’s words, and from meditating on Spenser’s “clowdily enwrapped ... Allegoricall deuises” to practicing the “good discipline” they ostensibly encourage. See *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 115-8. (Clark’s discussion here takes off from something that “Paul Valéry says somewhere,” but he does not offer a specific quote or citation.)

collective labor. As “a formal manifestation of experimentalist progress,” the “autoinquisition forced by Milton’s repeated invitations to perceptual self-consciousness,” Picciotto asserts, continually “prompt[s] us to hesitate, to reexamine,” and to defer the movement from thought to action indefinitely.¹⁵¹ Citing this passage, Steven Goldsmith observes a similar conjunction of “slow readerly motion” and prophetic enthusiasm in encounters with Blake’s illuminated poems, which he argues generate “a network of words and images that [always] require closer and further reading, thus redirecting the concentrated urgency of ... action into the lateral, slower motion of reading.” By making readers aware of both “the patient interpretation” that his artworks demand and the apocalyptic importance of the historical crises they diagnose, Blake’s texts “inevitably risk reopening an old quarrel between politics and close reading,” leading us to wonder if “we are rerouting an urgent political message, indeed a call to action, into an insular aesthetic activity.”¹⁵² The similarity of *The Faerie Queene*’s competing aesthetic and political impulses with those in Milton and Blake seems to me sufficiently clear, but Linda Gregerson’s description of just what reading the poem entails conveys its ramifying formal complexity in an especially forceful way:

Spenser’s capacious narrative is fraught with redundancy, hiatus, and overdetermination ... With studied and virtuosic regularity, the poet commutes from one representational plane to another, from characterological psychology to abstracted and schematic personification ... from the despotic and arbitrary mnemonic claims of a nine-line stanza form to the alternating urgency and dalliance of narrative pacing. Nor do these multiple means of progress combine to form a single synthetic fictional mode; they overlap and imperfectly cohere and regularly compete for causal dominance and control of narrative momentum. The consequent breaks in the narrative surface, the often sudden and incomplete shifts from one place of causality to another, require and produce *the active reading subject*, whose progress through the poem becomes its most reliable claim to coherence.¹⁵³

Gregerson’s appraisal would be perfectly applicable to individual books of Spenser’s poem, but the challenges the reader faces in reconciling them, in an Arthur-like act of critical synthesis, multiplies them to an even greater extent.

This basic scenario is no doubt relevant to virtually any artwork of stylistic intricacy and extra-literary aspiration. It is a version of what Geoffrey Galt Harpham describes as “the paradox of stillness and movement” essential to literary experience in general. “All efforts to move from art to somewhere else are inhibited,” he remarks, by “the stillness, or rather, the peculiar kind of

¹⁵¹ *Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 439. See especially, in this respect, Picciotto’s discussion of how seventeenth-century experimentalist authors combined “the interventionist aims of what we now call critique” with a literary style marked by “a refusal to conclude” the observational and interpretive labor it elicits (16).

¹⁵² *Blake’s Agitation: Criticism and the Emotions* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 133. As Kaufman describes this longstanding issue for Left critical theory, “the whole bourgeois enterprise of replacing politics with aesthetics,” for one school of thought, involves “deflecting into the latter the intensities that would otherwise be channeled into the former.” See “Negatively Capable Dialectics,” 369.

¹⁵³ *The Reformation of the Subject: Spenser, Milton, and the English Protestant Epic* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 146; emphasis added.

movement, distinctive to literature.” Much-repeated celebrations of poetry’s ability to “move” its readers, whether articulated at present or in the Elizabethan period, “suggest that literature is valued as an anti-inertial force,” but the activity of even the “fully engaged” interpreter remains “imaginative and attitudinal only.” This is a foundational paradox of proto-political aesthetics, which gestures to reformative social action as its *telos*, but which always runs the risk of stalling its reader in an act of interpretation that is both the prerequisite for, and antithesis of, such action. As Harpham astutely puts it, this kind of reading experience is constituted as “a kind of oscillation, an outward movement of imagination and affect not just accompanied by immobility but positively determined by it, and crowned by it as its necessary backlash.”¹⁵⁴ Spenser likewise posits close reading as a practice for *engaging* the political, a practice that is not itself a politics, but at most a “displaced politics, [or] politics at a distance.”¹⁵⁵

The Faerie Queene thus dramatizes the simultaneous attraction and repulsion between what I will later call the *wariness* of aesthetic experience and the *boldness* of political action, a tension both thematized within and enacted through the Legends of Justice and Courtesy. Literary experience thus becomes an enabling and disabling condition for extra-literary *praxis* at one and the same time, even as *praxis* gives literary experience its *raison d'être*. As Grogan remarks, “[t]he characteristic movement of the reading experience of *The Faerie Queene* ... is involvement and critical distance, the pull in two directions simultaneously.”¹⁵⁶ It is for these reasons that Spenser’s poem, Books V and VI in particular, turns out to be a surprisingly apt example of the “antagonism between interior and exterior [that] is requisite to the experience of art” in Adorno’s view—or, more precisely, of the way that the aesthetic “traverses its antithetical extremes [of autonomy and heteronomy] rather than settling into a spurious median between them.”¹⁵⁷ Indeed, it is the generativity of this push-and-pull, which pervades Spenser’s poem throughout, that makes Adorno’s aesthetics an especially apt rhetoric for thinking through the interactions between the aesthetic and the political in Spenser and the English Renaissance in general. Indeed, Adorno’s “negatively dialectical” vocabulary makes his work more responsive to artistic experience than our reigning version of historicism tends to be, since the latter regularly commits the error of reifying either aesthetics or politics, rather than examining their mutual implication.¹⁵⁸

Adorno’s conception of the artwork’s relation to social reality is most fully elaborated in his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), which focuses throughout on the push-and-pull between formal analysis and extra-literary commitment that is constitutive of aesthetic

¹⁵⁴ *Shadows of Ethics: Criticism and the Just Society* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 1-3.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 9. See also Marjorie Levinson’s discussion of the politically ambiguous work done by “contradiction and complexity” in much formalist theory. The vital critical agency that results from these phenomena (which are both internal to the artwork “in itself” and a function of the “dynamic exchange with its diverse environments”) nevertheless becomes “vulnerable to the charge of formalism” insofar as it dwells only in complication. See “What Is the New Formalism?”, *PMLA* 122.2 (2007), 568-9 n.2.

¹⁵⁶ *Exemplary Spenser*, 16.

¹⁵⁷ *Aesthetic Theory*, 349.

¹⁵⁸ In making this case, I am sensitive to Levinson’s observation that Adorno is regularly summoned by critics who wish to posit a notion of literary form as more dynamic, agential, and historically revelatory than current theoretical practice can conceive. See “What Is New Formalism?”, 563. Adorno’s orientation toward post-Enlightenment art and aesthetics, however, has meant that his work has been engaged only sporadically by early modernists, as I discussed in the Introduction.

experience.¹⁵⁹ On the one hand, Adorno's "materialistic-dialectical aesthetics," as he calls the method, compels readers to cultivate the historically- and politically-conscious "external perspective" that protects against the "fetishization of [aesthetic] autonomy."¹⁶⁰ In a manner wholly congenial to historicist precepts, he insists that "[a]rt perceived strictly aesthetically is art aesthetically misperceived," and that art "relapses back into fetishism and becomes a blind end in itself" as soon as its implication in "society's functional context" is forgotten or repressed.¹⁶¹ On the other hand, however, "art's autonomy remains irrevocable" since it is only "by virtue of separation from empirical reality" and an approach to monadic self-sufficiency that artworks are capable of communicating the truth of historical experience.¹⁶²

In dialectically playing these two perspectives against one another, *Aesthetic Theory* in turn points us toward the specifically *critical* agency that painstaking formal analysis enables. "History is immanent to artworks," Adorno affirms, but it is accessible only through the most "micrological figures" of "artistic detail."¹⁶³ The privileged medium for this kind of reading practice is what Adorno refers to as "second reflection," a style of contemplation that "lays hold of the [artwork's] technical procedures" and produces a cognitively generative "blindness" or "darkness," that "must be *interpreted*, not replaced by the [superficial] clarity of meaning."¹⁶⁴ The payoff of this exploratory grappling with artistic form is nothing more and nothing less than "the capacity for reflection" itself, so that aesthetic experience finally functions as "a stimulus to the possibility of critical thought and discovery."¹⁶⁵ As Robert Kaufman emphasizes, however, this critical faculty "is not so much a guarantor of any particular ethics, politics, and/or agency, as their necessary prerequisite."¹⁶⁶ The aesthetic is thus best understood as having a properly "protopolitical vocation," an essential but preparatory role in bringing about social progress.¹⁶⁷ Regarding Spenser specifically, Gregerson is no doubt correct that his poem obliges us both "to act and to understand," and "underscores the interdependence of these functions in one of his favorite verbs: to read." But even as his "poem is built to produce the reader that it, and the nation, require," the fact that the refinement of "an active reading subject ... is the one true end of Spenser's poem," then we have to construe the text as the pre- or proto-political artifact it is, one that remains preparatory to, rather than co-terminous with, political action.¹⁶⁸

¹⁵⁹ On the "nonidentity" of the Adornian art object, see Rachel Eisendrath, "Going Outside: Human Subjectivity and the Aesthetic Object, *The Faerie Queene*, Book III," *Spenser Studies* 30 (2015), 346-8.

¹⁶⁰ *Aesthetic Theory*, 3, 253. On the "double character" of art, see *ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 6, 341, 252.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 1, 4.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 191, 358.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 26-7; emphasis added.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 341; Kaufman, "Red Kant," 719. See also Teskey's account of the relationship between Spenser's poetics and experimental, exploratory, pre-conceptual thought in "Courtesy and Thinking," esp. 344-7, and "Thinking Moments in *The Faerie Queene*," *Spenser Studies* 22 (2007): 103-25.

¹⁶⁶ Kaufman, "Red Kant," 719.

¹⁶⁷ Kaufman, "Negatively Capable Dialectics," 382. Guenther has recently offered the term "instrumental aesthetics" to describe the social function of early modern poetry, which holds out of the promise "that it *can* produce in the reader the habit of mind that *enables* ideologically minded action." See *Magical Imaginations*, 9, 52 (emphasis added). I concur with her formulation, but would stress the necessarily provisional and preliminary nature of the interventions her own account implies.

¹⁶⁸ Gregerson, "*The Faerie Queene* (1590)," in *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser*, ed. Richard McCabe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 216.

IV. Reading the Virtues: Character and Example in *The Faerie Queene*

My discussion so far has leaned heavily on the conceptual opposition of aesthetics-and-politics, an expediency that is perhaps inevitable given the distinguished provenance of such explanatory binaries in the history of Spenser studies. In fact, the most celebrated theories of allegory in *The Faerie Queene* have been structured by an analogous set of critical oppositions setting centripetal order against centrifugal energy. C.S. Lewis thus posits a distinction between each book's "allegorical core" and its "complex adventures"; Northrop Frye between the legends' "houses of recognition" and the dispersed symbolism of the surrounding narrative; Angus Fletcher between systematized "temple" and chaotic "labyrinth" sequences; James Nohrnberg between unifying "Pan" and indeterminate "Proteus" principles; and Gordon Teskey between violent allegorical "capture" and organic narrative heterogeneity.¹⁶⁹ These conceptions of Spenserian poetics all view the text as a continual mediation of fixity and flux, monumental iconicity and erratic mutability.¹⁷⁰ However critics might conceive of Spenser's allegorical logic in its local complications, though, most share a sense of the fundamental coherence of *The Faerie Queene's* six fully elaborated moral virtues. While the precise nature of those virtues has often been disputed, scholars tend to assume that once their essential qualities and prerogatives have been determined, the diverse complications of each book's enfolding narrative become explicable. As Rosemond Tuve once insisted, formulating a belief that remains conventional today, "The sought virtue is the unifying factor in *every* Book."¹⁷¹ Few today would dispute A.C. Hamilton's modifying claim that the virtues need to be understood through the sum-total of the fictional plots they organize, rather than as transposable philosophical theories—that they "cannot be understood apart from the book[s]" in which Spenser places them. But even this construction still implies that the virtues are forces of a *positive* order, determining "the relation of [each book's] parts" to their centralizing principles.¹⁷²

As I will argue, however, this belief in the fixed coherence of the virtues is inadequate to the conflictual dynamism with which Spenser imbues them, especially in terms of their ethico-political valuation. *The Faerie Queene's* virtues, that is, are hardly the stable centers of benign influence on a wholly external realm of vice that they are often taken by criticism to be. Instead, they are marked by an internal tension that becomes increasingly fraught as each book

¹⁶⁹ See Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, 381; Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1963), 77; Fletcher, *The Prophetic Moment*, 12-3, 29; Nohrnberg, *The Analogy of "The Faerie Queene"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), ix; Teskey, *Allegory and Violence*, 23, 29-30.

¹⁷⁰ These are the key terms of Fletcher's opposition between "Two Frames in the Iconography of Thinking" in the literary text: one model occurs "when an idea or concept is perfectly fixed, like an item that can be labeled," reduced to the condition of a monumentally reductive icon, whereas the other is evident when voices in a text are "processually driven to endless thinking" in a dynamic of just-barely stabilized "flux." Fletcher identifies the former model as "the allegorical mode," but, as I will explain below, I would insist that the latter construction is as important to Spenser's poetics as the former. See *Colors of the Mind: Conjectures on Thinking in Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 35.

¹⁷¹ *Allegorical Imagery: Some Medieval Books and Their Posterity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 369; emphasis in the original.

¹⁷² See *FQ*, 5.

progresses.¹⁷³ As I will demonstrate in what follows, moreover, the virtues are dialectically conflicted not only in the makeup of their specific content, the conventional features of holiness or temperance that Spenser might choose to emphasize at the expense of others. More importantly, they betray a constitutive duplicity because the very features that make them capable of reforming social crises in *The Faerie Queene* are also those that render them ineffectual at doing so, and even lead to the intensification of those same crises. I glanced in this direction at the start of the chapter, when I suggested that justice and courtesy ultimately augment, as much as they eradicate, the evils that they seem to oppose. Hamilton argues in a similar vein when he observes that “in displaying the special powers of a virtue, each book displays also its radical limitations without the other virtues.”¹⁷⁴ This is a valuable insight, but it, too, needs to be supplemented by the recognition that because each legend is mediated from the perspective of its particular patron—with his unique resources of intellect, affect, and material technologies—our access to the virtues’ worldly realization is in fact *always* marked by just this kind of limitation. As Kathleen Williams put it long ago, the virtues function as a “means of organization,” with each one “provid[ing] a fresh point of view, a fresh centre from which the vast subject [of *The Faerie Queene*] may be contemplated.”¹⁷⁵ To invoke a different but analogous vocabulary, we might also say that each of Spenser’s virtues is akin to the Althusserian notion of a theoretical *problematic*: a “field of vision,” in Marjorie Levinson’s definition, that is “unique to a position embodied ... in a person at some moment, in some place, and having [the] conceptual, affective, and discursive tools” unique to that particular subject position.¹⁷⁶

What needs to be avoided, however, is the assumption that the virtues should be equated, through a simple identification, with the beneficial actions of each book’s “good” characters. As Paul Alpers long ago explained, Spenserian characters represent not “coherent dramatic individuals,” but “congeries of characteristics” that reveal different aspects of a virtue in action.¹⁷⁷ Characters’ conduct should therefore be seen in a *diagnostic*, rather than a *prescriptive*, light—illustrative of each virtue’s singular capacities, as well as inadequacies, for addressing particular

¹⁷³ The theorists of Spenser’s allegory who have come closest to conveying the double character of the virtues are Harry Berger, Jr. and Teskey. In the former’s account of “The Spenserian Dynamics,” the privileged explanatory trope is the *discordia concors*, in which “a diversity of many produces an overarching unity of one only so long as diversity and unity are sustained together in equilibrium.” But the impulse toward discord continually counteracts this provisional stasis, and achieving concord involves “a sustained process of control which can never stop.” The principle of unity within *discordia concors* is therefore “dynamic,” marked by “a restless dialectical thrusting” amongst its contrary influences. See “The Spenserian Dynamics” (orig. pub. 1968) in *Revisionary Play*, 20–1, 27. Berger’s understanding is similar to what Teskey refers to as the vital presence of “thinking moments in *The Faerie Queene*,” where *moment* has a Hegelian ambiguity that means both “a moment of arrest” and “a destabilizing element in a totality.” “The two meanings of *moment* twist together opposite things in a dynamic situation,” Teskey explains: they conjoin “instability and stasis, movement and arrest,” in a “continual oscillation” that finds its formal analogue in the poem’s “oscillation between narrative movement and symbolic tableau.” See “Thinking Moments,” 114–5. While Berger and Teskey do not address the makeup of the virtues specifically, their emphasis on the constantly shifting push-and-pull throughout Spenser’s text conveys something of the dialectical conflict that marks their construction.

¹⁷⁴ *FQ*, p. 6.

¹⁷⁵ *Spenser’s World of Glass: A Reading of The Faerie Queene* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), xix.

¹⁷⁶ Marjorie Levinson, “Reflections on the New Historicism,” *European Romantic Review* 23.3 (2012), 358. Her discussion is drawn from Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Verso, 1997).

¹⁷⁷ “How to Read *The Faerie Queene*,” 434.

dilemmas.¹⁷⁸ The virtue determines the character, that is to say, not the other way around. At the same time, insofar as thinking and acting require the agency of an individualized subject, the workings of each virtue must be mediated by discrete characters like Artegall and Calidore whose behaviors remain apprehensible and (at least in principle) replicable at a human level.¹⁷⁹

The essential feature of Spenserian character that I therefore wish to emphasize is its mediation, at an individual level, of the poem's larger metaphysical order. Readers of Spenser are likely familiar with this issue from Berger's celebrated notion of allegorical "inscape," where the fictional landscape "emerge[s] out of the problems and actions of his characters." Berger's account has rightfully been influential and remains exceptionally generative, especially as teaching tool. Nevertheless, the implication that characters in *The Faerie Queene* function like the "coherent dramatic individuals" that Alpers finds alien to the poem—Berger speaks of "the changing psychic development of the major characters" as its primary motivation of narrative progress—needs to be qualified.¹⁸⁰ For my purposes, it makes better sense to reverse the causal priority of these entities, following Fredric Jameson's discussion of romance narrative in *The Political Unconscious*. Drawing on the work of Frye and Kenneth Burke, Jameson sees character in this genre as "a registering apparatus" for the more meaningful "semic organization" of the romance world, with its archetypal oppositions between high and low, angelic and demonic, and so forth.¹⁸¹ Each book's titular virtue should therefore be understood as a conceptual framework, actualized with varying emphases by individual "character-positions," that both enables and restricts certain modes of thought and action in its response to social impasse.¹⁸² This double character, both empowering and disempowering for characters and readers alike, is why the virtues generate both reformative solutions to historical-political crises, as well as those crises' further deterioration. Viewed in this way, the legends of *The Faerie Queene* enforce on Spenser's readers something like the "austere dialectical imperative" that Jameson considers the burden of authentic critique. In Jameson's Adornian usage of the term, "dialectical" thought does not eventuate in conceptual fusion or reconciliation, but rather "urges us to do the impossible": to think through social and historical phenomena in all their positive and negative aspects, at one and the same time (or at least come as close to doing so as is humanly feasible). Like a politically-charged version of Keatsian negative capability, Jameson's dialectic mandates a readerly collocation of apparently opposed phenomena "within a single thought, and without attenuating any of the force of either judgment" in a spurious act of critical synthesis.¹⁸³ As I will

¹⁷⁸ As Alpers claims elsewhere, while "most interpreters of *The Faerie Queene* feel that their job is to determine the rights and wrongs of particular cases and to assign praise or blame for particular actions," readers' responses to Spenser's characters should instead be based in morally neutral critical analysis, and not in "ethical judgments." See *The Poetry of "The Faerie Queene,"* 284.

¹⁷⁹ McCabe thus remarks that for Spenser's allegory "to retain any objective correlative" with social reality, its characters need to "correspond to some human agency," and not only transcendental abstractions. See *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment*, 98.

¹⁸⁰ *Revisionary Play*, 23.

¹⁸¹ *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 113, 111.

¹⁸² The term "character-positions" is Jameson's. See *The Political Unconscious*, 113.

¹⁸³ *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 47. Jameson's specifically non-Hegelian usage of "dialectical" draws on Adorno's "negative dialectics." As Kaufman lucidly describes it, this practice aims at "the undoing of dialectical synthesis ... in order to prevent dialectical reification and positivism." See "Red Kant," 709-10, as well as Adorno's own *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton

show in the following chapters, this kind of dialectical analysis is especially pertinent to Spenser's anatomization of the counter-intuitive ways that justice and courtesy blend into *injustice* and *discourtesy* in the course of Books V and VI.

Along with these double-facing formulations of the virtues and character, Spenser's other structural technique for coordinating the conceptual binaries so vital to *The Faerie Queene* is his use of examples. In the "Letter to Raleigh," the poem's project of subject formation centers in its delivery of educative examples: while the text, Spenser tells us, is "coloured with an historicall fiction" for the "variety of matter" the mode affords, its "delight" goes hand-in-hand with the "profite of [its] ensample."¹⁸⁴ If, in idealizing poetry as a means of social renovation, Spenser positioned his poem unmistakably within the humanist tradition of political activism, then his reliance on exemplarity to mediate between aesthetics and politics was in fact no different. As Jeff Dolven explains, "[e]xample was humanism's longed-for bridge from precept to praxis" since it combined both phenomena in a rhetoric that is "half experience, half precept, both narrative, and not." Spenser's poem, in Dolven's account, constantly displays the allegorical process of condensing undigested narrative experience into abstract lessons, and example occupies the "fragile middle category" between the two. By conjoining "ease of statement" with the "practical difficulty" of applying the lesson to future phenomena, however, the poem also points to examples' limitations. For Dolven, the Spenserian paradigm of reading-by-example is the injunction to be "ware of like agein" (I.viii.44), a maxim that "has a comforting music to it, but will not help when the next Duessa comes along."¹⁸⁵ Victoria Kahn, however, draws out a more optimistic implication of the inevitable disarticulation between theory and practice that occurs with any example. In Kahn's argument, the "practice of interpretation" that examples enforce constitutes training for "the active life" of humanist labor, and the resistance of the specific case to universal theory is critically enabling "because they call for judgment and use rather than naive or slavish imitation." Consequently, even seeming failures of exemplarity to illustrate general precepts are instructive, for "in failing, [they] succeed in questioning their subordinate status as mere illustrations of theory."¹⁸⁶

The most formidable debunker of this relationship between abstract generalization and narrative particularity in Spenser's work was Alpers, who disparaged what he took to be the anachronistic understanding of the Renaissance mind on which it was founded. Alpers claims that the modern attitude toward exemplary aphorism—where the poem's sententious moral comments do not "tell what the fiction means, but by their felt inadequacy ... alert us to its complexities and make us better interpreters ourselves"—would have been "merely puzzling to a sixteenth century writer." Instead, Spenser's generalizations offer not "a definitive

(New York: Continuum, 1973). For Keats' famous formulation of negative capability, see *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), I:193.

¹⁸⁴ *FQ*, 715. See also Sidney's Aristotelian claim that poetry strikes a balance between the abstractions of philosophy and the arbitrary particularity of history in coupling "the general notion" to "the particular example." The "speaking picture of poesy," therefore "is uniquely capable of conveying "a true lively knowledge" to its reader. See *Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, 16.

¹⁸⁵ *Scenes of Instruction in Renaissance Romance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 148, 166, 137, 5, 13. As Teskey similarly observes, the paradigmatic Spenserian maxim of "'not too little, but not too much!' ... is about as useful in any particular situation as 'buy low and sell high!' It is true in theory, but it is nearly useless in practice, and starts us oscillating between extremes as we search for the nonexistent middle." See "Thinking Moments," 108.

¹⁸⁶ "Humanism and the Resistance to Theory" in *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, 378–9.

pronouncement” on any given category of experience, but rather “a reason which one *can* take seriously and which *could* be a grounds for action.”¹⁸⁷ This contention was part of Alpers’ larger belief that critics’ expectations of pseudo-novelistic consistency in *The Faerie Queene* is misplaced, since Spenser is never interested in the determination of absolute truth, but in “the provisional adopting of attitudes and evaluations”—in prompting his audience to a particular reaction that *might* be adequate to a given situation, but that does not rule out other responses, either.¹⁸⁸ As always, Alpers’ analysis is a worthwhile check on contemporary protocols of academic reading, which run the risk of being unresponsive to the peculiarities of Spenser’s poetics. But his repudiation does not resolve the more fundamental issue that Dolven and Kahn raise in a satisfactory way. As Picciotto observes, the relationship between the general and the particular that governs the logic of exemplarity as such is “a problem posed [afresh] by every literary work,” since each one “inevitably engages us in the task of aligning concrete thing and abstract meaning.”¹⁸⁹ With a poem like Spenser’s, which persistently dramatizes the drive toward allegorical condensation, the conjunction of narrative detail and abstract meaning is almost always an open question, and any critical operation presuming a degree of formal unity must construe the juxtaposition through an act of strenuously attentive interpretation.

This dynamic is what makes Kahn’s link between refined critical judgment and empowered political engagement apt for responding to *The Faerie Queene*. For the kind of reading necessary to literary interpretation is fundamentally the same as that required by *praxis* and social contingency; the two realms are homologous, as well as causally adjacent. As I stated above, Alpers seems to me correct in asserting that a Spenser is not a casuist in the moralizing manner of “assign[ing] praise or blame for particular actions” to his various characters.¹⁹⁰ His poem, however, might be construed as casuistic insofar as it becomes a “discourse of the application of principle to circumstances,” concerned with “the positing of worlds—normative orders—against which chance and contingency might be established as such.”¹⁹¹ It is by determining what constitutes principle rather mere chance throughout Spenser’s text that readers are inculcated in the “gentle discipline” at which the poet aims. But this recuperative account of the “active reading subject’s” social empowerment nevertheless returns us to the equivocal relationship between the aesthetic and the political with which we began. If the interpretive rigor and readerly agency that are fostered by interrogating virtue, character, and literary example are what make a reader fit for the *vita activa*, the question remains: at what point does the potentially endless activity of critical inquiry actually cease? When are the intellectual energies of such a reading practice finally directed back to empirical reality, instead of being merely

¹⁸⁷ “Narration in *The Faerie Queene*,” *ELH* 44 (1977), 24-5; emphasis added.

¹⁸⁸ *The Poetry of “The Faerie Queene,”* 288.

¹⁸⁹ “Circumstantial Particulars, Particular Individuals, and Defoe” in *Reflections on Sentiment: Essays in Honor of George Starr*, ed. Alessa Johns (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2016), 33. See also J. Hillis Miller’s articulation of the paradoxical, and interpretively challenging, phenomenon: “No choice of an example is innocent. Each carries with it a whole set of perhaps question-begging assumptions” since the exemplary part is “at once a unique unrepeatable feature of a heterogeneous whole and a cunning exact repetition in small of the large.” See “Parabolic Exemplarity: The Example of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*” in *Unruly Examples: On the Rhetoric of Exemplarity*, ed. Alexander Gelley (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 162-3.

¹⁹⁰ *The Poetry of “The Faerie Queene,”* 284.

¹⁹¹ Chandler, *England in 1819*, 39-40.

“communicat[ed] furiously to the margins of books”?¹⁹² This is the imperative, but finally unanswerable, question that *The Faerie Queene* will pose over the course of the Legends of Justice and Courtesy.

V. Poetic Agency and the Limits of Art in Spenser's Career

Spenser's ambivalent conception of imaginative literature's social and political efficacy (or lack thereof) is what makes his oeuvre, especially the later texts, such a revealing case study in the history of aesthetics-and-politics. Indeed, it is in his shifting constructions of authorial personae, as well as in his less explicit thematizations of the relationship between poetry and extra-literary *praxis*, that we can discern the ostensibly “modern” extremes of aesthetic experience: in the first case, the utopian promise of the literary to spur social renovation, and, in the second, the dystopian suspicion of art's utter irrelevance to empirical reality. Indeed, Spenser has long been invoked as *the* paradigmatic exemplar of each of these attitudes in Renaissance England, with *The Faerie Queene* being aptly described as a near-schizophrenic “emblem of [both] Elizabethan aspirations and anxieties.”¹⁹³ We can obtain a more comprehensive view of this dichotomy by situating it in the context of Spenser's broader career.

On the one hand, as Helgerson has argued, Spenser was not only the most accomplished writer of the Elizabethan Age, but the era's “only poet of distinctly laureate ambition.”¹⁹⁴ This self-consciously emboldened authorial pose was communicated, unmistakably, in the prefatory material to *The Shepheardes Calender*, which refers to Spenser as “this our new Poete.” Presented as the English Vergil and the worthy successor of Chaucer, Spenser is ascribed an unprecedented literary “auctoritie,” and the editor-figure E.K. promises that he “shall be not onely kiste, but also beloved of all, embraced of the most, and wondred at of the best.”¹⁹⁵ Just one year later, Spenser would advertise his ambition, in correspondence with Gabriel Harvey on the future of English letters, to find a style answerable to memorializing the nation in verse: “For, why a Gods name may not we, as else the Greekes, haue the kingdome of oure owne Language[?]”, he wonders.¹⁹⁶ In the 1590 first edition of *The Faerie Queene*, of course, Spenser once again places himself in a Vergilian lineage, attaching prefatory verses to his epic-romance that directly echo the paratexts of Renaissance editions of the *Aeneid*, and audaciously sets his work the epochal task of “fashion[ing] a gentleman ... in vertuous and gentle discipline.”¹⁹⁷ By early 1591, just a year after his personal audience with the queen, Elizabeth had granted Spenser an annual pension of €50, all but making official his laureate status. More than just an artistic credential, such a seal of royal

¹⁹² G.K. Hunter, *John Lyly: The Humanist as Courtier* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 33.

¹⁹³ Brady, “Spenser's Irish Crisis,” 18, 49.

¹⁹⁴ *Self-Crowned Laureates*, 55.

¹⁹⁵ See the Epistle to *The Shepheardes Calender*, in *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. William A. Oram, et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 13-4.

¹⁹⁶ See *Three proper wittie familiar Letters*, in *Variorum*, IX: 16. On the nationalist implications of this text, see Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), esp. 25-40.

¹⁹⁷ See I.proem.1 (“Lo I the man ...”); *FQ*, 714. At the start of Book II, Spenser also figures his poem as the “fayre mirrhour” not only of Elizabeth, but of the queen's imperial “realmes.” The text thus functions as analogue of the newly discovered “great Regions ... / Which to late age were neuer mentioned,” and his authorial labor the imaginative equivalent of the “hardy enterprize” of colonial expansion (proem.4, 2).

approval would have suggested to the author at least “the *possibility* of enlisting the queen’s support for his militant cause.”¹⁹⁸ By the mid-1590s, then, Spenser could claim a uniquely privileged place not only as the first man to take “poetry beyond repentance” in Elizabethan England,¹⁹⁹ but as perhaps the only poet who could plausibly hope to “exert an *upward influence* upon the shape of the never-entirely-settled Elizabethan political agenda.”²⁰⁰

On the other hand, however, the 1596 edition of *The Faerie Queene* has long struck critics as betraying an “embittered and embattled” tone, especially regarding literature’s ability to alter the course of public affairs. For Brady, the immediately preceding years were marked by “personal crisis,” as “the recognition and advancement” Spenser long sought, and that would have come with “an honoured place at court,” had definitively “failed to materialize.”²⁰¹ Relegated to a life of colonial exile, Spenser was, as Hadfield notes, “a minor public servant attempting to complete with increasing disillusionment an English national epic” that would soon be “marginalised” from public life in much the same way that the author himself was restricted to the empire’s periphery.²⁰² The indications of Spenser’s sense of literary and extra-literary disempowerment are, indeed, visible throughout the later poetry. In Book IV of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser draws attention to his erotically-charged “looser rimes,” which, he tells us, have been censured by “the rugged forehead” of Lord Burghley, Elizabeth’s chief counselor; the author’s “vaine poems” are specifically juxtaposed with the weighty matters of “kingdomes causes, and affaires of state” (proem.1). Even as Spenser denounces Burghley and his philistine associates here as “Stoicke censours” lacking in both moral and aesthetic judgment (3), the only option he imagines for ameliorating their disapproval is to appeal directly to the queen. But the odds of such favorable monarchical intercession seem agonizingly long, as Spenser indicates in a tendentious episode in Book V. When Arthur and Artegall enter the palace of Mercilla, they notice the maimed tongue of “a Poet bad” that has been “Nayld to a post” as a result of his “bold speeches” and “lewd poems” (V.ix.25). The charges against the author are written out for all to see, but composed

In cyphers strange, that few could rightly read,
 BON FONT: but *bon* that once had written bin,
 Was raced out, and *Mal* was now put in.
 So now *Malfont* was plainly to be red ...

¹⁹⁸ Herron, *Spenser’s Irish Work*, 20; emphasis in the original.

¹⁹⁹ Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates*, 100. On Spenser’s conception of his own vocation or professional identity, see also Jeffrey Knapp, “Spenser the Priest,” *Representations* 81.1 (2003), 61–78, and Richard Rambuss, *Spenser’s Secret Career* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

²⁰⁰ Suttie, “Edmund Spenser’s Political Pragmatism,” *Studies in Philology* 95 (1998): 57; emphasis in the original. See also Brady on this point: “in Ireland the poet who was also the planter, the part-time official and the man of wide experience could actively contribute to the resolution of one of the most urgent problems in England’s crisis” (“Spenser’s Irish Crisis,” 47).

²⁰¹ “Spenser’s Irish Crisis,” 41–2.

²⁰² *Literature, Politics and National Identity*, 20. Helgerson, moreover, discerns in the final books of *The Faerie Queene*, as well his other late poems, the “disappointment” and “regretful air” that attend the poet’s “impending withdrawal from the public world.” See *Self-Crowned Laureates*, 88–9. For McCabe, finally, the later parts of Spenser’s epic “explore the nature of [the work’s] incompleteness,” as the poet who has spent his maturity “on the periphery of the Elizabethan state” infuses “Ovidian moods” of political and artistic marginalization “into Virgilian forms.” See *Spenser’s Monstrous Regiment*, 251, 1.

In this mirror of Elizabethan literary culture and the state censorship that shadowed it, governmental misconstruction of authorial intent substitutes “plaine” reading for “right” reading, and the author’s true identity is put under erasure.²⁰³ The implication that Bonfont’s “wicked sclaunders” have been willfully misconstrued by a malicious political elite is further strengthened by the final stanzas of Book VI, where the Blatant Beast—the epitome of courtly envy—is said to range throughout the contemporary world, preying in particular on “the gentle Poets rime.” Even as Spenser pleads the innocence of his “former writs,” he concedes that his poetry is now limited merely to delighting, rather than instructing, its readers: “seeke to please,” he acerbically instructs his verses, since unprofitable gratification is now considered even “wisemens threasure” (xii.40-1). Most striking of all, perhaps, is the absence of the “Letter to Raleigh” in the 1596 *Faerie Queene*. Even in its triumphant optimism, the “Letter” had begun by acknowledging “how doubtfully all Allegories may be construed” and anticipating the “gealous opinions and misconstructions” to which it would be subject. In the void created by the text’s removal, then, Spenser’s reader is loosed even further amidst the poem’s labyrinthine ambiguities and its now uncertain social purpose.²⁰⁴

Seen in its longer arc, Spenser’s career provides ample evidence of a poetic program that audaciously inserts itself into the world of early modern politics, one that conceives itself capable not only of textualizing the great events of the age but of actively shaping them. Alternately, however, Spenser simultaneously betrays all the guilty suspicions of literature’s inconsequence to public affairs that one finds in modern aesthetic theory, as he resigns himself to the margins of national life and directs his energies to the elaborate enrichment of a superfluous and self-regarding aesthetic artifact. As I will show in the following chapters, however, these opposed conceptions of poetry’s vocation as a vehicle for political engagement were not the mutually exclusive poles between which Spenser shuttled at different points in his career, nor were they the starting- and ending-points of an evolutionary trajectory that progressed from youthful optimism to mature cynicism.²⁰⁵ As early as the envoy to *The Shepheardes Calender*, Spenser takes

²⁰³ The writings of Bon/Malfont, of course, bear a close resemblance to Spenser’s own, with the former’s “lewd poems” blending into the “looser rimes” of the Book IV proem.

²⁰⁴ *FQ*, 714. The precise reasons for the “Letter’s” removal from the poem’s second edition are still unclear. For Hadfield’s speculation that this move had more to do with Raleigh’s decreased standing at court than with Spenser’s didactic objectives, see *Edmund Spenser: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 232-5.

²⁰⁵ This latter perspective has been a surprisingly durable feature of Spenser criticism, articulated most eloquently in Helgerson’s account of the breach that he sees eventually emerging “between the poet of the inner pastoral world and the poet of heroic accomplishment.” See *Self-Crowned Laureates*, 92. As “traditionalist” as this account might strike us today, the trajectory that it charts remains a popular feature of much contemporary scholarship. To take a representative example, in *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser*, Gregerson describes *The Faerie Queene*’s first edition in boldly activist terms: “aspiring to fashion its reader in consummate virtue, which is to say, in consummate fitness for service to a polemically idealized Reformation Faerie Queene, the poem imagines for itself an active role in bringing that destiny about” (198). According to Elizabeth Jane Bellamy, however, “*The Faerie Queene* (1596)” is marked rather by “incoherence and disunity,” and even “outright chaos” (271-2). “[W]earied of chivalric heroism,” the second edition signals, for Bellamy as for Helgerson, “the end of the ambitions of dynastic epic ... [which] Spenser had once promised his readers” (289-90). But as Norbrook sensibly remarks, in spite of the “bitterness” of the later books, it is reductive in the extreme to believe that Spenser “began *The Faerie Queene* as a naïve idealist and suddenly realized after 1590 that politics can be an unpleasant business.” See *Poetry and Politics*, 14. What we require, therefore, is a framework for reading Spenser that registers the change in degree, rather than kind, of his

it for granted “that Envie [will] barke at thee,” and that his writing will come into “blame” and “jeopardie” as a result of its interventionist ambitions.²⁰⁶ Books V and VI of *The Faerie Queene*, meanwhile, still find Spenser directly addressing the queen in their proems, and engaging (however allusively) topics of urgent political import. The bifurcated authorial poses of emboldened and restricted agency, of active engagement and contemplative marginalization, should instead be construed, I will argue, as the ever-present, mutually informing components of Spenser’s poetic identity. In this, his great work is not only emblematic of the vexed relationship between art and politics in the English Renaissance, but prophetic for the ambiguous social agency of modern aesthetic experience, as well.

thinking on the relationship between art and its social totality. In urging such a framework, I again seek to follow Goldsmith’s account of Blake, in which “political and apolitical tendencies are knitted together within the most characteristic practices of his art and verse, rather than being parceled out among different texts, different times, and different influences” (*Blake’s Agitation*, 83).

²⁰⁶ See “To His Booke,” in *Shorter Poems*, 12.

Chapter 2

Spilling the Principal, Saving the Part: Justice and Judgment in *The Faerie Queene* V

It must be difficult to judge and to decide. A decision worthy of the name—that is, a critical and reflective decision—could not possibly be rapid or easy.

—Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*²⁰⁷

All trades thereof are to be understood to be of three kindes, manuell, intellectuall, and mixed... But the realme of Ireland wanteth the most principall of them, that is, the intellectuall; therfore in seeking to reforme her state, it is specially to be looked unto.

—Spenser, *A View of the State of Ireland*²⁰⁸

I. Theory and Practice: The Fate of “the Literary” in Recent Spenser Studies

Over the past few decades, a remarkably uniform consensus has taken shape among early modern literary scholars: that in the fifth book of *The Faerie Queene* Spenser finally “gets real.”²⁰⁹ Familiar as it has now become, this admiring appraisal represents a dramatic generational shift in opinion about the merits of Book V. For earlier generations of critics, the referential transparency of the Legend of Justice was almost universally considered a defect, with its straightforward allegories of Elizabethan England’s involvement in the Low Countries, France, and Ireland a sign of imaginative exhaustion and polemical narrow-mindedness. Today, however, the text’s immersion in contemporary affairs is regarded as a redeeming virtue: so far from being thought a degraded “fall from prophecy into politics,” critics now generally acclaim the work for its “clear, urgent and directly political nature.”²¹⁰ The far-reaching effects of this reconsideration are readily apparent, for instance, in A.C. Hamilton’s two critical editions of the text. Whereas Book V was still considered “the simplest and ... least liked” installment of *The Faerie Queene* in 1977, by 2007 it had become “the most interesting,” at least for the poem’s multitude of historically-minded readers.²¹¹

The reasons for this alteration are easy enough to find. Critical interest in the Legend surged with the rise of the New Historicism, and not only because the text is “a veritable paradise for the seeker after contemporary allusions.”²¹² Perhaps more importantly, Book V became the focal point for a fundamental rethinking of Spenser’s relationship to the royal establishment and institutions of state. As author of the great epic dedicated to, and most identified with, “the Most High, Mightie and Magnificent Empresse” Elizabeth, Spenser had for centuries been

²⁰⁷ *Politics of Friendship*, 15.

²⁰⁸ *A View*, 148.

²⁰⁹ Lauren Silberman, “*The Faerie Queene*, Book V, and the Politics of the Text: The Kathleen Williams Lecture, 2002,” *Spenser Studies* 19 (2004), 9.

²¹⁰ Brady, “Spenser’s Irish Crisis,” 46–7.

²¹¹ Compare *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A.C. Hamilton (London: Longman, 1977), 525 with *FQ*, 13. All quotations from Spenser’s poem are taken from the latter text, and cited parenthetically by book, canto, and stanza number (with the abbreviation *FQ*, where necessary). See also C.S. Lewis’ mid-century observation that the “fifth book is the least popular in *The Faerie Queene*” (*Allegory of Love*, 347).

²¹² Brady, “Spenser’s Irish Crisis,” 45.

conceived as the queen's unwavering panegyrist—or, in Marx's terms, as her sycophantic, "arse-kissing poet."²¹³ Even Stephen Greenblatt's declaration in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) that Spenser "loves" and "worships power" only put a Foucauldian twist on the author's traditional characterization as one "wholly wedded to the autocratic ruler of the English state."²¹⁴ Since then, however, the consensus has decisively changed, with critics first reimagining Spenser as a "quiet apostate" from the crown, and later as an "undisguisedly critical" opponent of Elizabethan policy.²¹⁵ As we found in the previous chapter, Spenser is now almost universally heard speaking with "an oppositional voice," one that does not "glorify Elizabethan foreign and colonial policy but comment[s] on it from an interventionist Protestant perspective" that conversely laments "the ill effects of [Elizabeth's] half measures in the public sphere."²¹⁶

More specifically, recent scholarship has also insistently proclaimed that the polemical, activist poetics of Book V involves Spenser in an unrelenting subordination of theory to practice, ideals to reality, the contemplative and imaginative to the historical and political. According to a veritable honor roll of today's most esteemed Spenserians, Book V is all about the willing sacrifice of the "beautiful and inspiring" for the sake of "social and political practicality," showing us "the necessity of acting imperfectly in an imperfect world" (Carol Kaske).²¹⁷ The text thematizes, we hear, a descent from the "plane of ideal resolutions to the compromises of human history" (Kenneth Borris); "the paradoxical endeavour of making a 'virtue' of 'necessity'" (Richard McCabe); and "the contradiction between principle and practice," or "the gap between Justice in its ideal form and actual political experience" (Annabel Patterson).²¹⁸ The Legend thus amounts to "a practical consideration of why beautiful ideals have to be sacrificed for immediate political goals" (Lauren Silberman); "a parable illustrating the necessity of compromise" and the fact that "an ideal that cannot always be carried through in practice" (Tobias Gregory); and a "meta-allegory of what happens to heroes [and] myths ... that sidle through a fallen chronometrical cosmos not yet stayed upon the pillars of Eternity" (Anne Lake Prescott).²¹⁹ As such, the work demands to be placed within the domain of "problematic reality" rather than "the Platonic idea" (Michael O'Connell), and constantly proves "how useless an ideal conception of justice is" when approached through "abstract" concepts rather than the "practical problems" of "the real world"

²¹³ See the title page of the 1596 second edition, *FQ*, 27. Marx's epithet was first widely disseminated among literary historians by Norbrook in 1984. See *Poetry and Politics*, 124. For Marx's original reference to "Elizabeths Arschkissende Poet Spenser," see *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx*, ed. Lawrence Krader (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974), 305.

²¹⁴ *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 174. In Greenblatt's famous account, Spenser's allegiance to the Elizabethan regime results in his "passionate worship of imperialism" (*ibid.*).

²¹⁵ Teskey, *Allegory and Violence*, 175; Suttie, "Spenser's Political Pragmatism," 62.

²¹⁶ Hadfield, *Literature, Politics and National Identity*, 176; Gregory, "Shadowing Intervention," 366. The clearest indication of this sea change in thinking about Spenser's relationship to "the establishment" and court power is to be found in Hadfield's recent biography of the poet. The Spenser on offer here is no obsequious flatterer of the Queen and her ministers, but (as Hadfield insists at several points) someone marked by his "astonishingly rude [behavior] to the good and the great throughout his life." See *A Life*, 402.

²¹⁷ "Chivalric Idealism versus Pragmatism in Spenser and Malory: Taking Up Arms in a Wrongful Quarrel (The Kathleen Williams Lecture, 2010)," *Spenser Studies* 27 (2012), 2, 18.

²¹⁸ Borris, *Allegory and Epic in English Renaissance Literature: Heroic Form in Sidney, Spenser and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 62-3; McCabe, *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment*, 217; Patterson, *Reading between the Lines* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 89.

²¹⁹ Silberman, "Politics of the Text," 6; Gregory, "Shadowing Intervention," 376; Prescott, "Foreign Policy in Fairyland," 195.

(Andrew Hadfield).²²⁰ Propounding “not an idealist politics but a practical, pragmatic politics” (John D. Staines), Book V bears witness, for an entire generation of critics, to a fundamental change in Spenser’s artistic practice.²²¹ Like a Marxian-materialist successor to the poet’s own earlier Hegelian idealism, the Legend of Justice, it now appears, seeks not to interpret the world, but to change it.²²²

This type of critical rhetoric has become quite familiar in the twenty-first century, especially as an expression of the New Historicist stress on early modern poetry’s “deep functional utility” and its capacity “to make things happen” in external reality.²²³ Nevertheless, there is something remarkably strange and strained about these critics’ depreciation of beauty, idealism, abstraction, and so on—qualities traditionally associated with “aesthetic ideology.” What began as a salutary turn against the intellectual and moral complacency of ignoring *The Faerie Queene*’s complicity with the atrocities of the Elizabethan regime has now reified into a parody of an earlier “cultural poetics” or Marxian-inflected ideology critique. The mechanical quality of much recent scholarship on Book V is fully felt, for instance, in the tendentious vocabulary to which it so often returns—in simplistic and condescending references to “beautiful ideals” and “the real world,” or in strenuously redundant phrasings like “a practical, pragmatic politics.” Indeed, historicist Spenser critics today often bear a resemblance to Matthew Arnold’s satirical portrait of the Victorian Englishman, valuing “what is political and practical so much that ideas easily become objects of dislike in his eyes,” and for whom “practice is everything, a free play of the mind is nothing.”²²⁴ In what seems to me the transparently ironic scenario of finding such constructions in the work of poetry scholars, we might discern an example of “the deep embarrassment about the marginality of literary history now” that Alan Liu identified back in 1989, “the postmodern fear that in the face of history, *literary* history or any such mere show of intellect is passé.”²²⁵ Other, related trends in literary culture today have no doubt contributed to Spenserians’ genuflections to a historically-determinate practical politics as the unshakeable ground of the Real: the unstinting esteem accorded to “materialist” modes of inquiry in contemporary theory, for one, and the preference for concrete particularity over abstract generalization in virtually all fields of writing, for another.²²⁶ But it is the systematic assimilation

²²⁰ O’Connell, *Mirror and Veil: The Historical Dimension of Spenser’s Faerie Queene* (Chapel Hill: Univresity of North Carolina Press, 1977), 126; Hadfield, *Spenser’s Irish Experience*, 149.

²²¹ *Tragic Histories*, 124.

²²² See Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach” (1845) in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 173: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.” This connection is made more explicit in Brady’s study: “Hitherto Spenser had sought merely to inspire his world, but now the point was to change it.” See “Spenser’s Irish Crisis,” 47.

²²³ Greenblatt, “What Is the History of Literature?,” 462; Montrose, “The Elizabethan Subject and the Spenserian Text,” 305–6.

²²⁴ *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, 35.

²²⁵ “The Power of Formalism: The New Historicism,” *ELH* 56.4 (1989), 722.

²²⁶ See, respectively, Goldsmith, “Almost Gone: Rembrandt and the Ends of Materialism,” *New Literary History* 45.3 (2014): 411–43, and Joanna Picciotto, “Circumstantial Particulars, Particular Individuals, and Defoe,” 29–53. Goldsmith’s article discusses “the role materialism plays in our own critical discourses” at present, and specifically its status as “a conceptual ground so pervasive as to operate virtually uncontested.” “Although we might challenge or promote one version or another (historicist, economic, affective, dialectical, speculative, ecological, thing theorized, object oriented, new empirical),” Goldsmith observes, “no one today would seriously argue *against* materialism” (416). Picciotto, meanwhile, notes the similarly universal and even “compulsory identification of good writing with concrete particulars in modern literary culture”: “Today teachers of writing at every level are united in their

of artistic intent and effect to Spenser's social, political, and historical commitments that has been the keynote of current scholarship on the Legend of Justice, one that has only grown louder in recent years. Hence, whereas an historian like Ciaran Brady felt obliged, in the 1980s, to hedge his comparison of Book V and *A View* by conceding that one "remains a poem" and the other "a prose dialogue," and so entail "correspondingly different" hermeneutic processes, it is more common today to hear of the effective equivalence between "propaganda and literature" in the early modern period, differences between the two being (as we have heard) a "merely post-Kantian" anachronism.²²⁷ The pervasive devaluation of features like intellection, abstraction, contemplation, and so forth, in discussions of Book V thus provide compelling evidence for Geoffrey Galt Harpham's belief that "when literary criticism becomes uneasy or embarrassed about the fecklessness, irresponsibility, and gratuitousness of interpretation, it turns, as to a powerful father, to history."²²⁸

A specific example of how this mentality plays out in practical criticism of the Legend offers clarity. Spenser's personification of justice, the knight Artegall, is modeled to a significant extent on the author's one-time employer, Arthur Grey, the militant Lord Deputy of Ireland from 1580-2. As personal secretary and amanuensis, Spenser was responsible for scripting Grey's accounts of his most controversial decisions as governor to Elizabeth; these included Grey's brutal execution of Irish and Spanish prisoners at Smerwick and his acquiescence in the devastating Munster famine that followed.²²⁹ Spenser, however, would later offer what appears to be an unambiguous defense of Grey's bloody conduct in *A View*, which describes him as a "right noble Lord," "a most wise pilote," and an "honourable man."²³⁰ The parallel between historical personage and fictional character becomes clearest in the denouement of Book V, when Artegall is called away from an allegorical Ireland and back to Faerie Court, "ere he could reforme it

preference for concrete details over 'dead' abstractions and generalizations, and the result of their efforts is that everyone now knows that good writing shows rather than tells ..." (37). While the specific terms "materialist" and "concrete" do not necessarily appear with great frequency in the recent Spenser criticism I have been discussing, the significant overlap with the kind of theoretical and aesthetic preferences Goldsmith and Picciotto describe as being almost universal in the academy today strike me as self-evident. See also Fredric Jameson's discussion of the contemporary preference, among intellectuals, for the "immanent" over the "transcendental" in *Postmodernism*, esp. 181-217.

²²⁷ Brady, "Spenser's Irish Crisis," 18; Staines, *Tragic Histories*, 4; Guenther, *Magical Imaginations*, 9. The distance that criticism has traveled can be measured by how startling it is to find Brady making the case for "the importance of history to Spenser's poem" (43 n.77). Earlier historicist scholars, however, also often felt compelled to account for the consensus view of the text's aesthetic limitations. See, for example, O'Connell's study of the "historical dimension" of Book V: "The poem fails when Spenser is unable, for a variety of reasons, to make his poem an authentic vehicle of prophecy, to judge history in sufficiently moral terms" (*Mirror and Veil*, 126).

²²⁸ *Shadows of Ethics*, 147. Liu again makes a similar point: "The New Historicism ... is the supremely *self-conscious* embarrassment of the postmodern intellect as expressed in the medium of historical consciousness." See "The Power of Formalism," 745.

²²⁹ Elizabeth's dismay at Grey's imposition of martial law was due not only to the vast expenditures required for maintaining an overseas army, but to the excessively cruel treatment of rebel soldiers—who remained, in the Crown's view, the Queen's own subjects. As McCabe explains, the legal questions posed by England's colonization of Ireland led Elizabeth to insist that "her ministers govern in accordance with common law," a "policy [that] was anathema to Spenser and many other New English commentators." See *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment*, 95. For an extensive account of Spenser's career as Grey's secretary, see Hadfield, *A Life*, 153-95; for the author's composition of Grey's letters back to court, see 165-9.

²³⁰ *A View*, 28.

thoroughly" (xii.27): as McCabe observes, the poem "all but quotes Grey's words" at this point.²³¹ In response to Spenser's justifications of Grey's scandalous behavior and Artegall's analogous activity at certain points in *The Faerie Queene*, critics now regularly presume the poet's unequivocal endorsement of the knight's conduct, viewing it as an exemplary manifestation of absolute justice. In consequence, when confronted with instances that seem to generate tension between Artegall and the virtue he ostensibly represents, therefore, readers almost invariably locate the source of moral and political value in the knight, and disparage the countervailing position. But when we hear at the start of canto i, for example, that Artegall was raised from infancy by the goddess Astraea, and that she has since abandoned the sinful world and its "wicked men, in whom no truth she found" (11), we are led to ask: exactly what kind of justice does Artegall embody? Given the self-willed removal of his divine patroness, and her apparent judgment that he himself shares in the universal lack of "truth" she deplores, must not the knight's justice be a flawed, even ruinously compromised, version of the virtue Astraea personifies? Characteristic historicist readings, however, cut hard in the opposite direction. Thus, for Hadfield, Astraea's absence from the Legend shows that she is "unable to tolerate the devious and messy world," and "too pure to perform the actions which will implement justice"; like her earthly confederate, Elizabeth, "she represents a version of justice which refers only to a series of abstract principles [that are] of no use" in sublunary reality.²³² Whereas in earlier decades the moral prestige of Spenser's sovereign and the classical deity with which she identified commanded significant interpretive respect, the imperatives of a self-consciously historical, "realist" hermeneutic now reduce such claims to the discredited realm of the "pure" and the "abstract"—those insufficiently practical and material preoccupations of a self-indulgent aestheticism.

As in any case where a particular interpretive consensus achieves something like hegemonic status, we would do well to consider the scholarly interests and desires the agreement serves. We are prompted in this direction here by the counter-intuitive phenomenon of near-universal critical accord that nevertheless requires continual, and almost verbatim, re-affirmation from one study to the next. If we can all agree on Spenser's prioritization of the pragmatic and political over the abstract and ideal in Book V, then why do we need to repeat the point with such frequency and vehemence? As I have suggested above, these invocations serve a kind of apotropaic function, warding off charges of literary-critical frivolity by subordinating the claims

²³¹ *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment*, 89. See the analogous passage in *A View*, as well: "So I remember that in the late government of that good Lord Grey, when after long travell, and many perillous assayes, he had brought things almost to this passe that you speake of, that it was even made ready for reformation, and might have beene brought to what her Maiestie would, like complaint was made against him, that he was a bloodie man, and regarded not the life of her subiects no more than dogges, but had wasted and consumed all, so as now she had nothing almost left, but to raigne in their ashes; eare was soon lent therunto, and all suddenly turned topside-turvy; the noble Lord eft-soones was blamed; the wretched people pitied; and new counsells plotted ... upon which all former purposes were blancked, the Governour at a bay, and ... that hope of good which was even at the doore put back, and cleane frustrated" (103).

²³² *Spenser's Irish Experience*, 149-50. Astraea is associated with the constellation Virgo, which made her a common analogue for England's Virgin Queen. The standard account of this association remains that of Frances Yates, "Queen Elizabeth as Astraea," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 10 (1947): 27-82; see esp. 65-70 for her discussion of Spenser. For a contrasting reading, see McCabe, *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment*: "Artegall operates in the vacuum created by Astraea's absence, as Grey operated in the absence of royal favour, and the nature of his activities is inevitably compromised" (215).

of “the aesthetic” to those of “the historical.” In light of Greenblatt’s bracing account of Spenser’s advocacy for “a ruthless policy of mass starvation and massacre” and “the destruction of native Irish identity” in *The Faerie Queene*, the critic who treats Spenser’s poem as an autonomous, *belles-letttristic* artwork courts the charge that he himself resembles Yeats’ Spenserian poet, “sit[ting] apart in contemplative indolence playing with fragile things.”²³³ To situate Book V in the realm of inevitably compromised *praxis* is therefore to make of Spenser’s poetry what Fredric Jameson famously makes of History itself: “the experience of Necessity” (another term that recurs frequently in the recent scholarship).²³⁴ By characterizing Spenser’s view of the world in such decisively clear-eyed and hard-headed terms, the critic manages to draw on some of the credit accruing to this unblinkingly grim insight into Spenser’s hardline politics and the unremittingly “stonie” world of the Legend of Justice (proem.2).

But there are a number of problems with this trend as it exists in both Spenser studies and Renaissance literary criticism as a whole. For one, ritual acclamations of the practical immediacy that Spenser putatively champions throughout Book V have the effect of turning the text itself into a means of political action, not merely a representation of action’s dire necessity. In these accounts, the distinction between Spenser’s *desire* to compose a poetry capable of intervening in public affairs and his *success* at doing so is often blurred, in spite of the author’s marginal position in the Elizabethan government and the almost total absence of evidence that his work had any tangible effect on policymaking at court.²³⁵ As with studies that insist on the political agency of early modern literature in general, the move is to treat the artwork as a kind of speech act, stressing the “links between language and action,” or collapsing entirely the difference between “political thought” and effective “political action.” Unsurprisingly, this conception goes hand in hand, as we saw in Chapter 1, with disavowing poems’ status as “timeless monuments” or “closed [i.e., autonomous] systems of thought,” and stressing instead their dynamic interventions within “a contemporary context of debate.”²³⁶ The aesthetic and historical-political are once again starkly distinguished, but the latter becomes the realm not of submission to necessity, but of agency—the space in which political action is co-extensive with artistic

²³³ Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 187; Yeats, preface to his edition of the *Poems of Spenser* (1902), in *A Critical Anthology*, 177.

²³⁴ *The Political Unconscious*, 102.

²³⁵ The critical maneuver is reminiscent of one that Goldsmith describes with regard to Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, a poem similar in many ways to the rich aestheticization and political urgency of the later *Faerie Queene*. Goldsmith observes that discussions of the “politics of *Prometheus Unbound* has too often confined itself to the play’s self-representation ... or with how it performs an act of imaginative liberation ... In either account, the play’s internal political dynamics are taken to be one and the same as its political effects,” or “the way that it participates in actual social struggles regarding the relations of power.” As Goldsmith says, any comprehensive account of an artwork’s “politics” need to consider both “the hypothetical effects ... invited by the text” and the reality of its often “limited audience.” “Most of all,” he concludes, “we need to guard against the temptation to [mistake] a relatively small body of educated elite ... for an audience sufficiently capable of realizing [an author’s] utopian vision.” In many ways, recent Spenser criticism has repeated this mistake in seeing the relatively insular community of New English planter-commentators in Ireland as capable of altering Elizabethan policy in the way Spenser seems to have hoped they could. See *Unbuilding Jerusalem: Apocalypse and Romantic Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 211-2.

²³⁶ Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics, 1627-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 10-11. Norbrook describes the links he finds between poetry and political action in especially clear (if, in my opinion, problematic) terms, making explicit what many historicist critics leave implicit.

experience.²³⁷ In a related sense, moreover, critics continue to insist on a number of anti-“aestheticizing” claims in a polemical spirit even as these points no longer in doubt. In doing so, they repeat the overreaction to an earlier formalism that T.J. Clark observes in contemporary art history. If the urgent task for historically responsible critics, several decades ago, was to make the artwork “fully part of a world of transactions, interests, disputes, beliefs, ‘politics,’” then “who now thinks it is not?” Clark rightly asks. The present obstacle to informed scholarship is therefore not the idea of artistic experience “as pursued in a state of trance-like removal from human concerns, but the parody notion we have come to live with of its *belonging to the world*, its incorporation into it.”²³⁸ Not only does this presumption turn Spenser’s poem into a suspiciously congenial mirror for current theoretical priorities; and not only does it exaggerate the extra-textual effects of early modern poetry by stressing its ostensibly radical difference from the world of modern aesthetics. More centrally to my concerns in what follows, it also misconstrues Spenser’s own deliberate intentions in composing the Legend of Justice.

As I will demonstrate in the rest of the chapter, Book V does not single-mindedly insist on the priority of action over thought, practice over theory, the real over the ideal. Instead, it thematizes the mutual implication of these opposing influences: their mutual constitution, that is, as well as their mutual impossibility. Rather than dogmatically privileging the sphere of the historical, political, and contingent over that of contemplative thought and utopian imagination, as per today’s overwhelming consensus, the text in fact agonizes over the central question of whether a flawed, practical justice can be considered justice at all, and when it becomes merely “the name given by those in power to keep their power.”²³⁹ Recent criticism has not been wrong to approach the Legend through an elaborate series of conceptual distinctions, as I will show, but it has erred in seeing the questions the antinomies raise as merely rhetorical ones, rather than authentically difficult and, finally, irresolvable dilemmas.

A central issue throughout the study will be the character of Artegall and his relationship to the other key protagonists in Book V. These include not only Talus and Arthur, Artegall’s comrades-in-arms, but a number of female figures, as well: Astraea, Mercilla, and, above all, Britomart, his future wife. As the rest of the chapter will explain in detail, these feminine

²³⁷ This tendency amounts to the mistake, as Robert Kaufman describes it, of “regarding [aesthetic] judgment as itself an ethical or political act,” which is “tantamount to believing that the understanding of formal structure ... counts as an ethico-political act.” What we require, in contrast, is the “awareness, won through the ambiguities of the literary, that the moral and political are decidedly *extra-literary*.” See “The Sublime as Super-Genre of the Modern, or *Hamlet* in Revolution: Caleb Williams and His Problems,” *Studies in Romanticism* 36.4 (1997), 571.

²³⁸ *The Sight of Death*, 122. Recent responses to Book V, I would go so far as to venture, exemplify the critical distortion that Clark here laments, in which the idea of Spenser’s “being at any tawdry ideology’s service” is “celebrated” as “the sign of art’s coming down from its ivory tower” (*ibid.*). See Adorno on this point: “Artworks that want to divest themselves of fetishism by real and extremely dubious political commitment regularly enmesh themselves in false consciousness as the result of inevitable and vainly praised simplification. In the shortsighted praxis to which they blindly subscribe, their own blindness is prolonged” (*Aesthetic Theory*, 228). See also the similar diagnosis that James Chandler offers in the context of Anglo-American literary criticism of the past few decades: “We speak routinely and casually of the need to restore works to the ‘historical situation’ in which they were produced, or of sketching ‘historical situations’ for our own studies. The concept has turned slogan, and the inevitability with which it has accompanied efforts, especially programmatic efforts, to argue *against* certain kinds of formalism—New Criticism, Deconstruction—and *for* a certain kind of contextualism would be impossible to document exhaustively here: the practice has simply been too pervasive.” Chandler’s appraisal, articulated just prior to the turn of the century, remains equally (if not more) valid almost two decades later. See *England in 1819*, 37.

²³⁹ Hamilton, *FQ*, 14.

characters each represent an aspect of Spenserian justice that counters and completes the military power concentrated in the knight and his “yron man” groom (i.12). Throughout the Legend, Artegall embodies what we might think of as *justice proper*: the imposition of punitive force on criminal subjects, in accordance with the full rigor of the law. As we soon learn, however, this *punitive* or merely *legal justice* constitutes only one half of the comprehensive virtue, as Spenser conceives it. The other half is the ameliorative counterpart to this belligerent impulse, and it manifests itself in closely related forms throughout the Legend: as *equity*, primarily, but also as *mercy* and *clemency*. Derived from Aristotle, equity (and its affiliates) seeks out the covert spirit, rather than the overt letter, of the law: its often irrecoverable, but intended meaning. As such, equitable judgment requires a discriminating interpretive agency, one capable of reconciling the conflicting imperatives of the law’s corrective rigor and mercy’s sympathetic indulgence. Along with sufficient force, therefore, Spenser’s idealized representative of *equitable justice* requires an exceptional critical agency—the reflective insight of a Solomonic magistrate, as well as the surpassing strength of an Achilles. Like Milton’s Samson, Spenser’s virtue will therefore continually prompt readers to ask, “what is strength without a double share / Of wisdom?”²⁴⁰

What Spenser ultimately shows, however, is that Artegall, the seeming “Champion of true Iustice” (i.3), in fact remains persistently inadequate to these cognitive demands throughout the Legend. Such a faculty of discerning deliberation is precisely what the landscape of Book V requires of those who would reform it, given its total subversion of moral values. “Right now is wrong, and wrong that was is right,” Spenser laments at the start of the text, with the confusion of “vertue” and “vice” so pervasive as to be “so vs’d of all” (proem.4). In such a context, the inability to tell the one from the other continually raises the possibility that Spenser worries over in *A View*: that botched attempts at social improvement will go to “the gracing of wickednes and vice, which with good usage would serve to adorne and beautifie vertue.”²⁴¹ This interpretive inadequacy is precisely what Artegall betrays throughout Book V. It is detectable, moreover, not only in the knight’s tendency to coercive violence, but also in those moments when the poem—either through the person of Artegall or the voice of the narrator—proffers exculpatory explanations of, and justifications, for his often dubious conduct. In these instances, Spenser dramatizes a rift between properly equitable exercises of critical judgment and the erroneous, self-exculpatory glosses on historical experience that instead get proffered in their place. Authentically equitable justice therefore requires Spenser’s reader continually to supplement Artegall’s perspective with that of Britomart and her affiliates, and to recognize the absolute necessity (and even superiority) of the latter for the virtue’s realization both within and outside of the poem.

An appreciation of this synthetic theme in the book—its novel splitting of the virtue it explores into multiple characters—was, in fact, a hallmark of an earlier generation of Spenser criticism. Scholarship on the Legend (and *The Faerie Queene* as a whole) in the middle decades of the twentieth century was, of course, focused less on the extra-literary causes for which Spenser wrote and more on what now strike us as narrowly formalist and *literary*-historical concerns: “those parts of criticism,” as Northrop Frye put it, “that have to do with such words as ‘myth,’

²⁴⁰ *Samson Agonistes*, ll. 53–4. Quoted in *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

²⁴¹ *A View*, 77.

‘symbol,’ ‘ritual,’ and ‘archetype.’”²⁴² In the work of commentators like Lewis, Judith Anderson, Angus Fletcher, A.C. Hamilton, Richard Helgerson, and James Nohrnberg, Artegall was understood to incarnate only a flawed, “rough justice,” one which needed to be “over-ruled by equity, circumvented by mercy, and, in the succeeding book, countered by courtesy.”²⁴³ Marked by “oversimplification, insensitivity, and simply inhumanity,”²⁴⁴ Artegallian justice was thought to be “so unreasoning in its brutality” that it could only be viewed as a perversion of the virtue’s “best truth, the vision of Justice controlled by Equity in Isis Church.”²⁴⁵ Book V, according to this view, progresses in accordance with an intellectual and moral teleology, in which a militarized “legal justice,” embodied in Artegall and Talus, is superseded by “a higher ideal of equity,” and which is in turn “tempered with mercy.”²⁴⁶ Fletcher was therefore expressing a consensus view of mid-twentieth-century scholarship when he observed that “[w]ithout the ameliorating counterinfluence of equity and conscience ... there can be no survival of justice through time.”²⁴⁷ This intuitive reading of Book V has been largely discredited in the rush, at present, to view almost *any* mitigation of Artegall’s single-minded ferocity as a condemnation, on Spenser’s part, of weak-minded temporizing and sentimental obliviousness to harsh political necessities. One of the claims I wish to advance in this chapter, therefore, concerns the importance of taking this earlier phase of criticism more seriously than we tend to at present, treating its insights as a salutary check on the inclination to draw straight lines from poem to immediate historical context and local political program.

At the same time, of course, recent criticism has been absolutely right to focus Spenser’s emphasis on *praxis* and immediacy in Book V, even as such attention only takes us so far. For the narrative does indeed operate under the sign not only of worldly experience in general, but political crisis in particular. We have seen how Spenser’s critics have long recognized the uniquely specific topicality of Book V, with its concluding cantos “specifically fashioned to reflect [recent] historical situations” in Ireland and Continental Europe.²⁴⁸ As Hamilton remarks, the Legend’s engagement with the great public controversies of the era would have been “painfully

²⁴² *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), xiii. Frye’s totalizing, transhistorical study of “literary symbolism” and “the theory of allegory,” he explains, initially began as “a study of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*” (*ibid.*).

²⁴³ Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, 349; Hamilton, *FQ*, 14. “Artegall is one of the most disagreeable characters in the whole poem,” Lewis says, judiciously adding that “while it would be absurd to suggest that Spenser saw [him] with our eyes, he has none the less made it clear that Artegall is not intended to be perfect” (348–9).

²⁴⁴ Anderson, “Artegall” in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, 63. See also her similar discussion in “Nor Man It Is: The Knight of Justice in Book V of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*,” *PMLA* 85.1 (1970): Artegall, she argues, betrays “a naïve and excessive reliance on ... force and physical prowess,” and perceives the world in terms that are “factitiously simple or fictively ideal” (68).

²⁴⁵ Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates*, 90.

²⁴⁶ Nohrnberg, *Analogy*, 353. “The positive symbolism [of the book] is to be found,” he concludes, “at Isis Church and the palace of Mercilla, and they provide the symbolic foci for the legend of justice” (360).

²⁴⁷ *The Prophetic Moment*, 286. The most prominent scholar in more recent times to insist on the essentially critical (in the negative sense) attitude that Spenser maintains toward justice as a virtue and Artegall as a character is Gordon Teskey, who not coincidentally focuses on the mythopoetic and contemplative qualities of Spenser’s poetry. See his discussions of Book V in *Allegory and Violence*, 174–6, and “‘And therefore as a stranger give it welcome’: Courtesy and Thinking,” *Spenser Studies* 18 (2003), 351–5. For an account of the role of theoretical contemplation in Spenser that goes against the grain of historicizing emphases on immediate political objectives, see “Thinking Moments in *The Faerie Queene*,” *Spenser Studies* 22 (2007): 103–25.

²⁴⁸ Michael O’Connell, *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, 24; Brady, “Spenser’s Irish Crisis,” 47.

obvious” to a contemporary readership, conjuring an overdetermined atmosphere in which the weight implications of public action remain front and center throughout.²⁴⁹ Spenser himself conveys the paranoid anxiety of his especially “fraught and dangerous times” in *A View*, when Irenius, just prior to his insistence that reform in Ireland must proceed “by the sword,” observes that “every day wee perceive the troubles growing more upon us,” the rebels “all hav[ing] their eares upright, wayting when the watch-word shall come, that they should all arise generally into rebellion, and cast away the English subjection.”²⁵⁰ More pertinently still, the chronological urgency that Artegall faces is also singular within *The Faerie Queene*, as he confronts a world that “growes daily wourse and wourse” (proem.1). Unlike the protagonists of other books, that is, Artegall is always on the clock, with Spenser substituting “the time/space of emergency [for] that of romantic knight errantry,” as Lorna Hutson puts it.²⁵¹ His mission to liberate Irena from Grantorto’s captivity, the motivation for all his ramifying activity in the poem, proceeds against “th’appointed tyde” (xi.39), or hard deadline, of her execution. By the time Artegall makes his final approach to her kingdom, we learn that she has only ten days to live, a fast-expiring window that increases the knight’s anxiety at “the terme approching fast” and the “time drawing ny” (xi.65, xii.3). The dilatory wandering of romance narrative, elsewhere a given of the poem’s temporal scheme, now becomes a *problem* that Artegall is never able to solve.²⁵² His ultimate failure to transform Irena’s realm “ere” he is recalled to Faerie Court is a function not only of an arbitrary “occasion,” therefore, but of his own inability to “reforme it thoroughly” before Gloriana’s patience finally expires (xii.27). Artegall’s lapses throughout the Legend, culminating in the fiasco of his abortive reformation, are largely the result of his *never having enough time* to deliberate—to exercise the critical judgment necessary to genuinely just action.

²⁴⁹ Hamilton, *FQ*, 13.

²⁵⁰ *A View*, 92. “To which there now little wanteth,” Irenius darkly concludes, “for I thinke the word be already given, and there wanteth nothing but opportunitie ...” See also the start the tract, where this atmosphere is evoked in similar terms: “some of [the kingdom’s troubles are] ... are dayly growing and increasing continuallie by their evill occasions, which are every day offered” (12). On the especially “fraught and dangerous times” in which Spenser was finishing both the treatise and the 1596 *Faerie Queene*, see Hadfield, *Spenser’s Irish Experience*: “With the outbreak of the Nine Years War in 1594, when Hugh O’Neill launched the most serious offensive yet against English rule in Ireland, which finally threatened to transform the situation there into an international crisis, the Munster planters had to face the threat they had been anticipating. The first records of English being killed occur in 1594 and there was increasing hostility until the Plantation”—and with it Spenser’s own estate at Kilcolman—“was largely destroyed in the uprising of 1598” (48). This is the context in which Irenius will conclude *A View* by gesturing to the Earl of Essex as the man on whom “the eye of all England is fixed, and our *last hopes* now rest” (159; emphasis added).

²⁵¹ Hutson, “Fortunate Travelers,” 93; Hutson is describing Sidney’s *Arcadia*, but her terms of analysis are especially apt here. The Red Cross Knight, to take an obvious counter-example to Artegall, does not face any particular pressures of timeliness in his quest to free Una’s parents from the dragon in Book I. The eschatological framework of the Legend of Holiness, in which Red Cross’s slaying of the dragon and restoration of Una’s family analogizes Satan’s apocalyptic defeat and start of the Millennium, does not admit of the urgency of contingent occasion that obtains throughout the rest of the poem in general, and Book V in particular. For the classic account of a distinction between Book I’s “order of grace” and an emphasis on classical, secular ethics in Books II–VI, see A.S.P. Woodhouse, “Nature and Grace in *The Faerie Queene*,” *ELH* 16 (1949): 194–228. I am grateful to David Landreth for help in developing this paragraph’s insights.

²⁵² Artegall’s tardiness is, for instance, also translated into an erotic context when his imprisonment by Radigund prevents him from reuniting with Britomart by the “vtmost, assynde / For his returne.” Britomart receives news of his captivity from Talus in what Spenser calls, in terms paradigmatic for the temporality of the book as a whole, as “vntimely houre” (vi.3).

What needs to be recognized is that the primary impetus for this recurring phenomenon is not to stigmatize Artegall, or even the virtue of justice, *per se*. For, if the knight's compromised (and often blundering) activity makes clear the "secret wit" of his chivalric motto, "*Saluagesse sans finesse*" (VI.iv.39), then Spenser's insistence on the difficulties attending equitable justice should leave us skeptical of almost *any* earthly agent's ability to achieve its realization. Artegall's enactment of the virtue he personifies limits the multivalent wholeness of the virtue to a one-sided display of punitive force, but his intellectually compromised conduct also provides for justice's indispensable, though flawed, realization in historical time. As Spenser will put it in a climactic moment of the Legend, such limitation is the means by which the agent of reform "spilles the principall, to saue the part" of justice (x.2). In sacrificing the dialectical poise of equitable justice, in other words, Artegall achieves an only partial realization of the virtue that instead continually resembles the vice it would eradicate. Moreover, the urgent demands enforced on Artegall are also those experienced by the *readers* of Spenser's fiction, as well—a fact amply attested to by the vogue in recent criticism for stressing the importance of the local, the immediate, and the practical. Like its characters, we experience the pressure to forswear the qualities of patient, deliberative judgment that we associate with close reading for the sake of a localized and more vigorous form interventionist social agency, one that accords with the extra-literary aims of *The Faerie Queene's* project of "fashion[ing] a gentleman." As attentive readers, however, we are simultaneously forced to register the authentically debilitating compromises that such action inevitably entails. As a result, we are led, finally, to recognize the fundamental political ambiguity of *The Faerie Queene* and Spenserian aesthetics. It is only when translated into social action that the moral and intellectual insights of the reading experience are fulfilled and given value; but it is only in the reading experience that such insights are to be properly grasped, as their translation into the realm of *praxis* necessarily requires a perversion of virtue into something more like vice.

The contradictory dynamics that Book V generates call to mind the regime of temporal pressure and intellection that Jacques Derrida catches with acuity in his well-known discussion of the "just decision." Reflecting on the ineluctable split between thought and action in the administration of justice, Derrida explains why critical judgment in a time of crisis "must not wait."

[A] just decision is always required *immediately*, right away, as quickly as possible. It cannot provide itself with the infinite information and the unlimited knowledge of conditions, rules, or hypothetical imperatives that could justify it. And even if it did have all that at its disposal, even if it did give itself ... all the time and all the necessary knowledge about the matter, well then, the moment of *decision as such*, what must be just, *must* [*il faut*] always remain a finite moment of urgency and precipitation; it must [*doit*] not be the consequence or the effect of this theoretical or historical knowledge, of this reflection or this deliberation, since the decision always marks the interruption of the juridico-, ethico-, or politico-cognitive deliberation that precedes it, that *must* [*doit*] precede it... Even if time and prudence, the patience of knowledge and the mastery of conditions were hypothetically unlimited, the decision would be structurally finite, however late it

came—a decision of urgency and precipitation, acting in the night of nonknowledge and nonrule.²⁵³

Much like Derrida's justice, Spenser's virtue also involves a rift between the contemplative and the active, the one a realm of "reflection" and "deliberation," the other a realm of "urgency and precipitation." More specifically, Book V will present a similar contradiction to the radical one that Derrida describes here: the equitably just decision can only claim ethical and intellectual validation, can only "justify" itself, through "the patience of knowledge and the mastery of conditions" that inform it; but the "finite moment" at which cognitive process is translated into act "must" also obliterate all of this "necessary knowledge," and be marked instead by "nonknowledge and nonrule."

The translation from interpretation to extra-literary engagement nevertheless remains necessary for Spenser, as it perhaps does not for Derrida. What he requires, however—and what recent critics have consistently failed to appreciate—is a passage through something like the "phase of undecidability" that Derrida elsewhere conceives as the requirement of ethical action. As Harpham describes it, this tarrying in interpretive uncertainty "places imperatives, principles, alternatives on a *balanced scale*, sustaining an august reticence, [and] a principled irresolution" to decisive action also applies to the "equall balance" of the compound virtue of equitable justice in *The Faerie Queene* (V.i.7). A decision achieved without this provisional suspension of urgent activity would "represent mere blindness and brutality," falling short of the equitably just, even as the decision for a specific course of action in history remains equally "necessary and inescapable."²⁵⁴ Reconciling these opposed mandates—however provisionally—is the vital and ultimately insurmountable challenge faced both by Spenser's characters, as they translate the interpretive dictates of equitable judgment into chivalric action, and by Spenser's readers, as we attempt to translate the interpretive dictates of aesthetic experience into political action. If this limitation compromises the didactic aims of Spenser's poem, its transitive, instrumental work on readers, then the productivity for which this impasse provides the occasion is, finally, only *protopolitical*, a form of *critical* agency that makes the reader equally aware of the vital necessity and doomed impossibility of redeeming "the real world."

II. "Equall Balance": Equitable Judgment in Elizabethan England

Justice is first figured in Book V as irresistible divine force, "[r]esembling God in his imperiall might" and "soueraine powre." Mediated in history by the "Princes" to whom its

²⁵³ "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'" (trans. Mary Quaintance) in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 255. Andrew Majeske's description of the delayed temporality of Aristotelian equity chimes, as we will see in the next section, with Derrida's emphasis on the time and deliberation required of a hypothetical just decision: "equity based on *epieikeia* was dilatory because it required more time than [other juridical criteria] to reach judgment—its focus on the individual facts and circumstances of specific cases was time and labor intensive... Equity based on *epieikeia* could be described as discontinuous or digressive as compared to the relatively quick and straight forward results achieved by [these alternative criteria]." See *Equity in English Renaissance Literature: Thomas More and Edmund Spenser* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 98.

²⁵⁴ Harpham, *Shadows of Ethics*, 23, 30; emphasis added. As Harpham observes, responding to the similar celebration of interpretive undecidability in J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading* (1986), "against the virtually infinite prolongations Miller had envisioned, any definite judgment could seem premature, or 'unethical'" (21).

exercise is entrusted, this “sacred” and “imperiall” potency is a defining feature of Spenser’s own (imagined) royal auditor, the “Dread Souerayne Goddess” Elizabeth (proem.10-11). The theme is rearticulated in starker terms later in the Legend, when Spenser observes that the executors of justice must have “mightie hands”—“For powre,” he insists, “is the right hand of Iustice truely hight” (iv.1). He also makes clear from the first that Artegall, the personification of justice, is a supremely capable “instrument” of the martial energies that undergird the virtue (proem.11): the knight’s surpassing force is “Immoueable, resistlesse, without end,” much like his companion Talus.²⁵⁵ This preliminary construction of justice as “powre” joined to “right” therefore suggests a disciplinary conception of the virtue, whereby violations of the moral law are met with unyielding punitive violence. Indeed, this function is figured in the righteous “vengeance” with which Artegall is characteristically “flam’d ... inwardly” when confronted with spectacles of unmerited suffering (i.14), and in his avowal “to worke auengement strong” on the Souldan and his “great wrongs” (viii.24). Most starkly, it is reflected in Talus, whose name links him with the classical figure of Talos (a literal upholder of the law), as well as the Latin term *talio*: simple retribution, or, in the words of one sixteenth-century commentator, “an equall or like payne in recompense of an hurt.”²⁵⁶

But we quickly learn that possession of “dreadlesse might” is not the sole, or even paramount, faculty necessary to agents of justice. For the virtue issues, Spenser tells us, from the “seate of iudgement” (proem.11), and (as the etymology of the Latin root *ius*—indicates) it is delivered through the figure of the judge, an archetype as central to Artegall’s characterization as that of the Herculean warrior.²⁵⁷ Alongside force, then, the proem also emphasizes the vital importance of discriminations of *right*. God’s justice, we are told, is “most exprest” in that “both to good and bad he dealeth right,” and in his imperative that earthly sovereigns “rule [their] people right” (10). Moreover, if heavenly justice proceeds from a literal “seate,” then in human

²⁵⁵ This stress on the overwhelming force necessary to justice’s functioning has long been registered by Spenser’s readers in their discomfort with the pervasive violence of Book V. Following Lewis, critics have frequently responded to the book’s emphasis on “the slaughter that necessarily attends the triumph of justice” more with queasiness at its “spectacle of blood and despair” than gratification in the virtue’s ostensible enactment. See Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, 349; A.C. Hamilton, *FQ*, 14; Teskey, *Allegory and Violence*, 175. Nohnberg’s description of the Legend abounding in “chopped off heads, lopped extremities, grisly anthropoid grins, guerilla warfare, armies of occupation, violent pacifications, and embittered ends” conveys something of the repulsion with which Spenser criticism has often responded to the text. See *Analogy*, 378.

²⁵⁶ Thomas Cooper, *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae & Britannicae* (1565); quoted in Nohnberg, *Analogy*, 412. Talus’ iconographic possession of “an yron flae,” meanwhile, also associates him with the divine violence of the apocalyptic harvest in the prophetic books of the Old Testament. While Talus is thus aptly understood as the executive and impersonal power of justice, he remains an allegorically adaptable figure throughout Book V. As Angus Fletcher describes him, he acts as “the lower constabulary” to Artegall’s “high officer of justice,” “performs the policing function of the law,” and even “resembles the police detective” in his ability to “ferret[] out criminals.” See *The Prophetic Moment*, 138. For Nohnberg, Talus similarly fuses three different categories of significance: the legalistic, martial, and technological: “the three Taluses form the whole police power of surveillance, investigation, detection, apprehension, arrest, arraignment, and punishment,” Nohnberg concludes, “the more or less unidealized mechanics of justice instrumental to the enforcement and execution of the law.” See *Analogy*, 410.

²⁵⁷ As Sidney remarks in *The Defence of Poesy*, “*ius*,” right or law, is “the daughter of justice.” See *Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, 15. David Norbrook has described the central concerns of book five as essentially juridical, a characterization most immediately suggested by the designation of the book’s culminating antagonist as “Grantorto”: a “great wrong” or, more specifically, “great tort.” See *Poetry and Politics*, 110. As Fletcher succinctly puts it, “about Artegall’s judicial function there can be no doubt” (*Prophetic Moment*, 167).

affairs this juridical station has a distinctly cognitive (rather than physical) association: as Artegall will later insist, it is “in the mind [that] the doome of right must bee” (ii.47). Determining “right,” however, proves an unceasingly difficult task; as Jonathan Goldberg observes, “throughout book V it is no easy matter to decide where justice resides or to make judgments,” whether for Spenser’s characters or his readers.²⁵⁸ This is because Spenserian justice continually splinters into a variety of conflictual impulses, and these mutually constitutive and contradictory logics make up the virtue’s tensile whole. This push-and-pull dynamic is signaled at the level of character in the importance of Talus, whose steadfast accompaniment emphasizes the vital role of talionic justice to Artegall’s quest, but also distinguishes that faculty from the knight’s (ostensible) bodying forth of a more comprehensive form of justice. Moreover, Talus is not the only confederate Artegall requires to maintain the virtue in its ideal form: at the heart of the book, his paramour Britomart is pressed into service, and her metaphorical significance here will be explained by her identification with “[t]hat part of Iustice, which is Equity” (vii.3), the ameliorative counterpart to Talus’ unstinting rigor. The vital role these figures—and a variety of corresponding characters, such as Astraea and Mercilla—play throughout the Legend demonstrates the crucial fact that Spenser’s “instrument” of justice in fact requires *other instruments* to fulfill his mission, and suggests the complex and internally contradictory elements of the virtue that Artegall should in principle harmonize.²⁵⁹

In fact, this characterological schema—Artegallian justice propped up by avenging force and merciful equity in equal measure—maps onto the classical and early modern understanding of justice in a consistent, though complex, way. According to these traditions, the rigors of a punitive justice, rendered in accordance with the letter of the law, were to be measured against the mitigating influence of equity, which was understood as the spirit (or conscience) of the law. In the sixteenth century and beyond, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* continued to define the normative relation between legal vengeance and equity. According to Aristotle, equity is not identical to strict legal justice; rather, it modifies the law’s letter so as to enable a judge to arrive at a fairer determination in accordance with the contingencies of lived experience:

[A]lthough the equitable is just, it is not what is just according to law. The equitable is instead a correction of the legally just. The cause of this is that all law is general ... but concerning some matters it is not possible to speak correctly in a general way... Whenever the law speaks generally, then, but what happens in a given case constitutes an exception to the general rule, then it is correct ... to

²⁵⁸ *James I and the Politics of Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 5.

²⁵⁹ My emphasis on the crucial importance of Britomart as the equitable counterpart to Artegall’s embodiment of an ostensibly comprehensive justice is meant as a corrective to two of the more notable recent discussions of Book V. Jessica Wolfe’s account of Spenser’s ambivalent attitude to Elizabethan “military humanism” describes Artegall and Talus as, respectively, Spenser’s figuration of “the spirit and the letter of the law.” See *Humanism, Machinery, and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 209. Andrew Zurcher, meanwhile, similarly sees Artegall as the representative of equity (synonymous with the spirit of the law, as I will shortly explain) and Talus the “automaton-like executor” of the law. See *Spenser’s Legal Language: Law and Poetry in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007), 138. While Wolfe and Zurcher are clearly correct in emphasizing the importance of Talus to Artegall’s enactment of justice, the absence of Britomart as the representative of equity in their accounts neglects, as I will argue, a crucial aspect of the symbolic economy of Book V.

rectify that omission with what the lawgiver himself would have said if he had been present, and if he had known of this case, what he would have legislated.

“This is in fact the nature of the equitable,” Aristotle affirms: “a correction of law [where] it is deficient because of its being general.”²⁶⁰ In Elizabethan England, the institution charged with hedging against the potential reifications of law was Chancery, the so-called “court of conscience.” Spenser himself spent seven years as a clerk in the Irish Chancery courts, a career that Elizabeth Fowler plausibly suggests “ideally suited him to consider the practice of equity and the potential for conflict” between its particularizing character and the transcendental homogeneity of the law.²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ *Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), V.x (p. 112). Further citations are taken from this edition, unless otherwise indicated. Joel Altman puts the idea this way: since “laws must be formulated in very general terms” even as “human actions are infinitely varied,” the judge is to exercise discretion and forsake a rigorous adherence to the letter of the law should peculiar circumstances dictate. See “Justice and Equity” in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, 414. See also Fletcher, *Prophetic Moment*, 280-3. Aristotle clarifies that the necessity for an equitable correction to the generalities of the law does not undermine the integrity of law in the abstract, since it “takes what is for the most part the case, but without being ignorant of the error involved in so doing”—an error that “resides not in the law or in the lawgiver but in the nature of the matter at hand. For such is simply the stuff of which actions are made” (*Ethics*, 112). Laws are composed as if they could be applied universally, without their authors believing this notion to be more than an enabling fiction.

Equity, in turn, was thus commonly understood, in the sixteenth century, as the “conscience of the law,” or the “interior understanding of the virtue,” in accordance with which the “just governor ... will join clemency to severity, and seek the mean between them” (Nohnberg, *Analogy*, 380, 382). Nohnberg’s account of the era’s normative understanding of jurisprudence emphasizes the legal theory of William Perkins, Christopher St. German, Pierre de la Primaudaye, Thomas Elyot, and Richard Hooker. Nohnberg offers, as a consensus definition of equity as the conscience or spirit of the law, a passage from Edward Hake’s *Epiekeia*, a 1599 treatise whose title borrows the Greek term for equity: “for a judge in his exposition of the lawe sometimes to forsake the letter of the lawe or to decline from the same, and to suffer himself to be ledde by the Equity thereof which exhybiteth unto him this secreat sense and hidden (but the right and trewe) meaning of the lawe, this is not [to] change the lawe, but is indeede to sett the law in his right place, and rather to give life to the lawe which otherwise in the letter thereof would be dead.” See *Analogy*, 380. While equity, in the early modern period, was not necessarily equivalent to lenity (insofar as the spirit of the law may sometimes urge the just magistrate toward greater severity than its letter would), scholars have generally understood equity in *The Faerie Queene* to function as mitigation of punitive, literalistic justice. As Mark Fortier puts it, the ideal virtue Spenser advocates “is a subtle harmony of justice and equity, male and female, rigour and clemency...” See *The Culture of Equity in Early Modern England* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), 117. The other classical touchstone for early modern thinking about equity would have been Cicero, who sees equity as a guarantee of equal treatment before the law for all citizens: *aequitas* “requires equal laws in equal cases.” See *De Inventione, De Optimo Genere Oratorum, Topica*, trans. H.M. Hubbell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), 397 (*Topica*, book IV, section 23). Majeske has argued that Ciceronian equity is thus very different from Aristotle’s sense of the term as the living spirit of the law. He goes on to observe, however, that Cicero’s other invocations of *aequitas*, most notably in *De officiis*, identify the term with a softening law’s rigor, as in the text’s famous maxim, *summum ius summa iniuria*. See *Equity in English Renaissance Literature*, 18-9. Zurcher likewise sees Ciceronian equity as an adaptation from the *Ethics*, with Cicero’s *perfectum officium* (absolute justice) and *medium officium* (simple justice) analogous to Aristotle’s conception of properly equitable justice versus merely legal justice. See *Spenser’s Legal Language*, 126-7.

²⁶¹ “The Failure of Moral Philosophy,” 64. W. Nicholas Knight clarifies that while “the Irish Chancery did not practice equity,” given that Chancery in England was associated with relief from the law on the basis of conscience, “the Irish clerk would have to have known the limits of equitable jurisdiction in the matters before him, so that he did not violate the prerogatives Elizabeth had kept for herself, prerogatives which were usually the property of

This “potential for conflict” that Fowler mentions is crucial to understand. For Aristotle’s conception of equity’s openness to the experiential particularity brings to view a fault line within the theory of justice. Given the countervailing need for “the logic of justice to keep the law consistent with itself,” it is only a refined faculty of judgment that can discriminate between valid and invalid deviations from the letter of the law—between the necessarily “discretionary” quality of equity, as Fowler says, and its lapse into the arbitrarily “personal” or “subjective.”²⁶² Spenser himself confronts this problem head-on in *A View of the State of Ireland*. Early in the dialogue, Irenius (generally taken to be Spenser’s shrewd mouthpiece) laments the effects of overly severe English law on the Irish populace, and his interlocutor Eudoxus replies that “the iudge ... may easily decide this doubt, and lay open the intent of the law, by his better discretion.” This is the very logic on which courts of equity were founded, but Irenius counters that “it is dangerous to leave the sence of the law unto the reason or will of the iudge, who are men and may bee miscarried by affections, and many other means.” The law, Irenius concludes, “ought to bee like stony tables, plaine, stedfast, and unmoveable.”²⁶³ On the other hand, however, Spenser also recognizes the need for an adaptable legal apparatus at various points throughout the text. Irenius, for instance, makes the basic argument that the magistracy must “temper[], and manag[e]” punitive violence so that the law indeed reforms abuses, rather than “worketh hurt” (20, 13). Analogously, since laws are only just “in regard of the evils which they prevent, and the safety of the commonweale which they provide for,” expediency might justify a law that is “not of it selfe iust” but is made so “by application, or rather necessity” (30). If explicit invocations of equity and judicial conscience in *A View* are often maligned, the ideal of authentic justice invoked throughout the tract is nevertheless predicated on juridical adaptiveness to contingency. But the fundamental problem remains unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable. For what are the criteria on which a magistrate might rely in determining whether deviations from the law’s stony rigor are in fact demanded by “necessity,” or are merely a “dangerous” submission to irrational affections?

Genuinely equitable justice, therefore, is always tasked with an essentially *interpretive* difficulty, for, as Joel Altman remarks, “to render each his due is not a simple matter in practice.”²⁶⁴ Indeed, it is this *critical* aspect of the faculty that leads James Nohnberg to associate equity with “the more intellectual part” of justice, focused as it is on the “exercise of judgment” that would inform the imposition of any given punishment. Equitable justice is thus marked by the judge’s need for surpassing cognitive sensitivity, as Nohnberg stresses in the excerpt he offers from the *Ethics*:

So in Aristotle: “What is called judgment ... is the *right discrimination* of the equitable. This is shown by the fact that we say the equitable man is above all others a man of sympathetic judgment, and identify equity with sympathetic

Chancery.” See “The Narrative Unity of Book V of *The Faerie Queene*: ‘That Part of Justice which is Equity,’” *Review of English Studies*, new series 21 (1970), 270.

²⁶² Fletcher, *Prophetic Moment*, 286; Fowler, “Failure of Moral Philosophy,” 64.

²⁶³ *A View*, 40. Eudoxus later concurs that “it is not expedient, that the execution of a law once ordayned should be left to the discretion of the iudge” (72), and raises a similar objection to the native Irish Brehon law, in which “oftentimes there appeareth great shew of equity, in determining the right betweene party and party, but in many things repugning quite both to Gods law, and mans” (14).

²⁶⁴ *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, 414.

judgment about certain facts. And sympathetic judgment is judgment which discriminates what is equitable *and does so correctly* ...”²⁶⁵

As Andrew Zurcher puts it, the genuinely just decision “depends on the individual mind and ears of the equitable judge”; it is a “personal judgment” that rejects “slavish adherence to ... precedents, maxims, and formulas.”²⁶⁶ But the question still persists: beyond merely placing faith in a particular subject’s possession of “judgment, comprehension, prudence, and intellect,” what objective criteria could we use to evaluate any particular decision at which a magistrate might arrive?²⁶⁷ How might we distinguish, that is, between the “acts of inspired law-breaking” that Zurcher sees as essential to equitable discernment and the irrational caprice that Fowler associates with merely “personal” or “subjective” prerogative?²⁶⁸

For the purposes of my argument, what is crucial to emphasize is not the hairsplitting distinctions between justice, equity, and mercy, or between competing legal institutions, in late-Elizabethan jurisprudence, as some have done.²⁶⁹ Rather, it is the need that any magistrate figure has for a discerning faculty of critical judgment, one capable of reconciling the opposed impulses that a genuinely just judgment always requires, amidst the pressures of contingent historical experience. In fact, we find Spenser dramatizing this very challenge (of translating the ideal ratio of legal punishment to equity into *praxis*) with the unique resources of poetic form afforded him by *The Faerie Queene*. In V.i, he describes Artegall’s upbringing by the goddess Astraea, who instructs him in “all the depth of rightfull doome” (5):

There she him taught to weigh both right and wrong
In equall ballance with due recompence,
And equitie to measure out along,
According to the line of conscience,
When so it needs with rigour to dispence.

(7)

²⁶⁵ *Analogy*, 366, quoting *Ethics*, VI.xi.1—emphasis added. Nohnberg is quoting the translation by W.D. Ross. Bartlett and Collins render the passage in a similar way: “And what is called ‘judgment’ ... is the correct decision as to what is equitable. There is a sign of this: we assert that the equitable person is especially characterized by sympathetic judgment and that having sympathy in some matters is an equitable thing. Sympathetic judgment is a judgment characterized by a correct decision as to what is equitable, it being correct because it grasps what is truly equitable” (129; V.xi). Bartlett and Collins note that “judgment” translates the Greek *gnome*, while “sympathetic judgment” is *sun gnome*, which might alternatively be termed “forgiveness” (*ibid.*).

²⁶⁶ *Spenser’s Legal Language*, 143.

²⁶⁷ See, in this regard, the revealingly circular logic involved in identifying Aristotle’s man of critical judgment: “in attributing judgment, comprehension, prudence, and intellect to the same people, we mean that they have judgment and intellect already and are prudent and comprehending... [S]omeone’s being comprehending and of good or sympathetic judgment consists in his being skilled in deciding the matters with which the prudent person is concerned” (*Ethics*, 129; V.xi).

²⁶⁸ For the phrase “acts of inspired law-breaking,” see Picciotto, *Labors of Innocence*, 751 n.319. See also 493–507 for a larger discussion of how this concept operates in Milton’s *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*.

²⁶⁹ See Zurcher, *Spenser’s Legal Language*, esp. 123–52; Fortier, *Culture of Equity*, esp. 107–36; Majeske, *Equity in English Renaissance Literature*, esp. 93–114.

Equity is here presented as a revisionary check on the already circumspect diagnosis of “due recompence”: the matter of experience (“right and wrong”) is weighed out by a discerning faculty whose balance is then further stabilized by equity’s precise and unwavering “line of conscience.” In the fifth line of the stanza, however, Spenser plays on opposed senses of the key final term: conscience may “dispence” with the “rigour” of the law in the sense of distributing or meting it out, but it may also relax or forgo that same severity as equity might demand.²⁷⁰ As we have seen, the very possibility of this ambiguity defines the Aristotelian notion of equitable justice, according to which punitive rigor always has the potential to be enacted, moderated, or forsworn as contingency dictates. The theoretical equipoise of conflicting possibilities—hung “in equall ballance,” as it were—that is maintained by “dispence” is therefore a *functional* ambiguity that preserves the discretionary adaptability essential to judgments of justice. As Fletcher hopefully remarks, what Spenser therefore pursues throughout Book V is “not laws codified into total uniformity and rigor, but a flexible system always responsive to the promptings of man’s deeper instincts toward equity.”²⁷¹

But if this interpretive indeterminacy guarantees the integrity of the virtue, it also represents its limiting condition. This is the case because rendering any *particular* decision entails forgoing the radical openness to alternate potentialities that characterizes the discriminating judge. Spenser conveys this interpretive double bind through the pressure this passage exerts on the reader’s interpretive faculties. The first problem we encounter is that of visualization, for the passage’s imagery seems calculated to call attention to the divergence between theoretical abstraction and the attempt to realize its contents in spatially and temporally limited experience. (This is a problem intrinsic to allegory itself, of course—for Coleridge, the arbitrariness and artificiality of such transactions virtually defined the mode—but in this passage the disconnect is especially forceful.²⁷²) It begins with the apparently corporeal activity of weighing “right and wrong” in a balance before reverting to the sensory deprivation of the “line” of conscience, the faculty of equity that is represented as infinite in extension through space, but which would therefore cease to be itself were it forced into any local (and thus limited) instantiation.²⁷³

The studied polysemy of “dispence,” moreover, creates much the same effect. Even as we recognize this ambiguity’s apt adequacy to the fine alterations of any given juridical judgment, as

²⁷⁰ See *OED* I and II. Hamilton notes the double meaning at *FQ*, p. 511.

²⁷¹ *Prophetic Moment*, 167. Though he does not make the connection, Zurcher’s discussion of the Lesbian rule in Aristotle’s *Ethics* further suggests Spenser has in mind here the paradox of a judgmental flexibility that is ultimately in the service of greater legal rectitude. Zurcher notes that, for Aristotle, equity “is like the Lesbian rule, a measure traditionally thought to have been made out of lead and thus conformable to the irregular stone surfaces used in building. This type of rule is characteristic, even celebrated, precisely for its lack of straightness. In effect, Aristotle argues that *epieikeia* makes justice ‘straighter’ by rendering it more pliable...” See *Spenser’s Legal Language*, 127.

²⁷² On the “phantom proxies” of allegory, and its status as a mere “form of fancy” in comparison with the organic comprehensiveness of the symbol, which “partakes of the Reality it renders intelligible,” see Coleridge, *The Statesman’s Manual* in *Lay Sermons*, ed. R.J. White (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 30, 79. The effect that I describe in Spenser’s stanza is also noted by Annabel Patterson, who conceives this passage preventing readers “from finding any historically specific content” within it. See *Reading Between the Lines*, 90-1.

²⁷³ Regarding the “line of conscience,” Nohrnberg cites passages from the medieval handbook *The Boke of Vices and Virtues* and Pierre de La Primaudaye’s 1586 dialogue on the virtues, *The French Academy*, to associate the imagery of the line with the idea of a temperate and just man, who “goes forth evenly and right as a line,” “corrective [of] all other crooked things that are applied to it” (*Analogy*, 385). Spenser might, however, also be referring to the cord used by artisans “for taking measurements, or for making things level and straight” (*OED* 4.a).

soon as we privilege either of the opposed meanings of “dispen[n]ce”—the alternate enactment or evacuation of “rigour”—the exquisite dialectical poise that constitutes equitable justice is sacrificed. The conceptual limitation that would accompany the term’s “either/or” realization in time and space, that is, necessarily evacuates the comprehensive “both/and” potentialities that define aspirations to a genuinely equitable justice. And there is no remedy for this dilemma, which is produced by the very mechanics of the reading experience, as it is dramatized both inside and outside the poem: we are incited to arrive at a univocal determination of one meaning over the other, at least provisionally, in much the same way that Spenser’s chivalric agents are obliged to enforce, temper, or forgo punitive rigor under the strain of temporal pressure.

It is this conjunction, between the trials of judgment faced by reader and fictive character alike, where aesthetics and politics meet in Book V of *The Faerie Queene*. For the mutually informing limitations of justice that I describe—in which local instantiation realizes the virtue as effective worldly practice, but dissolves its defining quality in the process—can be mapped onto a canonical rift between political action and aesthetic contemplation. Indeed, the distinction between a theoretically ideal (but purely imaginary) form of equitable justice and one that is a defective (but actually existing) proxy calls to mind the paradox at the heart of Friedrich Schiller’s *Aesthetic Letters* (1794). Schiller here maintains that in the contemplation of beauty, a subject’s competing inclinations toward the sensuous and formal principles of life (the “drives” that correspond, respectively, to action and thought, history and eternity, particularity and universality, and so forth) are “tuned up” in a “happy medium.” The aesthetic state that experiences of beauty produce restores a therapeutic wholeness to the fragmented modern psyche, and thereby repairs the countervailing “one-sided constraint[s]” always exerted on it by nature and reason, sense and form.²⁷⁴ But for Schiller, this equilibrium “remains no more than an Idea, which can never be fully realized in actuality” since we will always be left “with a preponderance of the one element over the other, and the utmost that experience can achieve will consist of an oscillation between the two principles.”²⁷⁵ The ideal harmony of the aesthetic state is therefore “nothing but form and empty potential,” sacrificed “in practice with every determinate condition into which [a subject] does enter.”²⁷⁶ This is the essential contradiction of Schiller’s aesthetics as they relate to *praxis*: “since form is never made manifest except in some material, nor the Absolute except through the medium of limitation,” the realm of experience—human history, the Augustinian *saeculum*—is that which both realizes the potentialities of man and which, at the same time, “makes their complete fulfillment impossible.”²⁷⁷ Schiller’s aesthetic state is thus, like Spenser’s notion of genuinely equitable justice, an ideal of harmonious integrity that must necessarily be sacrificed whenever put into contingent practice.

The implications of this paradox cut two ways, and it is crucial to register the full force of their opposition “within a single thought, and without attenuating any of the force of either

²⁷⁴ *Aesthetic Education*, 21, 105, 147. As Schiller famously proclaims, man “is only fully a human being when he plays” (107).

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 77, 147.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 81. See Goldsmith’s lucid account of this tradeoff in Schiller’s treatises: “Schiller’s aesthetic is primarily an apocalypse of glorious inaction. ‘Reft out of time,’ the self-referential space of the ... aesthetic (‘a whole in itself’) is doomed to a mere formalism, for its utopian mirage evaporates the instant one *does anything*” (*Unbuilding Jerusalem*, 8).

judgment.”²⁷⁸ On the one hand, social and political renovation of any kind requires the instantiation of justice in time and space, in however flawed a form; historical progress demands that an agent of justice not make the perfect the enemy of the good, as it were. On the other hand, given the difficulty of correctly making a just decision (finding the proper ratio between punitive severity and ameliorative equity, as well the appropriate means for bringing such decisions to pass), attempts at justice almost necessarily devolve into injustice. Indeed, Spenser’s Legend continually prompts readers to reflect on the variable points at which an imperfect enactment of justice ceases to be worthy of the name of virtue at all. As we saw above in the constitutive ambiguity of “dispenche,” the point is specifically that failure to do full justice to dialectically opposed impulses, for readers and fictive knights alike, is an inevitability—essential, rather than accidental, to the virtue’s experiential functioning. The ideal of genuinely equitable justice is not, therefore, a theoretical abstraction with which a clear-eyed practice might dispose, but serves a crucial diagnostic function. Just as Schiller’s aesthetic state “cannot be derived from any actual case” and so can never be fully achievable in historical experience, its ideal, like authentic Spenserian justice, nevertheless “corrects and regulates our judgement of every actual case.”²⁷⁹ The two conceptual standards thus constitute an engine for perpetual Utopian critique of actually-existing institutions. Indeed, their analogous critical function corresponds, with striking precision, to David Norbrook’s sense of what literature is meant to do for Spenser’s readers: “Poetry could enact a [civilizing] transformation, not literally but by prophetic vision, by imagining the world as it might be and encouraging people to remake it.”²⁸⁰

In leveraging Schiller to better understand the literary logic of Book V, I am making two key, related points about how the Romantic theorist illuminates Spenser’s poetic practice. First, Schiller’s aesthetic state analogizes an idealized equitable justice, as Spenser figures it throughout his Legend. In each case, the readerly subject achieves a state of cognitive reconciliation that synchronizes the competing impulses of thought and action, theory and practice. This harmonious condition, however, exists only as a realm of pure potentiality, and is evacuated with every determinate worldly engagement into which the subject might enter. The one-sidedness of social action is the price that both Spenserian justice and experiences of beauty pay for making themselves effective realities. Spenser thus *thematizes* the dynamics of Schiller’s aesthetic state *within* the fiction of the poem, through the paradoxes of equitable justice. But if the text indeed urges the necessary sacrifice of the ideal for the real, as contemporary critics overwhelmingly believe Book V does, then it also offers itself as the means of restoring to the reader the formal potentialities of the Schillerian aesthetic. The reading experience invites us to lavish attention on the “balanced poise” of “opposed impulses” in Spenser’s construction of virtue in a way that is denied to us amidst the pressures of time-bound, worldly decision-making.²⁸¹ The compromised extra-textual action *The Faerie Queene* seeks to incite in politically-engaged readers is thus to be measured against the comprehensive ideal of justice that we glimpse in the poem itself. This, then, is the second point of intersection between Spenser’s and Schiller’s texts: Book V is an

²⁷⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 47.

²⁷⁹ *Aesthetic Education*, 77, 69.

²⁸⁰ *Poetry and Politics*, 131. Borris similarly discusses the apocalyptic intimations of Book V, which gesture to “an ultimate messianic intervention,” in comparison with which “any existing social order must thus be inadequate, and estimable only insofar as it can dimly shadow or anticipate messianic reform.” See *Spenser’s Poetics of Prophecy in The Faerie Queene V* (Victoria: University of Victoria, 1991), 77.

²⁸¹ Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 248, 251.

approximation of aesthetic concord, an ideal of dialectically poised artistic experience, that offers a standard against which an inevitably flawed, but nevertheless essential, social action is to be measured. In doing so, it *dramatizes* the dynamics of the Schillerian aesthetic *outside* the fiction of the poem, in the mind of the fit reader. Spenser preserves this foundational paradox—in which a deliberative, readerly-critical agency becomes both the enabling and disabling condition, at one and the same time, for a redemptive socio-political agency—through the entirety of Book V, and it is to the paradox’s development in discrete narrative episodes that we must now turn.

III. Uncritical Justice: Artegall’s Violence and the Limits of Judgement

As much as anything, the early sections of *The Faerie Queene*’s fifth book demonstrate Artegall’s deficient capacity for the sympathetic judgment essential to genuinely equitable justice. Throughout the Legend’s first four cantos, Artegallian justice continually takes the form of mere punitive force, imposed in accordance with the rigors of law. This one-sided enactment of the virtue Artegall is meant to embody, with its reflexive recourse to violence, in turn fails at the peacefully persuasive means of dispute resolution at which justice should, in principle, aim. Instead, it leaves in its wake a residue of begrudging non-consent among the knight’s fellow subjects, a lingering resentment that indicates the inadequacy of merely punitive justice to the lasting maintenance of the *polis*.

Artegall’s lack of an equitable judge’s supple discernment is on full display during the occasions for critical analysis with which he is often presented. In his first scene of juridical practice, Artegall comes across a despairing Squire whose beloved has been abducted by the vicious knight Sanglier, also the killer of his erstwhile paramour. The Squire at first accepts the irremediable nature of the situation, believing it pointless to gainsay his social superior (i.23). Artegall remains suspicious of Sanglier, however, and after imposing on the pair a version of Solomon’s judgment (so that “the dead and liuing” ladies will each be “Deuided” among the men [26]), forces the murderer to bear the dead lady’s head as a sign of his crimes. But Sanglier “disdaine[s]” and “repine[s]” against the sentence, refusing absolutely to obey it until Artegall gives way to Talus, who then “force[s]” Sanglier to acquiesce; by now seeing it “bootelesse to resist,” he at last “takes his burden vp for feare” (29). It is difficult here not to feel something of the awkward overdetermination of the episode, given Artegall’s recourse to Solomonic justice only *after* we learn that he had already perceived Sanglier’s guilt by means of unspecified “signes” (24).²⁸² There is a way, that is, in which Artegall’s need to identify with his biblical forerunner overrides the scene’s logical necessity, which might instead be satisfied simply by questioning the surviving lady—much as the more dexterous Calidore will “inquire” of another woman “whether what [a knight] spoke / Were soothly so” in a near-identical situation at the start of Book VI (ii.13). Instead, the persistent unruliness of Sanglier is “represt” not by applying a critical judgment responsive to the contingent resources of the case at hand and dedicated to forestalling the threat of violence, but rather through the “resistlesse” force of Talus.

Artegall’s reliance on the iron man’s awesome force to disperse the intransigent energies of the Legend’s villains soon becomes familiar, and reinforces our sense of his limited powers of

²⁸² For Solomon’s judgment, see Kings 3.16–27. Drawing out the comparison, Dunseath notes that this mechanism for revealing hidden guilt is the first scene of judgment for both Solomon and Artegall. See *Spenser’s Allegory of Justice in Book Five of “The Faerie Queene”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 81–2.

judgment.²⁸³ Two more brief examples will suffice to make the point. At the end of canto iii, Artegall disciplines the incorrigible Braggadochio, whose theft of Guyon's horse all the way back in Book II is finally requited. "But the proud boaster his doome vpbrayd," Spenser tells us, "And [Artegall] reuil'd, and rated, and disdayned" (35). At this point, active agency once again transfers to Talus, who proceeds to baffle Braggadochio once and for all, shaving his beard, stripping his armor, and breaking his sword (37). It would be special pleading to argue that Braggadochio's revelation as an imposter should not be construed as a paradigm of "poetic justice," but his leftover recalcitrance toward Artegall and his "iudgement so vniust" occurs in virtually *all* of the knight's early interactions (35). In the next canto, he encounters the litigious brothers Amidas and Bracidas (along with their respective partners, Philtera and Lucy) quarreling over maritime treasure. Artegall determines that it should remain the rightful possession of its current possessors, leading to the predictably opposed responses amongst the contending parties:

When he his sentence thus pronounced had,
 Both *Amidas* and *Philtra* were displeased:
 But *Bracidas* and *Lucy* were right glad,
 And on the threasure by that iudgement ceased.
 So was their discord by this doome appeased ...
 (5.4.20)

Spenser's manipulation of the stanza's rhymed terms, with "seased" and "appeased" at its median couplet, condenses the dynamic of these episodes as a whole. Whether the subjects of Artegall's judgments are appeased or displeased is simply a function of their participation in or exclusion from the act of "seizing" disputed goods, the sanction for which is always rooted in violence.²⁸⁴

Artegall's consistent subordination of consensual persuasion to the dictates of punitive force should perhaps be unsurprising, given the nature of his upbringing. Prior to her

²⁸³ It might be objected that in these early cantos Artegall should not be identified as a judicial archetype since the early cantos suggest the pre-historical "legendary days" in which "the main need of society is not for a lawyer or judge, but rather for some one man of great power and natural goodness who uses the most violent means to establish or restore a basic social order." Artegall would thus figure at the start as a type of the "social bandit" in the vein of Hercules, who brings "justice to a world where laws either do not yet exist or have failed somehow to work" (Fletcher, *Prophetic Moment*, 153; 147). Nohnberg, indeed, believes that the earlier parts of Book V resemble "the lawless condition of the Hesiodic iron age," where the law is simply the action of "man's right hand" (*Analogy*, 353). While Spenser's legend clearly proceeds according to a loose principle of social development, culminating in the detailed allegories of contemporary events in cantos ix-xii, the invocation of Solomon's judgment and the abstract clarity of the legal scenarios in the early episodes clearly operate under the sign of legal justice, however primitive. As Zurcher notes, the Solomonic intertext "is famous as an exemplary application of natural law principles" (*Spenser's Legal Language*, 139), and Fletcher also remarks that Artegall's "actions possess what we may call 'natural equity,' because he is conceived as a hero with an idea of fair dealings" (161). Artegall's early judgments are thus continuous with the more complicated legal operations of the later cantos in Book V.

²⁸⁴ McCabe also notes the residue of displeasure that survives the scene; see *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment*, 221. While Fletcher is clearly correct in averring that Artegall's judgment here "is sufficiently authoritative that it stands," we might locate this authority in Artegall's monopoly of force, rather than in demonstration of right (*Prophetic Moment*, 168). Each of the episodes in cantos i-iv might thus be understood to glance, however indirectly, at what Anderson describes as "the danger, in applying justice, of a strain between interior judgment and physical force, with the result that might is right" (*The Spenser Encyclopedia*, 63).

abandonment of earth, the goddess Astraea designates Artegall as her vicegerent when he is still a “gentle childe,” instructing him in “all the discipline of iustice,” but deep within “a caue[,] from companie exilde.” Artegall’s initiation into the workings of the fundamentally political virtue he represents is surprisingly and incongruously antisocial, proceeding only in isolation from his “peres” (i.6). Spenser further underscores the cloistered nature of his education in the striking application of Astraea’s discipline: “She caused him to make experience / Vpon wyld beasts, which she in woods did find, / With wrongfull powre oppressing others of their kind” (7). While Spenser gestures here to the mythological model for Artegall’s tutelage in Statius’ Achilles, whose justice is cultivated by the enlightened centaur Chiron and tested on animals, Spenser nevertheless also gives readers reason for pause.²⁸⁵ Are Astraea’s tableaux of tyrannical animals, we might wonder, a fit model for the equitable justice that would be responsive to the manifold complexities of human aggregation?²⁸⁶ Indeed, if McCabe is correct in perceiving throughout Book V a satirical undertone that often “reads like mock-heroic, or even self-parody,” we might identify the early episodes’ scenes of crude social policing, elaborated from this rudimentary and antisocial starting point, as prime examples of the phenomenon.²⁸⁷

It is, of course, possible to conclude that this paradigm, where allegorical criminals refuse to acknowledge the justice of their punishments, simply aligns Spenser’s understanding of the virtue with its formulation in Sidney’s *Defence of Poesy*. Justice, for Sidney, is “the chief of virtues,” but it is a mechanism of orderly containment rather than moral reform. Its imposition, he tells us, “doth not endeavour to make men good, but that their evil hurt not others, having no care, so he be a good citizen, how bad a man he be.”²⁸⁸ The very incorrigibility of Spenser’s villains, according to this line of argument, sanctions the full violence of the law, and their lack of ethical amendment only further validates the paradoxical process through which, as Jeff Dolven puts it, “the afterness of punishment becom[es] the beforeness of evidence.”²⁸⁹ But, as Fletcher

²⁸⁵ For Artegall’s modeling on the basis of Achilles, see *FQ*, 511. The knight, we remember, first appears to Britomart in Merlin’s mirror wearing Achilles’ armor, a point to which I will return later. His legendary models also include, at various points in Book V, Hercules, Bacchus, Osiris, Samson, and Antony, as a number of critics have noted. See Nohrnberg, *Analogy*, 373–5; Dunseath, *Spenser’s Allegory of Justice*, 48–59; Jane Aptekar, *Icons of Justice: Iconography and Thematic Imagery in Book V of The Faerie Queene* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).

²⁸⁶ Spenser seems to return to this very question in canto ix. Reflecting on the foregoing episode of Arthur and Artegall’s defeat of the Souldan and his wife Adicia (viii.20), the latter of whom is transformed into a tiger for her malicious fury (ix.1), he observes that “wrong ... arm’d ... with might” is “Not fit mongst men, that doe with reason mell, / But mongst wyld beasts and saluage woods to dwell” (1). Even as this passage registers the way that oppression jumps the species boundary that would theoretically separate men from beasts, therefore, it nevertheless posits the distinction between human and animal that would make the latter an unfit model for dealing with the former. As Anderson pointedly observes of his punishment on Sanglier, “Artegall’s justice is appropriate to a barnyard, where wayward farm dogs are similarly disciplined” (*The Spenser Encyclopedia*, 63), and Patterson also regards Artegall’s tutelage as an “ironized” counterpoint the foregoing iconography relating justice proper to equity and conscience (*Reading Between the Lines*, 91).

²⁸⁷ *Spenser’s Monstrous Regiment*, 215. Anderson also detects “the distant threat of parody” in these early scenes, with their “factitiously simple or fictively ideal” scenarios and Artegall’s “naïve and excessive reliance on ... force and physical prowess” to resolve them. See “Knight of Justice,” 68.

²⁸⁸ *Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, 15. The comparison is noted by Hamilton in *FQ*, 13.

²⁸⁹ As Dolven explains, “Any criminal punished in a manner that symbolically invokes the nature of his crime will look guilty ... [so that] the righteousness of the punishment is made self-evident by the act of punishing... [I]t is as though the punishment itself could now be entered into the evidence for the judgment...” See *Scenes of Instruction*, 213.

argues to the contrary, “Law functions only when it can partly detach itself from physical enforcement, when, through its own clear authority, it sways men to act in accordance with principle,” leading to the internalization of the law on the sturdier basis of custom.²⁹⁰ Fletcher’s point here calls to mind Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence,” which observes that the law’s foundational reliance on punitive force appears “in so ambiguous a moral light that the question poses itself whether there are no other than violent means for regulating conflicting human interests.”²⁹¹ Moreover, Spenser himself gestures in this direction in *A View* when Irenius says that “laws ought to be fashioned unto the manners and condition of the people to whom they are meant, and not to be imposed upon them according to the simple rule of right” (20), a claim that presupposes the vital (even if not exclusive) importance of “consent, mutuality, and social bonds” to the administration of justice.²⁹²

In quoting *A View*, I do not mean to diminish the ferocity of Spenser’s prescriptions for subjugating the Irish rebels through slaughter and cultural extirpation. Irenius insists, before urging a policy of enforced starvation, that “it is vaine to prescribe lawes, where no man careth for keeping of them, nor feareth the daunger for breaking of them”; the initial stage of civil reclamation must therefore proceed “by the sword” (92-3). But while Spenser’s interlocutors are drawn to these conclusions in light of the irremediable state to which they believe the native Irish have sunk, the legal *principles* the tract articulates nevertheless indicate that authentic justice should not be understood as simple retribution. Justice first involves, Eudoxus says, “feare ... which restraineth offences, and inflicteth sharpe punishment to misdoers,” but, according to the authoritative Irenius, it is also “intended for the reformation of abuses, and peaceable continuance of the subject” (13). Similarly, the latter rejects the notion that “heavy lawes and penalties” are the best remedy for criminality by arguing that it is more effective to instill “more understanding of the right, and shame of the fault” in lawbreakers (32). Irenius ultimately concludes that “where no other remedie may bee devised, nor hope of recovery had” violent suppression must be imposed (93), but he maintains throughout that it is “very evill surgery to cut off every unsound or sicke part of the body, which, being by other due meanes recovered, might afterwards doe very good service to the body againe” (82). He thus articulates a version of the maxim (to which I will return below) that it is “better to reforme, then to cut off the ill”

²⁹⁰ *The Prophetic Moment*, 179. In support this claim, Fletcher cites Jean Bodin’s prioritization of custom over abstract law: “Law is made on the instant and draws its force from him who has the right to bind all the rest. Custom is established imperceptibly and without any exercise of compulsion. Law is promulgated and imposed by authority, and often against the wishes of the subject” (*Prophetic Moment*, 182). Fletcher also argues for the loaded historical context of Spenser’s refusal to equate justice with a merely punitive force when he refers to “the curse that hung over the Tudor establishment,” the persistence of “the unanswered question: is the monarch’s right to rule fixed only because backed by power, or is it genuine right?” (*Prophetic Moment*, 257).

²⁹¹ *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978), 286-7. At the conclusion of the essay, Benjamin proposes the idea of a “divine” violence, “a pure immediate violence” in the service of authentic justice, and untainted by private interest (297). In Spenser’s representations of irresistible punishment executed by the agents of justice throughout Book V, I believe that he pursues something akin to this concept. But Benjamin also acknowledges that it is “[l]ess possible ... to decide when unalloyed violence has been realized in particular cases” than it is to imagine its theoretical possibility (300). This corollary suspicion—that a purely just violence is accessible only as mere ideation, and is inevitably sacrificed in practice—haunts Spenser’s legend in much the same way as it does Benjamin’s essay, even as both seek to imagine an at least hypothetical way out of the impasse.

²⁹² Fowler, “Failure of Moral Philosophy,” 56.

(V.x.2). In both cases, Spenser asserts the non-identity between law and retributive violence, as well as the reformatory *possibilities* of genuine justice.

From this perspective, the episode that conveys most forcefully Artegall's inadequacies as the administrator of a critically discerning equitable justice that pursues peaceful consent is his confrontation with the egalitarian Giant. In this much-discussed scene, Artegall rejects the Giant's promotion of social leveling and popular uprising in a vocabulary that critics have typically conceived as a straightforward "expression of Elizabethan pieties."²⁹³ Two disconcerting aspects of Artegall's rhetorical strategy, however, deserve scrutiny. First, his refutation of the Giant's threat to "reduce [all things] vnto equality" is premised on the timeless order of Creation (32): amongst the heavens, he says, "no change hath yet beene found" since "first they all created were / In goodly measure, by their Makers might" (35-6). As a number of readers have observed, however, this claim is directly contradicted by the proem to Book V, which says that "the world is runne quite out of square, / From the first point of his appointed sourse" (1), and that "the heauens reuolution / Is wandred farre from where it first was pight" (4).²⁹⁴ This is precisely the point the Giant makes in response, when he challenges Artegall, "Seest not, how badly all things present bee, / And each estate quite out of order goth?" (ii.37). He thus demystifies Artegall's reliance on "an obsolete metaphor to justify the perceived inequalities of lived experience,"²⁹⁵ leaving no doubt of the knight's misinterpretation of a cosmic devolution that "plaine appears" to both the Giant and Spenser himself (proem.5). Second, when Artegall later questions the efficacy of the Giant's "huge great paire of ballance" to weigh right and wrong, truth and falsehood, and the device does indeed prove useless (30), Artegall offers a twofold gloss on his failure. The Giant's futile efforts show that "in the minde the doome of right must bee" (rather than in the material substance of the scales), and that since "truth is one, and right is euer one," they cannot be weighed against falsehood and wrong as though they were the same in kind (47-8).²⁹⁶ But the Giant's operation of his balance resembles, with unmistakable precision, the technology associated with Artegall's own training in equitable justice. As we have seen, the knight's instruction centers in Astraea's teaching him "to weigh both right and wrong / In equall ballance" in a trope that entangles conceptual and material orders of discourse in much the same way that the Giant's scale does.²⁹⁷ This similarity at least makes plausible the Giant's (apparent)

²⁹³ Fowler, "Failure of Moral Philosophy," 60. For an example of this "normative" reading, see Fletcher, *Prophetic Moment*, 242-6. Fowler refutes this position with impressive ingenuity, arguing that Artegall's positions thoroughly "violate received jurisprudence," implying a purely subjective basis of justice in which virtue and force are monopolized by the *dominus* and the subject's voluntary consent is rendered irrelevant. See "Failure of Moral Philosophy," 60; see also 63-5.

²⁹⁴ See Patterson, *Reading Between the Lines*, 105-6; Fowler, "Failure of Moral Philosophy," 62; and Kristen Tranter, "'The sea it selfe doest thou not plainely see?': Reading *The Faerie Queene*, Book V," *Spenser Studies* 21 (2006), 87.

²⁹⁵ McCabe, *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment*, 217.

²⁹⁶ The debate's resolution, with abstract right occupying the balance's median position between different kinds of falsity, appears to reaffirm an Aristotelian "meane" between contrary "extremities," a familiar Spenserian *topos* that the Giant rejects as he continues frantically to put his scales to work (49).

²⁹⁷ Patterson reads this passage as "an internal critique of the way allegory, by setting static emblems in narrative motion, is bound to reveal their inherent failures of logic or truthfulness," and notes that since "it is also Artegall who demands that the Giant weigh abstractions ... in his materialist scale," the consequent "blurring of registers that drives the Giant to distraction in trying to combine incompatible categories" redounds on Artegall himself (*Reading Between the Lines*, 96). Tranter follows her closely in seeing here "a culmination of the tension between

misunderstanding of equitable distribution. His subsequent destruction, when he is “shouldered ... from off the higher ground” by Talus and drowned in the sea (49), is also continuous with the resistance to Artegallian justice that characterizes the Legend as a whole—a resistance that is displaced only by the threat or realization of force.²⁹⁸

But Artegall’s shortcomings as equitable judge are even more economically scrutinized *after* the Giant’s destruction, when the knight is compelled to respond to the ensuing mutiny of the “tumultuous rout” (51). At its “warlike” approach, Artegall, we are told, “much was troubled, ne wist what to doo. / For loth he was his noble hands t’embrew / In the base blood of such a rascall crew” (52). Artegall is caught here, as Stephen Greenblatt has memorably explained, between the chivalric imperative to avoid “the strain that would attend a base encounter” with social inferiors, on the one hand, and his fear that the mutineers “with shame would him pursew” were he simply to abandon the field (*ibid.*), on the other. The solution is once again for Talus to intervene, scattering the peasants “like a swarme of flyes” (53), while Artegall restricts himself to the verbal domain of judicial mediation.²⁹⁹ But Greenblatt’s account, for all its elegance, does not accurately describe what transpires here. For it is Talus, not Artegall, who has the prerogative “to persuade and to negotiate” with the mob,³⁰⁰ as the iron man is dispatched “t’inquire / The cause of their array, and truce for to desire” (52). It should strike us as absurd that Artegall, after the lengthy dialogue with the Giant, would still need confirmation of the “cause” of the mob’s insurgence, and his designation of Talus as a more fitting agent than himself to pursue this delicate act of diplomacy suggests nothing so much as the undertone of parody that McCabe detects in Book V. This sequence, in fact, presents us with a Talus who, contrary to Fletcher’s generalization that he “cannot act without orders from someone over him,” acts largely of his own accord throughout: the Giant is destroyed not on Artegall’s orders but as a result of Talus judging him “so lewdly minded” as to merit a death sentence (49), and he again attacks the mob absent Artegall’s decree when it hopelessly initiates combat.³⁰¹

The conclusion of the scene therefore presents us with an Artegall whose performance of statecraft is dubious in the extreme, as “troubled” in his exercise of equitable judgment as in his bewildered reaction to finding himself in such a situation to begin with (“Ne wist he what to doo”). The episode, that is, thwarts our intuitive expectation that, per Greenblatt, the prestige of the judiciary needs to be preserved through the intervening violence of a Talus-like police state. On the contrary, the real obstacle to the exercise of discriminating judgment here is instead the lack of any functional distinction *between* these justicial organs.

material and abstract categories in the episode,” and makes the valuable point that “if the scales are a functional sign of the mental process of judgment, then they should be able to perform within the allegorical frame” (“Reading Book V,” 89-90). Even Nohrnberg, though concluding that the giant is “a poor judge of the mean” and a “parody [of] the deliberations of equity,” points out that since “the securing of some form of equality is always a traditional function of justice,” “the communist giant is not entirely wrong in attributing the impairment of the estate of the world to a loss of ‘equality’” (*Analogy*, 390, 386, 389).

²⁹⁸ As Patterson remarks, “the knight of Justice is himself incapable of keeping the encounter at the level of persuasion, and in frustration falls back on simple force” (*Reading Between the Lines*, 93).

²⁹⁹ In Greenblatt’s apt words, violence “is the prerogative of Talus who can no more receive dishonor than can a Cruise missile.” See “Murdering Peasants” in *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 165-6.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁰¹ *The Prophetic Moment*, 138. For a reading of Talus that stresses his independent initiative, see Wolfe, *Humanism, Machinery, and Renaissance Literature*, 212-3.

IV. Between Radigund and Britomart: Mobilizing Heroic Agency

As we have seen, Artegall preserves authority and social stability throughout the early cantos of Book V through “powre,” or “the right hand of Iustice truely hight.” But the warlike efficacy of his “mightie hands” offers no guarantee of his “skill” of determining “righteous doome,” a skill that is equally necessary to the administration of equitable justice (iv.1). In fact, the potentially inverse relationship between these two faculties—the martial and the interpretive—is consonant not only with Derrida’s aforementioned discussion of the temporality of the “just decision,” but with Simone Weil’s antinomy between force and intellection, as well. In her influential reading of *The Iliad*, Weil asserts that the Homeric warrior “moves in a frictionless environment,” and so never experiences the need of “an interval for reflection between impulse and action.” “Where reflection has no place,” she continues, “there is *neither justice nor forethought*: hence the ruthless and mindless behavior of warriors.”³⁰² These startlingly apt constructions could be translated almost verbatim into a reading of Artegall, whom readers of *The Faerie Queene* first glimpse clad in “Achilles armes” (III.ii.25). For the knight’s duel with the Amazonian queen Radigund is not only his first real encounter with the experiential friction that imposes Weil’s reflective interval, but also his most unequivocal failure of thought in the entire poem.

This episode has long been understood as Spenser’s misogynistic epitome of the dangers of effeminate pity, the self-defeating emotional extreme that must be distinguished from rational exercises of mercy or clemency.³⁰³ The tendentious vocabulary of the scene’s climactic stanzas

³⁰² *The Iliad or the Poem of Force: A Critical Edition*, ed. and trans. James P. Holoka (New York: Lang, 2003), 53; emphasis added. See Goldsmith’s discussion of this passage in relation to the “lack of judgment” displayed by Milton’s Samson in *Blake’s Agitation*, 149.

³⁰³ We appear to find much the same lesson earlier in the Legend in canto ii, when Talus presents the golden-handed embodiment of bribery, Munera, to Artegall for judgment. Removing her from a heap of gold, Talus

her drew
By the faire lockes, and fowly did array,
Withouten pittie of her goodly hew,
That *Artegall* him selfe her seemelesse plight did rew.

Yet for no pittie would he change the course
Of Iustice, which in *Talus* hand did lye;
Who rudely hayld her forth without remorse,
.....
But he her suppliant hands, those hands of gold,
And eke her feete, those feete of siluer trye,
Which sought vnrighteousnesse, and iustice sold,
Chopt off, and nayld on high, that all might them behold.

(5.2.25-26)

Justice is here defined in diametrical opposition to pity, and though Artegall initially inclines to mercy for the beautiful Munera, he ultimately sanctions the grotesque dismemberment “which in *Talus* hand did lye.” Spenser dramatizes the progressive movement by which pity is tempered by the dispassionate execution of justice, lingering pathetically upon “those hands of gold” and “those feete of siluer trye,” before steeling both his characters and readers by emphatically reiterating that those delicate extremities “sought vnrighteousnesse and iustice sold.” While

makes the point unmistakably. At the sight of Radigund's battered face, Artegall's formerly "cruell minded hart / Empierced was with pittifull regard, / That his sharpe sword he threw from him apart" (v.13). Affectively overwhelmed in a parody of chivalric generosity, he is left "with emptie hands all weaponlesse" (14), and surrenders himself to her. The logic is that of the Ovidian or Dantesque *contrapasso*, as the now effeminate and impotent Artegall is alternately penetrated and softened by his self-submission—he is "mollifie[d]" by "ruth of beautie" after first being "empierced" (13). Imprisoned in Radigund's textile mill, he is forced to wear "womans weedes, that is to manhood shame" in what is perhaps the closest that *The Faerie Queene* ever comes to parody (20). Artegall's slackening of justice leads to such a thoroughgoing feminization that when his paramour Britomart eventually rescues him, she can hardly stand the shame of the "lothly vncouth sight," deprived as he is of "manly looke" and "manly hew" (vii.37, 40). Indeed, Britomart's invocation of a "May-game" here—"Ah my deare Lord, what sight is this (quoth she) / What May-game hath misfortune made of you?"—underscores how closely the scene verges on farce.³⁰⁴

Spenser's slide into outright mockery of Artegall in the Radigund narrative thus stresses the knight's lack of critical judgment in an even more emphatic way than the Giant episode did. The equitable justice that Radigund merits as the embodiment of feminine misrule (or what John Knox called the "monstrous regiment of women") is diametrically opposed to the dangerous liberty that Artegall pusillanimously grants her.³⁰⁵ It might be objected that, given the way in

chivalric decorum mandates courteous treatment of a beautiful woman in distress, Artegall's unwavering commitment to the austere dispensation of just deserts cannot accommodate the inclination to unmerited mercy, and his vengeance must be delivered "withouten pittie ... without remorse." Nohrnberg, in his reading of the Radigund episode, adduces Thomas Elyot's distinction between mercy as "a temperaunce of the mynde ... always ioyne with reason" and "vaine pitie," which is "a sicknesse of the mynd" (*Analogy*, 382-3). The most helpful recent critic on Spenser's attitude toward pity is Staines, who provides a genealogy of the early modern period's conflicting attitudes toward the passion. On the one hand is the denunciation of pity by royal counselors like Elyot and George Buchanan, who follow Seneca's distinction between the prudent calculation of *clementia* and the effeminizing weakness of *misericordia*. On the other is the Christian association of pity with virtuous compassion and charity, as in Augustine's belief that *misericordia* represented an affective impetus to the alleviation of suffering, and Calvin's praise of humane tenderheartedness. See *Tragic Histories*, esp. 1-26, and "Pity and the Authority of Feminine Passions in Books V and VI of *The Faerie Queene*," *Spenser Studies* 25 (2010): 129-61. For an analysis of the vital role that pity plays in the history of heroic poetry, see Colin Burrow, *Epic Romance: Homer to Milton* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). While Book V clearly emphasizes the destructive effects of pity, Staines and Burrow both concur that *The Faerie Queene* as a whole does not seek to banish the passion altogether, but rather to rehabilitate it for its humanizing effects.

³⁰⁴ The second half of canto v, in fact, is given over to the kind of gender-bending erotic intrigue amongst Artegall, Radigund, and her go-between Clarinda that is more characteristic of Shakespeare's festive comedies than anything we typically associate with Spenser. The ironic simile that conveys Britomart's "wonder and astonishment" at Artegall's unrecognizable feminization, in which she is compared to "chast *Penelope*" at Odysseus' homecoming, further satirizes Artegall's condition (vii.39): it is he, the immobilized weaver, who most resembles Penelope in these cantos, while Britomart is his avenging redeemer.

³⁰⁵ See Knox, *The first blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women* (Geneva: 1558). For Spenser's traditionalist articulation of gender hierarchy (granting the divine exception of Elizabeth), see v.25. Along with Radigund, the primary object of the Legend's misogynistic satire is Adicia (Greek for "injustice"), whom we meet in canto viii. Adicia is the "bad wife" of the Souldan (a figure for Philip II of Spain and the Armada); Adicia "counsels him through confidence of might, / To breake all bonds of law, and rules of right" (20). Like Radigund, she will ultimately be associated with the tiger (vii.30, viii.49), and placed in a mythological lineage of other tyrannical

which Artegall's disarming is figured as an irresistible emotional response to Radigund's distress, his error should not be ascribed to faulty intellect, but to an all-too-common affective frailty. Spenser seems to suggest as much at the start of the canto vi, when he anticipates that readers will be quick to "deeme in *Artegall* / Great weaknesse ... / For yielding so himselfe a wretched thrall," and offers the exculpatory generalization that "neuer yet was wight so well aware, / But he at first or last was trapt in womens snare" (1). Yet in the immediate aftermath of Artegall's defeat, Spenser is clear that not only is Artegall himself to blame for his imprisonment, but that his lapse is specifically a failure of mind—a conscious "decision" that results from intellectual "incompetence":³⁰⁶

So was he ouercome, not ouercome,
But to her yeelded of his owne accord;
Yet was he iustly damned by the doome
Of his owne mouth, that spake so warelesse word,
To be her thrall, and seruice her afford.

(v.17)

The sudden reversal of the first line, as Spenser abruptly contradicts himself with an emphatic caesura, corrects against the temptation to absolve Artegall of agency and ascribe his lapse to the universal shortcomings of masculine virtue. Indeed, to claim that Radigund has "trapt" the knight in any literal sense is nonsensical, since all she does prior to Artegall's "wilfull" self-subjection is fall unconscious and reveal "her faire visage voide of ornament" (17, 12). The knight's detention is instead precipitated by his "warelesse" condition throughout the combat with Radigund, a *particularized* failing that preemptively ironizes the apologetics of the following canto, and also calls back to Artegall's limited critical agency earlier in Book V.

It is true that there is no strict incompatibility between Spenser's two descriptions of Artegall's capitulation, and in thinking on the tension between them we might be reminded of Paul Alpers' insistence that moral generalizations in *The Faerie Queene* are not Spenser's "definitive pronouncement[s]" on a given issue, but instead offer readers "reason[s] which one can take seriously" in spite of their necessarily "provisional" nature.³⁰⁷ But this transition, in which a chastening but critically acute appraisal of Artegall's fiasco is followed by an exculpatory generalization of dubious accuracy, occurs *again*, and in more provocative fashion still, just after Artegall's liberation from Radigund's mill. Britomart, having arrived on the scene and defeated the Amazon in single combat, restores the kingdom to "mens subiection," and permits a rehabilitated Artegall to pursue his original mission of rescuing Irena. Spenser then laments the

women (viii.47). The prominence accorded to these characters in Book V underscores its investment in a hierarchy of the genders and its identification of feminine misrule as one of the paramount epitomes of injustice.

³⁰⁶ Anderson, *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, 63; Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics*, 122.

³⁰⁷ "Narration in *The Faerie Queene*," 25, 27. See the similar argument he makes in *The Poetry of "The Faerie Queene"*: Spenser's "moral intelligence," Alpers declares, takes the form of "the provisional adopting of attitudes and evaluations," rather than absolute "moral decisions" (287-8). In what follows, however, I agree with Greenblatt's sensible objection that contradictory phenomena often appear in Book V with such "close proximity" that they not only elicit, but positively demand, interpretive responses. See *Learning to Curse*, 163. At such moments, as Silberman suggests, the narrative voice's unreliability dramatizes how "*The Faerie Queene* ... put[s] its own discourse in question." See "Politics of the Text," 5.

baleful effect of “beauties louely baite,” which often leads “Great warriours ... their rigour to repress” and “forget their manlinesse” (viii.1). “Yet could it not sterne *Artegall* retaine,” the narrator then abruptly declares, “Nor hold from suite of his auowed quest” (3). These lines should once again force readers into a double-take, ascribing *Artegall*’s liberation to the knight himself rather than Britomart, the actual agent of his deliverance. (While the passage makes *Artegall* a grammatical object rather than a subject, its larger context, with references to Samson and Hercules, still clearly makes *Artegall*’s recovery a function of his masculine self-reliance in an economy of sexual difference.) Not only *could* Radigund’s mollifying beauty and *Artegall*’s incompetent reaction to it restrain him, we might reply to Spenser’s narrator, they indeed *did*, leaving the knight no prospect of deliverance prior to Britomart’s intervention.

The narrator’s endorsement of *Artegall*’s virile indomitability thus epitomizes the “tactical amnesia” in which the Legend frequently engages, by “invoking fictional versions of events when the facts prove difficult to swallow.”³⁰⁸ In forcing into view the discrepancy between his narrator’s summary moralization and the facts of the surrounding narrative, Spenser establishes a tension between 1) an act of critical judgment that would be faithful to experience and 2) the self-esteem necessary for heroic action. This phenomenon, which occurs elsewhere in *The Faerie Queene*, has been most sensitively described by Paul Suttie in his analysis of an analogous episode at the end of Book I, when the Redcross Knight delivers an evasive and self-exculpatory account of his dalliance with Duessa. In proffering a narrative that “portrays him as having been a victim rather than a perpetrator of his own misadventures,” Redcross absolves himself of responsibility for his earlier lapses, instead articulating “a manipulated version of events” in defiance of “the truth.” Moreover, much as with *Artegall*’s departure from Radegone, the Book I scene also collapses the perspectives of knight and narrator, making the latter “a willing ... apologist” for Redcross’ self-interested glosses, eagerly “interpret[ing] the knight’s actions as waywardly as did the knight himself.”³⁰⁹ As startling as these swerves from experiential fact can be, however, Spenser’s purpose (as Suttie construes it), is not to demystify his knights as failed exemplars of the virtues they embody, but to emphasize that “dwelling on one’s sinfulness is not conducive to salvation” or productive labor, and leads only to “paralysis and despair.” Spenser’s dramatizations of “the activity of interpretation” within his poem, therefore, aim less at the retrospective apprehension of objective truth and more at “the spurring of events.”³¹⁰

Suttie’s reading is especially valuable for making clear how being “economical with the truth” in *The Faerie Queene* can not only co-exist with, but actively facilitate, “getting on with [one’s] quest.”³¹¹ But the sacrifice of interpretive accuracy becomes a serious problem in Book V, where exercising sympathetic “iudgement” and delivering “righteous doome” are the hallmarks of equity. For justice to be truly just, in Spenser’s conception of the virtue, it must operate as an authentically *equitable* justice, supplementing “might” and “powre” with the critical agency of the discerning judge (proem 10-11). For *Artegall* and the narrator to conspire in producing a

³⁰⁸ Gregerson, *The Reformation of the Subject: Spenser*, 98, 101; Patterson, *Reading between the Lines*, 89.

³⁰⁹ “Spenser’s Political Pragmatism,” 72-3.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 73-4. As Suttie summarizes, “Giving a generous interpretation of events is not wrong in itself; what matters is whether the interpretation is conducive to virtuous behaviour” (74). The two aspects of this operation may also be understood as part of the process that Silberman describes as the book’s representation of the production of “politically useful emotion,” the “inciting and directing [of] whatever emotional energy is at hand to [immediate] political goals.” See “Politics of the Text,” 7.

³¹¹ “Spenser’s Political Pragmatism,” 74.

narrative that misconstrues objective fact in order to re-mobilize his *martial* energies (“sterne *Artegall*”), then, is to forgo an indispensable aspect of the virtue he represents, and therefore to threaten the coherence of the Legend of Justice as a whole. Seen in this light, we might supplement Suttie’s benign consideration of knightly-narratorial misprision with Gordon Teskey’s account of the conceptual “violence” of all allegory. For Teskey, the key maneuver of allegorical representation is *capture*, a figurative practice “in which the materials of narrative are shown being actively subdued for the purpose of raising a structure of meaning.” The production of allegorical meaning, in Teskey’s scheme, is always an exertion of creative violence, “imposing on the intolerable, chaotic otherness of nature a hierarchical order.” The unassimilable disorder of narrative and nature, however, discloses to an attentive reader “a background of resonant noise” that remains audible in spite of capture’s “logocentric reencoding.”³¹² What I am arguing is that Spenser opens an analogous schism between the actual narrative materials of *Artegall*’s misadventures in *Radegone*, and the redemptive summary gloss on them that the narrator incongruously proffers. The episode, that is, dramatizes something like the process of Teskey’s capture, in which the recalcitrant materials of experiential fact are forcibly recuperated by the narrator’s imposing a transcendental meaning on them. The awkwardness of the misfit between the two discourses, however, makes perceptible the “background of resonant noise” that is never fully silenced amidst *Artegall*’s re-mobilization. And the discontinuity between these discourses implies, even more troublingly, an unbridgeable rift between punitive justice and equitable judgment. Spenser therefore dramatizes the void between the constitutive elements of equitable justice in V.viii through narrative process, or the misfit between the details of plot and their summary moralization.

V. “Equall Iustice”: Isis Church and Its Aftermath

This reading is, admittedly, a quite elaborate one, relying on a few lines of verse to interrogate the allegorical logic of Book V as a whole. But it is warranted, I believe, by these lines’ proximity to the Isis Church episode in the preceding canto, in which Spenser metaphorizes authentically equitable justice more fully than anywhere else in the Legend. For this sequence, often taken to be the book’s transcendent “core” or “templar” episode,³¹³ not only figures the ideal relationship between the virtue’s component parts but also maps them onto the

³¹² *Allegory and Violence*, 23, 2. The corollary of allegorical capture for Teskey is personification, which more smoothly conceals the conceptual violence done to its object of representation. The greater violence of capture, in contrast, metacritically provides readers with a glimpse of “the fundamental disorder out of which the illusion of order is raised” (19). In a later essay, Teskey finds in Book V the purely destructive aspects of allegorical capture writ large. Spenserian justice, he argues, operates as a top-down “imposition of abstract principle on whatever circumstances it finds on the ground,” resulting not only in *conceptual* violence but in “ceaseless, mechanical bloodletting.” See “Courtesy and Thinking,” 351, 355. Dolven also finds a similar operation in Book V. For him, *Artegall* is “a full-blown allegory-maker,” whose “punitive decorum ... imposes an allegorical clarity where before there was only ... moral ambiguity (or indifference).” At unpredictable moments, however, Spenser will also offer sympathetic glimpses of *Artegall*’s victims, inserting into the poem instances of “brief, humane rupture” that the allegory “struggles to contain ... in its prosecutorial rigor.” See *Scenes of Instruction*, 210, 214. For Dolven’s account of how punishment and educational instruction often overlap in sixteenth-century England, see 207-19.

³¹³ On the idea of the allegorical “core,” see Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, 381; on the analogous idea of the “templar,” in comparison with the “labyrinthine,” in Spenser’s poetics, see Fletcher, *Prophetic Moment*, 12-3 and 29-32.

text's principal characters in a way that invests their eventual separation with greater symbolic import as the split between retributive justice and ameliorative equity. First, however, a minimum of summary is necessary for parsing the intricate symbolism of the sequence. Britomart sojourns overnight in the pagan temple as she makes her way to Radigund's kingdom, and while there she dreams about the church's "Idoll" (vii.6), a statue of Isis with one foot atop a crocodile. Glossing the idol's iconography, Spenser declares its "meaning" to be the goddess' "suppress[ion]" of "open force" (7). He then proceeds to describe Britomart's "wondrous vision," in which she sees herself "doing sacrifice / To *Isis*" (12-13), and then observes the statue come to life: the crocodile "awake[s] in horrible dismay" and consumes the "hideous tempest" and "outrageous flames" that suddenly rises throughout the temple (14), eventually threatening to devour Isis, as well. The goddess, however, quickly subdues the crocodile, "turning all his pride to humblesse meeke," and the creature once again prostrates itself at her feet, "for grace and loue of her to seeke"; the dream then abruptly concludes with Isis and crocodile consummating their union, "That of his game she soone enwombed grew" (16). Bewildered by the vision, Britomart seeks the counsel of the temple's priests, and their spokesman proceeds to elaborate its import for the "course of all her fortune and posteritie" (12).

The priest's explanation of the dream coordinates a series of contrasting symbolic pairings. The crocodile, he first explains, represents Artegall, "The righteous Knight, that is thy faithfull louer, / Like to *Osyris* in all iust endeuor." Isis, meanwhile, is associated by the priest with "clemence" (22), evidently a synonym for the goddess' identification, at the start of the canto, with "That part of Iustice, which is Equity" (3). As in Book V's proem, moreover, the canto makes equity the province of "right" or "righteous lore" (1), in contrast to the martial power of punitive justice. Finally, and completing the sequence, we also recall that Britomart had affiliated herself with Isis, sleeping "Vnder [her] wings" and worshipping her in the style of the temple's priests just prior to her vision (12-13). The dream interpretation thus collapses several entities onto one another, according to an elaborate binary system:³¹⁴

Crocodile	Goddess
Osiris	Isis
Artegall	Britomart
Justice	Equity/Clemency
"open force"	"righteous lore"

Britomart's dream vision of the idol therefore accomplishes two crucial tasks within the symbolic economy of Book V as a whole. On the one hand, it distinguishes sharply between the divergent aspects of equitable justice, setting a rigid conceptual boundary between their key features and functions. On the other hand, however, it sets forth a tableau suggesting how these disparate components might be synchronized, however provisionally, in their ideal interaction. This

³¹⁴ To the following entities we might also add the "royall Virgin," Elizabeth, one of the descendants of Britomart in Merlin's prophecy of her imperial destiny at III.iii.49. In that episode, Merlin's vision abruptly ends with Elizabeth's reign, breaking off in part because of the queen's lack of a husband (or Tudor successor). In the topical allegory in which Britomart and Artegall are involved, Elizabeth would become another confederate of Isis and Equity, but the historical realization of Osiris and Justice would be pointedly lacking. See Hamilton's note on *FQ*, 319.

conception, however, involves not the placid stasis conveyed by a statue, but the conflictual dynamism of prophetic mystery, which Spenser conveys in the episode's fluctuating tropes of sexual violence. Throughout the dream, Isis and Osiris (and all that they represent) negotiate an erotically charged exchange that is equal parts dominance and submission, attraction and repulsion.³¹⁵ Isis thus "restraines" Osiris' dangerous force (22), the god's "swolne ... pride [in] his owne peerelesse powre" that manifests itself in his ravenous consumption of "flame and tempest" (15). As the rhetoric of engorgement intimates, Isis' control over the crocodile will take the form of her wielding a phallic "rod" that keeps him in "humblesse meeke" (15-16), and "vnder Isis feete [in] sleepe for euer" (22). Nevertheless, the prophesied birth of their "Lion-like" offspring requires his "greedy ... deuour[ing]" of fire and storm (23, 15), which the priest construes as the perpetually threatened violence of Britomart's political enemies. Her impregnation sublimates, but continues to depend on, Osiris' exercise of "powre extreame," his "sterne" and even "cruell" exercise of punitive justice that is only intermittently ("oft") constrained by "clemence" (22-3). While the priest proclaims that Britomart's and Artegall's union will finally be non-hierarchical—they will, he says, "ioyne in equall portion of [their] realme" (23)—their commingling results not in benign, imperturbable tranquility. Rather, it eventuates in a violent flux that can be stabilized only with difficulty, and which is necessitated by the conflictual relationship between the very principles of justice and equity.³¹⁶

³¹⁵ Fletcher's claim that Isis Church presents "the prophetic moment in its purest form" is therefore apt, though of limited value in its evacuation of any particular content within the dream. See *Prophetic Moment*, 268-73. Fortier's contrasting sense of the dream representing the "subtle harmony" between "male and female, rigour and clemency," restores this content, but this vocabulary's suggestion of placid concord fails to convey what actually transpires in Britomart's dream. See *Culture of Equity*, 117; see also Aptekar, *Icons of Justice*, 55, and Dunseath, *Allegory of Justice*, 62. Indeed, this dialectic of martial violence and erotic submission obtains at every step of the way in the union between Britomart and Artegall. Britomart first falls in love with the "salvage knight" when she sees him in Merlin's mirror at III.ii, but she does not encounter him in the flesh until IV.iv, when they do battle as part of Satyrane's chivalric tournament. They later fight once again in IV.vi. After Britomart's recognition of Artegall's identity, he eventually wins her love "with meeke seruice and much suit," his previous "continuell siege" in armed combat sublimated, finally, into courtly seduction (40).

³¹⁶ For many critics, of course, the priest's explanation of Britomart's dream raises far more questions than it answers, particularly when the episode is approached from a feminist or psychoanalytic perspective. For the idea that the episode "reincorporat[es] feminine power into masculine heroics," see Eggert, *Showing Like a Queen: Female Authority and Literary Experiment in Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 39-42. See also Susanne Woods, "Spenser and the Problem of Women's Rule," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 48 (1985): 141-58. For Fletcher, the masculine justice symbolized by Artegall requires the "restraint and containment" of an equitable Britomart, with the two tendencies qualifying one another (*Prophetic Moment*, 273). Aptekar makes this point in more specific terms: "It is in Artegall ... that rigorous law and rigorous justice are most clearly exemplified; and it is through his relationship to Britomart that they are most clearly shown to be over-severe. For Artegall and the kind of justice which he represents is complemented by Britomart ... Spenser not only distinguishes the rigorous, Old, Jovial justice of Artegall from the merciful, New, Christian justice of Mercilla, but ... [also] the legal justice of Artegall from the equitable justice of Britomart." See *Icons of Justice*, 54-5. For the contrary view, which we might generally associate with New Historicist and postcolonial readings of the relationship between justice and equity, see especially Richard Mallette, "Book Five of *The Faerie Queene*: An Elizabethan Apocalypse," *Spenser Studies* 11 (1994): 129-59, and Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature*, 4-6. The most detailed recent study on the relation between "Justice, Equity and Mercy in the Legend of Artegall" is that of Zurcher, who rightly emphasizes the stakes of the issue in pointing out that "the ultimate character of any system of political justice depends on the disposition of these principles one relative to another" (*Spenser's Legal Language*, 123). The focal point of Zurcher's intervention is to emphasize "the relevance of contemporary English legal practice and theory to Spenser's understanding" of the relation between justice, equity, and mercy. Zurcher notes the

Spenser thus makes clear that equitable justice is to be found in the always precarious and tensile concord between Isis and Osiris, clemency and force, Britomart and Artegall, “For that they both like race in equall iustice runne” (4). In light of the allegorical logic established in the Isis Church sequence, then, the fact that Artegall’s resumption of his quest in the following canto occurs at the same time that Britomart is altogether dismissed from Book V proves especially revealing. Departing from Radegone, Artegall, we are told, “left his loue, albe her strong request, / ... / And rode him selfe vppon his first intent” (viii.3), once again accompanied only by Talus. The knight’s mobilization literalizes, at the level of dramatic action, Britomart’s exclusion from the narrator’s one-sided account of Artegall’s release, which occurs a few lines earlier: “Yet could it not sterne *Artegall* retaine...” This symbolic transfer of active agency from Britomart to Artegall—and its manifestly fictive status—had also been suggested at the end of the previous canto, when Britomart puts *herself* under erasure for her paramour’s benefit. After restoring the Amazonian kingdom to “mens subiection” and making its erstwhile prisoners “swear fealty to *Artegall*” (vii.42-3), Spenser tells us that Britomart “wisely moderated her owne smart” as Artegall prepares to leave, “Seeing his honor, which she tendred chiefe, / Consisted much in that aduentures priefe” (44). The integrity of Artegall’s selfhood, his identification with an activist form of punitive justice, requires the “repress[ion]” of Britomart’s presence (*ibid.*).³¹⁷

Taking the textual details of these two episodes together, we are left with a number of important implications for the remainder of the Legend. For the Isis Church episode allegorizes the inadequacy of Artegall’s administration of equitable justice in Britomart’s absence, as the comprehensive virtue will reduce to armed force and efface the mitigating influence of sympathetic judgment. Authentically “equall iustice,” Spenser makes clear, requires the “equall portion” borne by justice and equity, in their countervailing operations. But their harmonious commingling is possible only at fitful moments, and involves such violent and contrarious interaction that equitable justice’s full realization might be possible only in the “antique world” of myth, and accessible only through the “fayned colours” of poetic fiction (vii.2). Indeed, what Spenser further suggests in Artegall’s release from Radegone is precisely the mutual exclusion of genuine justice and equity amidst the pressures of experience. For Artegall’s marshalling of knightly energies as he resumes “his auowed quest” to liberate Irena—a quest whose window of

distinction between Aristotle’s and Cicero’s understanding of equity as a correction of the law that nevertheless accords with the law’s true spirit or intent and Seneca’s theory of clemency (*clementia*) as a deviation from the just through the merciful leniency of a legally unfettered prince (125-9). Zurcher sees Book V as a narrative working-through of Christopher St. German’s sixteenth-century legal principles, with “Artegall’s many experiences and judgments invok[ing] conflicts between competing systems, or bases, of law, conflicts that he must as a judge of equity resolve” (139), and he provides an account of the contemporary legal logic through which Artegall adjudicates the disputes in the first half of the book. Zurcher’s study illuminates the specificity and precision with which Spenser invokes legal terminology, but his explanations are often overly positivistic in presuming the inherent soundness of Artegall’s judgments. As the brief summary of his account suggests, it also tends to blur the generally clear conceptual distinctions that Spenser himself establishes at the start of Book V.

³¹⁷ In Eggert’s Lacanian reading, this maneuver is analogous to Plutarch’s version of the Isis and Osiris myth, from which Spenser drew in canto vii: “Unable to find Osiris’s penis, Plutarch’s Isis replaces it with a consecrated replica; and so too does Britomart reerect her husband’s phallic power.” She later describes the effects of Britomart’s self-effacement in terms similar to those offered above: “All of a sudden, and quite improbably, Artegall metamorphoses from an embarrassed, foolish Hercules to an epic Odysseus returning to his patient, waiting wife... From this moment, too, the narrative itself seems to know where it’s heading.” See *Showing Like a Queen*, 41.

opportunity has continued to close throughout his captivity—ends up requiring Britomart's dismissal from *The Faerie Queene*. Her relegation to the margins of his liberation narrative licenses the heroic self-esteem Artegall requires for his mission, but it also involves his willing sacrifice of "[t]hat part of Iustice, which is Equity." Britomart's ensuing absence thus indicates not so much a personal loss, but equity's "theoretical irrelevance" to the later cantos of Book V, as well.³¹⁸ This irrelevance, moreover, is evident not only in her character's removal from the poem's plot, but also in Spenser's dramatization of the interpretive violence involved in constructing redemptive meaning out of recalcitrant narrative fact. The allegorical "capture" involved in re-fashioning Artegall's release as an instance of his own heroic agency displays the willful forgoing of critical judgment that is the province of equity, and signals the limitations of Artegall's interpretive operations as he sets off to Irena's realm with Talus, and not Britomart, by his side. Indeed, Artegall's decision to leave his paramour behind and instead make Talus "[t]he true guide of his way and vertuous government" is all the more striking at this point (viii.3), given that he had specifically been denied entrance to Isis Church: the temple of equity is made for Britomart, "But *Talus* mote not be admitted to her part" (vii.3).³¹⁹ Choosing the iron man over the Knight of Chastity identifies the knight's post-Radegone exercise of justice as punitive rigor *tout court*, a rough justice that cannot make time for the "righteous lore" of equitable judgment and which cannot, therefore, be construed as authentic justice ever again in Book V.³²⁰

VI. The Principal and the Part: The Flawing of Justice in Cantos ix-xii

Another way of describing the phenomena I delineate above is to say that Spenser gestures to a fundamental rift between the theory and practice of justice across the midsection of Book V. Ideally considered, the virtue is comprised of equal parts Artegall and Britomart, Isis and Osiris, power and equity, all held in the dynamic tension of provisional harmony. In practice, however, the virtue inevitably falls short of its dialectical character, as the temporal pressures of social crisis force equitable justice into crudely reductive instantiations of brute force. Such reductions shut off the critical reflection that equitable judgment both enables and requires, but also make possible the virtue's flawed mobilization in experiential time and space. Spenser's characters, especially Artegall, are thus returned to the paradox that Schiller describes in his *Aesthetic Letters*, forced into choosing between the harmonious stasis of theoretical (mythical) justice, or the vigorous limitations of practical (historical) justice. As we have seen above, Spenser insists on the necessity of reformatory intervention in a dystopian world where "Right now is

³¹⁸ Anderson, *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, 63. The result of Britomart's exclusion, for Anderson, is "oversimplification, insensitivity, and simple inhumanity" in Artegall's subsequent dealings. As Clare Kinney similarly remarks, the union of Justice and Mercy symbolized in Isis Church ends up being "oddly irrelevant to the actual narrative progress of Arthegall and his automaton-slave Talus from one victory of force majeure to another" in subsequent episodes. See *Strategies of Poetic Narrative: Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 84.

³¹⁹ For McCabe, Artegall's own absence from Isis Church further emphasizes that equity is "precisely the virtue that Artegall appears to lack despite his childhood training." See *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment*, 219. See also Nohrnberg: "The polarization of equity and the will toward retribution is also evidenced in the exclusion of Talus from Isis' domain" (*Analogy*, 353).

³²⁰ See, with regard to much of the forgoing discussion, Lewis' extremely perceptive, but off-handed, remark that "Artegall ... is to the whole virtue much as Talus is to Artegall" (*Allegory of Love*, 349).

wrong, and wrong that was is right" (proem.4), whatever limitations such interventions might entail. But he also makes clear that the choice between theoretical and practical justice is a properly tragic one, involving the recognition that a fundamental "sacrifice of values has taken place" in settling for latter over the former, and that an exercise of one-sided justice offers a merely "illusory resolution" to social crisis.³²¹ And this choice becomes all the more freighted with implication as the Legend shifts into the "explicitly and inescapably topical" allegories of the last four cantos, the determinate representations of Elizabethan policy in contemporary European affairs that impinge directly on extra-literary *praxis*.³²²

Prior to the vignettes of English engagement in the Low Countries, France, and Ireland, however, is the trial of Duessa (now standing in for Mary Stuart, Queen of Scotland) in Mercilla's court, the other "core" episode of the book alongside Isis Church. Artegall arrives (Talus in tow) at the palace with Arthur after the pair's destruction of the Souldan, and their initial vision of the sovereign offers another tableau of the ideal union of avenging justice and its ameliorative counterpart. (Readers have disagreed about the allegorical significance of the shift from equity to mercy as the foil for Artegallian rigor at this point, but the aforementioned association of equity with "clemence" in Isis Church strongly suggests a functional equivalence between these concepts in the Legend, as well as the continuity between Britomart and the queen.³²³) Mercilla sits "[h]olding a Scepter" as a sign of "peace and clemencie," while "at her feet her sword was likewise layde." Although "rusted" through "long rest," the sword is invested with all the potential energy of surpassing military force, poised to be "sternely draw[n]" "when as foes enforst, or friends sought ayde" (ix.30). These counterpoised emblems of peace and divinely

³²¹ These phrases are taken from Greenblatt's appropriation of Guido Calabresi and Philip Bobbit's *Tragic Choices* (1978), which describes how societies seek to ward off existentially "tragic results" through a succession of *ad hoc* political strategies that are known to be transitory and self-defeating. "Driven by the will to deny its own perception of tragic conflict inherent in the fashioning of civility," Greenblatt suggests, "*The Faerie Queene* resembles such an intricate game." See *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 178.

³²² Anderson, "Knight of Justice," 65. As Anderson explains, it is not only that these transparent allusions "invite[] us to go outside the poem and glance at a denoted world"; rather, "it becomes *necessary* to go outside the fable in order to understand the topical reference" (65-6). The relationship between reading experience and social totality is thus inescapably insisted on in a way it has not been elsewhere in *The Faerie Queene*.

³²³ Amongst the numerous critics that have argued for a sharper distinction between equity and mercy is James E. Phillips, who claims that the Legend is divided into the "three major topics or places" of justice, equity, and mercy that Renaissance political theorists often follow in expositions of the virtue. See "Renaissance Concepts of Justice and the Structure of *The Faerie Queene*, Book V," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 33.2 (1970), 105. The chief difference between equity and mercy might, alternatively, be construed as one of affect. The tears that Mercilla sheds at the conclusion of Duessa's trial (the "perling drops from her faire lampes of light" [ix.50]) perhaps indicate the passionate quality of mercy in contrast to the more coldly rational equity. Taken in this spirit, the polemical force of the transition might involve mercy's greater susceptibility to the "vaine pittie" that Elyot and others saw as an inducement to irrational injustice; as Staines has shown, Elizabeth was sometimes associated with such unreasoning pity, especially in regard to the fate of Mary, Queen of Scots. Nevertheless, the inextricability of the relationship between justice proper and mercy that obtains in the Mercilla episode seems to me entirely in keeping with the earlier sections of Book V, where equity was instead emphasized. Mercy, in cantos ix-x, constitutes one of the two mutually constitutive aspects of the compound virtue that is Spenser's idealized justice, not merely an impetus to a womanish emotionalism that would undermine Artegall's properly martial rigor. As Zurcher argues, "Spenser rough-handedly wrests mercy to equity, blurring the distinction between them and suggesting that true *clementia* in a state ruled by law must, ultimately, be coextensive with equity." See *Spenser's Legal Language*, 148. See also Nohrnberg, who similarly speaks of "the cognate symbolism of Isis and Mercilla"; "Equity and mercy are associated in the mind of Christian culture," he notes, because both qualify the law" (*Analogy*, 382).

authorized violence are then reduplicated. At the queen's feet sit the Litae (Homer's personifications of prayer in the *Iliad*), whose function is "anger [to] calme" and "vengeance [to] stay," suing "for pardon and remission" on behalf of offenders against the law (31-2). At the same time, also "vnderneath her feete," a "huge great Lyon" sits, which, though restrained "With a strong yron chaine and coller," is heard to "murmure with rebellions sound, / And softly royne, when saluage choler gan redound" (33). While clement mildness once again curbs punitive force in a replay of Isis' superior position over Osiris, the resources of imperial power remain, as in the earlier representation, ready to be mobilized. The ensuing account of the trial and execution of Duessa for treason shows those very instruments of punitive rigor put into action, as Mercilla discerningly mediates between vengeance and compassion and so shows herself to be a "transcendent fusion of Law and Equity."³²⁴

These dynamics therefore prepare us for the book's concluding epitome of justice as a compound virtue, while—crucially—reproducing the same aporia between theory and practice, ideal and real, that we observed in the Radegone and Isis Church episodes. At the start of canto x, Spenser equivocates over the question of whether "*Mercie*, be of Iustice part, / Or drawne forth from her by diuine extreate" (i.e., extraction). He quickly voids the issue, though, concluding that "sure she is as great, / And meriteth to haue as high a place" (1). If this determination strikes us as an evasion, the following stanza, elaborating the relation between justice and mercy, is similarly circumspect in its calculated vagueness:

For it that Vertue [justice] be of so great might,
Which from iust verdict will for nothing start,
But to preserue inuiolated right,
Oft spilles the principall, to saue the part;
So much more then is that of powre and art,
That seekes to saue the subiect of her skill,
Yet neuer doth from doome of right depart:
As it is greater prayse to saue, then spill,
And better to reforme, then to cut off the ill.

(2)

As in Spenser's earlier treatment of equity in Isis Church, the virtue's ameliorating aspect occupies as "great" and "high" a place as its martial counterpart, and even assumes priority over it, having yet "more ... powre and art." But the specific vocabulary of the stanza introduces a number of complications to the now familiar schematization. Most notable is the characterization of punitive justice as that which "spilles the principall, to saue the part." This ambiguous construction has led generations of critics to understand it either as meaning exactly what it seems to say (that justice sacrifices something essential about itself so as to achieve a partial realization), or exactly the opposite.³²⁵ The former reading, however, is not only the more

³²⁴ Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics*, 111. Norbrook also sees the relationship between mercy and equity as one of essential continuity, rather than distinction: Mercilla's reluctance to execute Duessa, he says, is "a manifestation of equity" (122).

³²⁵ The commentary in the *Variorum* edition of Book V presents the two views side by side. On the one hand, as E.H. Blakeney argued of "this rather difficult stanza" in 1914, "Justice, by strict adherence to legal formulas, will

semantically intuitive alternative, but also more consonant with the central claims I have been making throughout this chapter than its inverse. Justice proper, in the person of Artegall, habitually fails to preserve the sympathetic judgment and compassion that Spenser believes essential to equity. Forgoing “That part of Iustice, which is Equity” is thus to forgo the “principall” that is the comprehensive virtue of equitable justice. But given that this essence seems to be sacrificed with every determinate application of the virtue, it remains necessary to preserve its limiting but realizable powers—to mobilize, that is, of “the part” of punitive justice.

As in the earlier stanza that redeems Artegall’s imprisonment, this passage also dramatizes the mutually limiting relation between the virtue’s theoretical and practical manifestations. Hamilton’s commentary effectively dismisses the history of conflicting readings of the principal/part line by asserting that its “gist” is obvious within the stanza as a whole: “mercy need not depart *from doome of right* in seeking to save rather than spill, or to reform rather than *to cut off*.” He notes in passing, however, that the diction of the concluding couplet “jars with Duessa’s head cut off” in the following stanza.³²⁶ Hamilton’s observation is correct, but it understates the grim force of Spenser’s irony. Indeed, the vocabulary here seems chosen precisely for its destabilizing effect when set against the revelation that Duessa’s blood has finally been spilled and not saved, the mental seat of her “ill” intent cut off rather than reformed. As recent critics have persuasively argued, Spenser and those associated with the Leicester circle harbored little doubt that Mary fully merited her execution. But this awareness only makes it more apparent that Spenser went out of his way here to drive a wedge between the rough justice that this particular moment calls for and the *ideal* of a merciful justice that would be “greater” and “better” were it specifically *not* to be realized in this particular fashion. A genuinely equitable justice, while not absolutely opposed to the instantiation of the virtue called forth by local circumstance (the superiority of saving over spilling is merely comparative, after all) is nevertheless rendered as *counterfactual* to what actually occurs in both the poetic fiction and historical fact. The stanza thus creates another of Spenser’s narrative disturbances, one of his unreliable paraphrases that analogize the inadequacy of partial realization to a theoretically just process of equitable judgment.

Just as in cantos vii–viii, Spenser once again also conveys this tradeoff at the level of character, carefully distinguishing Artegall’s response to the trial from Arthur’s and Mercilla’s. Spenser famously delays the revelation of Duessa’s execution across cantos, telling us that “she of death was guiltie found by right,” but that Mercilla “would not let iust vengeance on her light” (ix.50). It is only at x.4, after a dramatic section break of indeterminate duration in fictional time,

sacrifice the good of the individual, or society, in order to maintain its rules unimpaired; hence the phrase, ‘*summun jus, summa injuria*.’” On the other hand, John Upton, in his 1758 edition of *The Faerie Queene*, glosses the line to mean “To preserve right inviolated, often takes away the chief, or principal, corrupted part, to save the other part which is not corrupted.” See *Variorum*, V:247–8. Hamilton’s edition also details a more recent dispute. William Nelson suggests that the line urges the sacrifice of “the human principall in order to save the written part, i.e. the virtue itself as codified by law,” to which Michael O’Connell responds that if Spenser was trying to urge the preservation of the virtue’s essential features, “he has reversed what he means to say.” See *FQ*, 578; see also Nelson, *The Poetry of Edmund Spenser: A Study* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 268, and O’Connell, *Mirror and Veil*, 204n.27. Zurcher is no doubt partly right when he says that “Spenser determined to be as ambiguous as possible.” As I argue here, however, it is unnecessary to argue, as Zurcher does, that this is “the only thing” we can determine about the passage. See *Spenser’s Legal Language*, 150.

³²⁶ *FQ*, 578; terms bolded in the Hamilton’s note have here been changed to italics.

that we learn of Duessa's beheading. Her killing, moreover, occurs only as a result of the ambiguous "strong constraint" that has "enforce[d]" Mercilla's decision. Spenser's emphasis on the queen's hesitation is generally seen as a criticism of Elizabeth's own displays of excessively "piteous ruth" for Mary in spite of the vengeance that the Leicester circle believed was her counterpart's proper due (ix.50).³²⁷ But Mercilla's temporary hesitation is also shared by Arthur, who grows "sore empassionate" after hearing the case mounted in Duessa's defense, "That for great ruth his courage gan relent" (46). The prince ultimately "repent[s]" of his initial inclination to lenity after the prosecution re-doubles its attacks, however, and like Mercilla he accedes to the execution. Artegall, in contrast, remains "constant firme" throughout: "vrg[ing] her punishment" for "breach of lawes," he once again identifies himself with punitive and legal rigor (44, 49). While it is now conventional to identify Artegall's response with Spenser's own perspective, I would argue that it is Mercilla and Arthur's position that Spenser actually approves of here. Their transitory pause on the brink of a mortal decision, *provisionally* occupying alternative cognitive and affective positions before deciding on vengeance over clemency, is in fact closer to the dialectic of equitable justice, as Spenser conceives it throughout Book V, than is Artegall's unyielding, single-minded determination on Duessa's death. This is not to deny a critical element in the narrator's attitude toward Mercilla: Spenser avers that her lingering regret at Duessa's downfall is "more then needfull naturall remorse," an excess of compassion figured in the "perlings drops" that fall from her eyes as she initially defers judgment (x.4, ix.50). But Mercilla and Arthur ultimately prove equal to their task in deciding for execution, demonstrating precisely the "myriad-minded" sympathetic judgment that Spenser champions throughout the Legend.³²⁸ Their mutual passage through a "phase of undecidability," holding alternative possibilities "in equall balance" in accordance with "the line of conscience," is precisely what is required of the "critical and reflective decision" that both Spenser and Derrida believe essential to equitable judgment.³²⁹ As with his abandonment of Britomart, in contrast, Artegall's contrasting expressions of unyielding punitive rigor indicate his unmistakably one-sided expression of the virtue he only nominally embodies.

³²⁷ It refers, for Norbrook, to "the kind of hesitations that Puritans denounced as womanly weakness" (*Poetry and Politics*, 122; see also Staines, *Tragic Histories*, 117-44).

³²⁸ Norbrook makes this same point, in contrast to many recent critics who read the scene as overwhelmingly critical of Mercilla-Elizabeth: though she indulges in "womanly weakness" and "vacillations, she does eventually sanction Duessa's execution." See *Poetry and Politics*, 122-3. See also Burrow's reading of the scene as a whole: "Mercilla's action unites the appearance of pity with the reality of just condemnation. She embodies the wish to unite divergent concepts which makes epic romance: justice and mercy apparently blend" (*Epic Romance*, 134). "Myriad-minded" is, of course, taken from Coleridge's characterization of Shakespeare—his version of Keats' contemporaneous notion of the playwright's "negative capability," which I have previously mentioned. See Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), II:19.

³²⁹ Indeed, Spenser's first use of the term "let" at ix.50—Mercilla "would not let iust vengeance on [Duessa] light; / But rather let in stead thereof to fall / Few perling drops ..."—plays on the same ambiguity we saw earlier with "dispencc" at i.7. The equivocation keeps us in temporary suspense about Duessa's fate, as "let" can mean either "prevent" or "allow," an ambiguity preserved by the deferral of clarification until the following canto. Spenser in fact wants to have it both ways, since Mercilla initially obstructs her adversary's execution, only to eventually permit it. As with "dispencc" at the start of Book V, this semantic and syntactical duplicity corresponds to the dialectical poise that Spenser believes constitutive of an exercise of critical judgment.

We consequently learn the practical consequences of Artegall's limited justice, with an even greater emphasis on the temporal pressures of political crisis, in the Burbon episode of canto xi. Artegall here reluctantly aids his besieged fellow knight and his lover, Flourdelis, from the "lawlesse powre" of "a rude rout" (44)—an allegory of the Elizabethan regime's continuing, if grudging, alliance with the Huguenot King Henri IV after his conversion to Catholicism in 1593. We rejoin Artegall (after hearing of Arthur's exploits in the Low Countries) as the knight once again makes his way to Irena's realm following his earlier delays with Radigund, the Souldan, Malengin, and Mercilla. Artegall now encounters the ambassadorial figure Sir Sergis, who reveals that Grantorto has imprisoned Irena after she was left waiting, "presuming on th'appointed tyde, / In which [Artegall] promist, as [he] were a Knight, / To meete her at the saluage Ilands syde" (xi.39). Hearing in no uncertain terms that his errancy has led to Irena's fast-expiring death sentence, Artegall is at first "much abash[ed]," "griued sore, that through his fault she had / Fallen into that Tyrants hand and vsage bad" (40). He thus admits to Sergis, "Too much am I to blame" for Irena's suffering (41), but then incongruously continues,

But wnesse vnto me, ye heauens, that know
How cleare I am from blame of this vpbraide:
For ye into like thraldome me did throw,
And kept from complishing the faith, which I did owe.
(41)

Artegall's self-exculpation is so contradictory to his own words and the foregoing narrative that it once again commands readers' startled attention, but it should also be unsurprising. The "thraldome" refers to Radigund's imprisonment, which, we recall, was "yeelded of his owne accord," so that he was "iustly damned by the doome / Of his owne mouth." It was, as he initially avows, his "fault," not that of the "heavens." As Hamilton points out, this feeble self-defense implicates Artegall in his own denunciation of "faulty men" who "attribute their folly vnto fate, / And lay on heauen the guilt of their owne crimes" with unmistakable precision (iv.28).³³⁰ Those lines would also be recycled at the very start of *A View*, where Eudoxus similarly observes that "it is the manner of men, that when they are fallen into any absurdity, or their actions succede not as they would, they are alwayes readie to impute the blame thereof unto the heavens, so to excuse their owne follies and imperfections" (11-12). Spenser thus makes clear that we are once again witnessing Artegall's self-interested renunciation of critical and reflective judgment, occluding any "responsibility for his own downfall," as Suttie says, "with a clear view to forwarding his quest."³³¹ The narrative logic is identical to that of Artegall's departure from Rade gone, where Spenser ascribes the knight's liberation to his own agency rather than that of Britomart. It thus provides the moral impetus for a fresh mobilization of chivalric action by absolving him of guilt.

³³⁰ See Hamilton's gloss, *FQ*, 589. A.B. Gough, in his 1918 edition of the poem, argues that "[t]he flat contradiction between this avowal and lines 1-5 can only be explained by supposing that Artegall suddenly realizes the fact that the cause of Irena's new trouble was servitude to Radigund to which his honour had bound him." See *Variorum*, V:259. But this characterization of Artegall's "servitude" continues to evade the issue of how it was brought about in the first place.

³³¹ "Spenser's Political Pragmatism," 74.

Indeed, the knight's apologetics once again serve to organize and re-direct his heroic energies after the experience of potentially debilitating shame. He immediately re-pledges his aid to Irena and sets off for her kingdom alongside Talus and Sergis, and as the trio encounters Burbon we see the final conjunction of these phenomena. The trio witnesses a mob of rebellious commoners assault Burbon, leaving Flourdelis "all succourlesse" (44); Burbon is then forced to abandon his shield in a desperate defensive maneuver, at which point Artegall and Talus intervene and drive the multitude away. The two knights then engage in a conversation freighted with political and religious significance, with Artegall asking why Burbon would relinquish his shield, an act he calls "the greatest shame and foulest scorne" to knighthood. Burbon asserts that his decision was the product of "inforcement" rather than "will" (52), and offers that he might reassume the shield "when time doth serue." "To temporize is not from truth to swerue," he insists, defending his conduct as a considered acquiescence to historical "necessitie" (56).³³² But Artegall counters that no earthly cause could justify the abandonment of the shield—"Dye rather," he proclaims "then doe ought, that mote dishonour yield" (55)—and condemns Burbon's self-defense as mere "forgerie," since "truth is one in all" (56). Nevertheless, Artegall acquiesces to Burbon's desperate request for assistance, and, with Talus's assistance, the two drive the "raskall manie" from the field for good (59).

But as should be clear by now, the Knight of Justice is a singularly unapt spokesman for the position that "truth is one in all." As Gregory notes, Artegall here "speaks the language of chivalry, asserting the absolute nature of knightly ethics" against Machiavellian expediency, but Burbon's exculpatory justifications bear more than a passing resemblance to Artegall's own unreflective attempts to preserve a blameless heroic identity.³³³ Moreover, he also subverts the hierarchy of values he articulates to Burbon through more specific actions, both before and after this episode. Artegall ultimately secures victory in his duel with Grantorto by "loosing ... his shield" when doing so provides an opportunity to kill the tyrant (xii.22). As Silberman's argues, however, this act appears "to be a purely tactical maneuver" that is "never admonished [as] a breach of chivalric decorum" even though it is "comparable to and, indeed, a clear echo of the lapse that brought shame to Sir Burbon."³³⁴ Surrendering shields is no longer a source of "endles shame," as the narrator says it is for Burbon, but now only a shrewd tactic that permits Artegall to "let driue more fiercely then afore" at Grantorto (xi.46, xii.22). Moreover, Artegall has also *previously* yielded his shield to an opponent in act of life-saving submission. His surrender to Radigund, we recall, is signaled when "he to her deliuered had his shield" (v.16). If the poem does not exactly celebrate the relinquishment, then it also nowhere suggests that the cause of justice would have been better served by Artegall's self-sacrifice for the sake of his "honours stile" (xi.55). We should therefore perceive a corrosive irony when Artegall tells Burbon that "Vnder one hood to shadow faces twaine" is pure "forgerie," since this is precisely what he himself does throughout the book. The corollary that "truth is one in all" identifies Artegall with equitable justice, but only through an interpretive violence that would counter-factually make the knight's

³³² More specifically, Burbon makes the eminently plausible argument that sacrificing his shield is done "To stint all strife, and troublous enmitie" (54).

³³³ "Shadowing Intervention," 376.

³³⁴ Silberman, "Politics of the Text," 15-6. Kaske sees in the Burbon and Grantorto episodes the difference between the shield's allegorical significance as a sign of religious faith and its non-symbolic materiality, respectively. See "Chivalric Idealism versus Pragmatism," 11-17.

principles and practice co-extensive with one another. Paradoxically, Artegall's endorsement of unitary truth amounts to one more enabling fiction, differentiating him from his otherwise identical Other and so re-energizing his self-esteeming heroic energies.

Unsurprisingly, when Artegall finally vanquishes Grantorto in canto xii, the reformation of Irena's realm that he and Talus administer is utterly devoid of the ameliorating influences of equity, clemency, or mercy. Book V thus concludes with its starkest dramatization of justice as punitive violence in accordance with the rigor of the law, as Artegall and Talus "sorely punish[] with heauie payne" the kingdom's erstwhile collaborators (25). Like Weil's Homeric warriors, Artegall is incapable of passing through an interval for reflection that would check physical force, and Talus' ability to "reueale / All hidden crimes" among the island's inhabitants makes their regime little more than a constant application of rack and axe (26).³³⁵ In a sense, Artegall ends the Legend exactly as he began it, a victim of his lack of critical discernment and equitable judgment. In spite of Astraea's instruction in "all the depth of rightfull doome" (i.7), he concludes his quest in anxious "studie," "employ[ing] his busie paine / How to reforme that ragged common-weale." As elsewhere, however, Artegall's faulty conception of "true Iustice" amounts to nothing more than "griuous punishment" (26), a course of legal vengeance that is strikingly opposed, for example, to Arthur's reinstatement of Belge to her throne in canto xi. In contrast to Artegall's program of military repression, the prince makes "great feast and ioyous merriment, / Vntill he had [Belge] settled in her raine" (35). Restoring the kingdom through peaceful consensus rather than martial law, Arthur demonstrates the supple combination of "open force" (slaying Geryoneo and his monstrous confederates) and "righteous lore" (building civil society back up) that constitutes equitable justice. Our final glimpse of Artegall in Book V, in contrast, shows him at his lowest. Recalled to Faery Court by a distressed Gloriana and hounded by the "curses" Envy, Detraction, and the Blatant Beast, he himself is reduced, in a startling but apt simile, to the condition of a "rauenous Wolfe amongst the scattered flockes" (38).³³⁶ And yet, when we leave Artegall once and for all after his brief encounter with Calidore at the start of Book VI, he bears not the slightest trace of his failings. Instead, he has once again redeemed experience through a counter-factual construction of his erstwhile quest as a "valorous emprise," and of himself as one "from peril free" (i.5, 9). Misreading, it becomes clear, will forever be the way that the Knight of Justice remains a "happy man" (i.5).

VII. Toward an Aesthetics of Political Responsibility

Artegall's failures are so strangely deflating, and the atmosphere of Book V's conclusion so jarringly mordant, as to leave readers lacking even the cathartic satisfaction we might expect of the tragically-tinged epic history of *The Faerie Queene* V. Instead, we depart from the text in the state that Fletcher theorizes as "the prophetic moment" in Spenser's poetry, one marked only by

³³⁵ See Lewis' discussion of this revelation of Talus' abilities: "when we reflect on the judicial methods of the time, the statement that his iron page Talus 'could reueale all hidden crimes' becomes abominable, for it means that Talus is the rack as well as the axe" (*Allegory of Love*, 348). See also ii.25, where Talus is given the power "wisely [to] bewray" "all things secrete," "like a limehound."

³³⁶ Fletcher is one of the rare critics to emphasize Artegall's own culpability in his dismissal by Gloriana. See *Prophetic Moment*, 288: "Spenser suggests that Envy and Detraction are on the loose partly because Artegall and Talus do not complete the reformation of Irena's Commonweal... The mere fact that Artegall has not done his full work (Grey had not succeeded in Ireland) enables Envy's cloud to dim the luster of his fame."

the *feeling* of political engagement—an anxious poise or “affectively loaded expectancy” that remains a merely potential, rather than kinetic, form of readerly energy.³³⁷ In conceptual terms, all that readers can really *do*, after completing the Legend of Justice, is resolve “not to be mocked again by events, and therefore to judge more carefully, to seek out a fuller and more finely differentiated understanding of events and their courses” when next they present themselves to consciousness.³³⁸ Like the author of the provocatively opaque medieval treatise recently examined by Steven Justice, Spenser impresses on his audience the fact that politically-engaged “reading, writing, and action all involve habits of forecast: forays of anticipation and conjecture [that] navigate the present sentence or present circumstances with guesses at what should follow.” Like Justice’s text, Spenser’s poetry “demands these forays, and then turns them against the mind that makes them,” stalling the reader in Fletcher’s condition of “elusive betweenness,” convinced of both the absolute necessity of extra-literary intervention and its impossibility as an extension of readerly activity.³³⁹

Spenser enforces the feeling, throughout Book V, that only a more comprehensive, more sensitive, and more dialectical organ of critical reflection could be adequate to the endless permutations of historical experience and political crisis that Artegall encounters. But he also leaves readers bewildered as to the nature of the outcome that might result from such a faculty’s exercise in the urgent world of *praxis*, which seems conducive only to the crudely obvious instruments of compromised punitive justice for anything actually to occur at all.³⁴⁰ Spenser thus suggests the necessary limitations imposed on the sympathetic judgment that he identifies with equitable justice, and accedes to the sacrifice that such limitation entails for actually-existing social renovation. At the same time, *The Faerie Queene* seeks to correct for this sacrifice, to the extent that it is possible, through the development of its reader’s interpretive capabilities. Even as Spenser’s audience witnesses the deformations to which the virtue, in historical experience, seems fated to give rise, this discernment *might* make possible an ever-greater approximation to the ideal in empirical reality. But this asymptotic approach to the theoretical ideal through the trials of aesthetic experience remains, in the end, only a possibility—a mere thought experiment.³⁴¹ To re-invoke Schiller’s vocabulary for the aesthetic state, Book V generates a standard that, while not to be “derived from any actual case ... corrects and regulates our judgment of every actual case.” Spenser’s reformatory project is thus founded not on any pre-existing political program that might be translated into practice, but on the painstaking contemplative process whereby critical intelligence is trained for the complexities of historical experience by first passing through the analogous complexities of his poetic fiction.

Simultaneously, however, one can hardly avoid the feeling that such a basis for an “instrumental aesthetics” might always seem too attenuated as a response to the pressures of

³³⁷ *Prophetic Moment*, 49–50.

³³⁸ Steven Justice, *Adam Usk’s Secret* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 8.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9; Fletcher, *The Prophetic Moment*, 49.

³⁴⁰ As Nohnberg says, “It is as if justice, as an ideal form, can only exist in its purity in a world beyond ours, an empyreal realm to which it now returns. The theme of a lapsed golden age from which Spenser begins traps the cycle of the legend in a kind of paradoxical tautology: where justice truly obtains, no justice is required; and, where there is no justice, no justice can be done.” See *Analogy*, 408.

³⁴¹ See Grady’s relevant reading of the role of art in *Timon of Athens*: “The vision of the artist can act as a guidepost to the reformer—and also a measure of reform’s (inevitable) shortcomings” (*Impure Aesthetics*, 128).

political crisis.³⁴² This is a concern registered with equal acuteness by Spenser himself and his modern readers. As we have seen, Norbrook insists that “for Spenser the poet’s imaginative visions can be justified only if they can be translated into political action,” and that “[t]he enormous self-consciousness of the poem is designed to reinforce the didactic aim of fashioning a gentleman, not to undermine it.”³⁴³ But given the necessarily time-consuming and sedentary nature of any reading experience, much less the diligent perusal of a text as long and elaborately enriched as this one, even Spenser’s ideal contemporary readers must have wondered if the gains to be realized in political experience through a more finely self-aware faculty of critical judgment could ever adequately compensate for the loss of time and intellectual energy it would have taken to feel adequately “studied for action.”³⁴⁴ The Legend of Justice thus confronts a version of the problem that Arnold famously articulated in “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time”: critical thought—the attempt “to see things as they are,” “irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind”—will always necessarily be limited to “a very subtle and indirect action,” and “a slow and obscure work” in the world. “Slow and obscure it may be,” Arnold avers, “but it is the only proper work of criticism.”³⁴⁵ Substituting “poetry” for “criticism,” Spenser, as Book V suggests, would have been forced to agree, however reluctantly.

In another passage of Derrida’s, this time from *Politics of Friendship*, he describes the feelings of irresponsibility that academic study is likely to raise for contemporary intellectuals in terms closely related to this chapter’s consideration of the double-bind of Spenserian poetics. Close reading, he observes,

may perhaps seem too philological, micrological, *readerly*—complacent, too, with the time it allows itself when matters are urgent, at just the moment when one should no longer wait. At a moment when our world is delivered over to new forms of violence, new wars, new figures of cruelty or barbarity ... at a moment when hostilities are breaking out ... the political and historical urgency of what is befalling us should, one will say, tolerate less patience, fewer detours and less bibliophilic discretion. Less esoteric rarity. This is no longer the time to take one’s time, as a number of our well-intentioned contemporaries must no doubt think—as if we had ever been allowed to take our time in history, and as if absolute urgency were not the law of decision... Centuries of preparatory reflection and theoretical deliberation—the very infinity of knowledge—would change nothing in this urgency. It is absolutely cutting, conclusive, decisive, heartrending; it must interrupt the time of science and conscience, to which the instant of decision will always remain heterogeneous.³⁴⁶

When scholarship, particularly an historicizing kind, insists on the *direct* political influence to which Spenser’s poetry was committed, it is responding to a need that Spenser himself felt deeply, as well as to our own sense of complacency and irresponsibility at the prospect of

³⁴² See Guenther, *Magical Imaginations*.

³⁴³ *Poetry and Politics*, 130, 99.

³⁴⁴ See, again, Jardine and Grafton, “Studied for Action.”

³⁴⁵ *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, 41, 36.

³⁴⁶ *Politics of Friendship*, 78–9.

devoting so much time and so many communal resources to reading and interpretation. Spenser composed his Legend amidst the types of “violence,” “wars,” “cruelty,” and “barbarism” at which Derrida glances, at the very moment (as he tells us throughout Book V and *A View*) “when hostilities are breaking out.” Such a moment would have seemed the precise time when a vigorous form of decisive action, a rough justice, was to take priority over the “patience,” “detours,” “bibliophilic discretion” and “estoeric rarity” of critical reflection and equitable judgment. While the Legend of Justice ultimately insists on the “heartrending” necessity of martial activity that “interrupt[s] the time of science and conscience,” it also leaves no doubt that if we persist in taking up only what he later calls “immediate responsibilities,” then “we will always be in a state of lack”—always doomed to Artegall’s brand of *salvagesse sans finesse*.³⁴⁷

What Spenser asks of his readers is therefore not the simplistic preference for practice over theory, but *more* (or better) theory; he urges not that his readers think less, but better.³⁴⁸ He seeks, that is to say, not an abandonment of ethics for the maintenance of power, but “a *better* ethics—an ethics that will strike a different, more humane balance between the material and the ideal (between ... reflex and reflection).”³⁴⁹ This kind of moral intelligence would analogize the “righteous ballance” that, as the stellar emblem of Astraea’s heavenly justice, Spenser considers unavailable to historical experience but more closely approachable through redeemed thought and action. These, therefore, are the simultaneously enabling and limiting conditions of a politically-engaged Spenserian aesthetics, which eventuates not in a specific political program or even political agency as such, but only in the mixed mode of pre- or proto-political, *critical*, agency. The paradoxical name that Spenser will give to this socially-directed but properly readerly capacity is *wary boldness*, a term that occurs toward the conclusion of Book VI, and whose ambiguities the following chapter will explore in further detail.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁴⁸ See Kant, “On the Common Saying: ‘This May Be True in Theory, But It Does Not Apply in Practice’” in *Political Writings*, ed. H.S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 61–92. Kant says that in certain cases “theory may be incomplete, and can perhaps be perfected only by future experiments and experiences ... It is therefore not the fault of the theory if it is of little practical use in such cases. The fault is that there is *not enough* theory” (61; emphasis in the original).

³⁴⁹ Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 50.

Chapter 3

Wary Boldness: Courtesy and Critical Agency in *The Faerie Queene* VI

The double character of art ... is directly apparent in the aesthetic phenomena, which are both aesthetic and *faits sociaux*. They require a double observation that is no more to be posited as an unalloyed whole than aesthetic autonomy and art can be conflated as something strictly social.

— Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*³⁵⁰

... some virtues and some vices are so nicely distinguished, and so resembling each other, as they are often confounded, and the one taken for the other ...

— Raleigh, *The History of the World*³⁵¹

I. Re-Imagining Courtesy in Spenser's Legend

Spenser's courtesy, the subject of the final complete book of *The Faerie Queene*, has often struck readers as a singularly "uncertain" virtue.³⁵² The aptness of this judgment may be made keener when we consider the conceptual oppositions that have riven three overlapping discourses that inform our understanding of the text: sixteenth-century European courtesy theory, the Legend's own preliminary figurations of the virtue, and the modern critical history of Book VI. In the first of these, the early modern period maintained an almost schizophrenically equivocal attitude toward courtesy's ethical status and even its very definition. Marked by a "theoretical indeterminacy" unique amongst the virtues Spenser allegorized in his poem, courtesy "covered a field of different meanings ranging from divine grace to sex."³⁵³ From one perspective, it was an "obvious choice" for inclusion in Spenser's work, often invoked as "a catch-all denominator of commendable behaviour."³⁵⁴ Courtesy, in this vein, encompassed not only the secular values of "etiquette, affability, and humanity" encouraged by the popular Italianate conduct manuals of the sixteenth century, but could also be taken as an earthly mediation of heavenly beauty and "cosmic

³⁵⁰ *Aesthetic Theory*, 252.

³⁵¹ *The Historie of the World. In Five Books* (London: 1614), II.vi.7 (p. 321).

³⁵² See Douglas A. Northrop, "The Uncertainty of Courtesy in Book VI of *The Faerie Queene*," *Spenser Studies* 14 (2000): 215-32.

³⁵³ Grogan, *Exemplary Spenser*, 140; Catherine Bates, *The Rhetoric of Courtship in Elizabethan Language and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 168.

³⁵⁴ See Kenneth Borris, *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, 140. Prominent texts in the loosely-defined genre of courtesy and conduct literature would have included works as diverse as Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (1528), Stefano Guazzo's *Civil Conversation* (1574), Erasmus' *Education of a Christian Prince* (1516), and Thomas Elyot's *The Governor* (1531). As Humphrey Tonkin explains, "The courtesy books of the later sixteenth century are a curious and sometimes unwieldy mixture of material traceable to the chivalric manuals of the fifteenth century, classical works on education and good government, Christian doctrine, Italian humanism, and contemporary treatises on education or political theory." In spite of this theoretical diversity, however, Tonkin finds central to the tradition the notion that "there is such a person as a gentleman, who has special responsibilities to society and to his fellow men." See *Spenser's Courteous Pastoral: Book Six of "The Faerie Queene"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 163-4, 166.

harmonies.”³⁵⁵ At the same time, however, insofar as the era had come to see courteous conduct as a rhetoric of self-promotion, a “corpus of strategic gestures” for competitive advancement, its very claim to virtue had become highly dubious.³⁵⁶ Courtesy’s axiomatic association with the court (as in Spenser’s prefatory observation, “Of Court it seemes, men Courtesie doe call” [VI.i.1]) also implicated it in the commonplace humanist cynicism toward that space as an incubator of “excessive artificiality, deceit, fraud, and frivolity.”³⁵⁷ By the time the final three complete books of *The Faerie Queene* appeared in 1596, courtesy could easily be understood less as “a metaphor for the perfections of the divine order” than as an expression of sycophancy and fraud.³⁵⁸

Set against this often demystified appraisal, Spenser’s text initially seems a visionary reimagining of courtesy according to philosophical first principles. He signals the experimentalism of his enterprise in the book’s proem, as the “strange waies, where neuer foote did vse” of the narrative landscape anticipate the “straunge and wonderfull” qualities of the virtue itself (proem.2, v.29). Courtesy is here presented as something like the possibility of intersubjectivity itself, the “roote of ciuill conuersation” that simultaneously “spreds it selfe through all ciuilitie” (i.1, proem.4). An image of ecological benevolence that traverses the entire social organism from “ground” and “lowly stalke,” to “branch[]” (proem.4), Spenser’s trope naturalizes the exhortation to compassionate amity in 1 Peter 3:8 (“be ye all of one minde: one suffre with another: love as brethren: *be pitiful: be courteous*”), and corresponds to Stefano Guazzo’s characterization of “civil conversation” as, in George Pettie’s resonant translation, a “vertuous kinde of liuing in the worlde.”³⁵⁹ Indeed, the radicalism of this conception and the pressure to recover something of its force might explain the common critical maneuver of translating Spenser’s “courtesy” into an analogous vocabulary: C.S. Lewis thus aligns it with “charity and humility,” Humphrey Tonkin with “social harmony,” Gordon Teskey with “culture,” and Joshua Phillips with “empathy.”³⁶⁰

But as these attempts at definition-by-translation suggest, courtesy remains a moving target for Spenser, subject to a variety of elusive manifestations that resist classification and moral valuation. Courtesy can modulate, even within a single stanza, from the essence of sociability itself (the “friendly offices that bynde”) to mere ornamentation, the graceful “complements” of refined breeding such as “comely carriage” and “Sweete semblaunt” (x.23). While the virtue is sometimes identified with the space of the court as the “patterne” of the queen’s own “Princely

³⁵⁵ Borris, *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, 194; Frank Whigham, “Courtesy as a Social Code” in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, 196.

³⁵⁶ Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege: The Social Tropes of Elizabethan Courtesy Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 27. See also Grogan, *Exemplary Spenser*, 137-49.

³⁵⁷ Daniel Javitch, *Poetry and Courtliness in Renaissance England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 132.

³⁵⁸ Borris, “Courtesy,” *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, 194. See also Javitch, “Courtesy Books,” *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, 197, and *Poetry and Courtliness*, esp. 107-40. For related accounts, see Bates, *The Rhetoric of Courtship*, esp. 1-24; Dorothy Woodward Culp, “Courtesy and Moral Virtue,” *SEL*, 1500-1900 11.1 (1971): 37-51; Jennifer Richards, *Rhetoric and Courtliness in Early Modern Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), esp. 1-19; and Tonkin, *Spenser’s Courteous Pastoral*, esp. 163-72.

³⁵⁹ *The Civile Conuersation of M. Steeuen Guazzo written first in Italian, and nowe translated out of French by George Pettie, deuided into foure bookes* (London, 1581), 22. All Biblical quotations are taken from the Geneva translation.

³⁶⁰ Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, 350; Tonkin, *Spenser’s Courteous Pastoral*, 201; Teskey, “Courtesy and Thinking,” 352; Phillips, “Monasticism and Idleness in Spenser’s Late Poetry,” *SEL* 54.1 (2014), 60.

curtesie" (proem.6-7), the court is at other times the very antithesis of genuine courtesy, the haunt of "courting fooles, that curtesies would faine" (v.38). Conversely, while virtuous characters like the Salvage Man, Tristram, and the pastoral shepherds embody a rustic ethos of "appearaunce plaine" and "franke delight" (v.38, vii.1), the realm of uncultivated nature is also what threatens the project of civilization, as in the assaults of the cannibalistic Salvage Nation and rapacious brigands.³⁶¹ These divergences point to the book's ambiguous attitude toward hierarchical privilege, as well. If courtesy is often the means of bridging social division, requiring that the courteous set aside the absolute prerogatives of estate that eventuate in "proud disdaine" (ii.11), and instead profess the virtue "[e]uen vnto the lowest and the least" (xii.2), it elsewhere shores up social distinction by equating "gentle minde," "gentle deeds," "gentle blood," and "gentle manners" in a self-reinforcing relay (iii.1-2). Courtesy lastly nominates the desire for privacy and the integrity of secluded enclosures, those "absolutes of interiority where the inner self is forged" in "recreation or procreation," even as Spenser's courteous subjects intrusively disrupt such scenes of idyllic repose, exposing private interiors to public scrutiny over and over again.³⁶²

This structural ambiguity helps explain the singularly vexed reception history of Book VI within Spenser criticism, a scholarly muddle analogous to the polarized attitudes toward courtesy in early modernity itself. Many readers have found in courtesy the "culminating moral virtue" of *The Faerie Queene* (A.C. Hamilton), a miniature of "the central issues of the whole work" (Humphrey Tonkin), and an expression of "the will to community," without which "no society can exist" (Teskey).³⁶³ As Hamilton puts it, "Without courtesy's 'civility' there would be no civilization ... no Christian community," a perspective that was implied by Northrop Frye's perception of "a sort of Hegelian progression" in Spenser's sequencing of the virtues, with courtesy "a summing up and conclusion for the entire poem and for Spenser's poetic career."³⁶⁴ An equally prestigious group of critics, meanwhile, has long viewed courtesy as what Jane Grogan has recently called a "sham-virtue,"³⁶⁵ productive of the slack and aimless qualities once inventoried by Harry Berger, Jr. For these critics, "the contrivance of the narrative, the inconclusiveness of the adventures, the gradual flawing of the romance world, [and] the failure of chivalric action" correspond to Spenser's disillusioned "awareness that the problems of life cannot be solved by poetry."³⁶⁶ This longstanding divergence over courtesy's efficacy as an instrument of social and poetic progress has been decisively re-oriented in recent decades, as historicist critics have situated the Legend in the context of Spenser's career as apologist-administrator of the Irish Plantation. Few would now agree that Book VI finds "Spenser turn[ing] inward, away from

³⁶¹ On the place of this binary split in Spenser's larger oeuvre, see Donald Cheney, *Spenser's Image of Nature: Wild Man and Shepherd in "The Faerie Queene"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

³⁶² Whigham, "Courtesy as a Social Code" in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, 196.

³⁶³ Hamilton, *FQ*, 15; Tonkin, *Spenser's Courteous Pastoral*, 11; Teskey, "Courtesy and Thinking," 355, 353, 352.

³⁶⁴ Hamilton, *FQ*, 15; Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 70.

³⁶⁵ Grogan, *Exemplary Spenser*, 175. See also Grogan's extended account of the ineffectual "palliative poetics" to which courtesy gives rise in *Exemplary Spenser*, 149-75, and Andrew Hadfield's similar reading in *A Life*, 327-32.

³⁶⁶ Berger, *Revisionary Play*, 219. See also Richard Neuse, "Book VI as Conclusion to *The Faerie Queene*," *ELH* 35.3 (1968), 331; and Northrop, "The Uncertainty of Courtesy," 219. For an account of Book VI that stresses its production of readerly pleasure in defiance of didactic "social use value," however, see Corey McEleney, "Spenser's Unhappy Ends: The Legend of Courtesy and the Pleasure of the Text," *ELH* 79.4 (2012): 797-822.

history,” much less that it represents “the most private” installment of *The Faerie Queene*.³⁶⁷ Instead, as we saw in Chapter One, the text is now typically seen as an attempt to confer moral legitimacy and literary prestige on the colonial enterprise, figured as the dissemination of Anglo-Protestant civility among a native populace tamed by the military suppressions allegorized in the Legend of Justice. As Stephen Greenblatt evocatively puts it, “Civility is won through the exercise of violence over what is deemed barbarous and evil,” necessitating not only “a ruthless policy of mass starvation and massacre,” but “the destruction of native Irish identity,” as well.³⁶⁸

These readings all tend to get Spenser’s courtesy only half right, however, inadequate as they are to the virtue’s authentically dialectical character. Examining its contradictory realizations in closer detail, I will argue that, rather than isolating benign from malign expressions of worldly action, Spenser’s courtesy instead identifies the constitutive duplicity through which these eventualities become indistinguishable from—and even productive of—one another. Book VI fluctuates between paradigms of redeemed sociability and invasive cruelty with such rapidity that they ultimately assume a functional identity. The privileged emblem of this coincidence is the Blatant Beast, an imaginative and linguistic coinage that becomes as much the archetype of Spenser’s experimental investigation into the virtue as the knight Calidore himself. Marked by an epistemic and ethical opacity that nullifies simple moral valuation as good or evil, courtesy functions instead as a conceptual framing device, akin (as I have suggested earlier) to an Althusserian *problematic*: a delimited “field of vision” that Spenser actualizes through the “conceptual, affective, and discursive tools” of the Legend’s various character-positions.³⁶⁹ As with justice in Book V, the narration of courtesy demonstrates to readers *how* the virtue functions in the world as a result of its constitutive strengths and limitations; it constitutes an *analysis* of the virtue’s manifestations, not a *guide* or conduct manual telling us which behaviors to pursue or avoid. This is why all of Calidore’s behaviors are illustrative of courtesy, and not subject to praise or blame as more or less desirable or authentic realizations of the virtue he embodies. Hence, as well, Spenser’s assertion that his narration of all the apparently disconcerting details of Calidore’s truant conduct throughout the book, “Though out of course, yet hath not bene mis-sayd,” since they all contribute “To shew the courtesie by him profest” (xii.2). “[C]ourteous *Calidore*,” “Whose every act and deed ... / Was like enchantment,” simply *is* the virtue itself (ii.3), and his trajectory across the Legend therefore constitutes a diagnostic epitome of what courtesy looks like in practice, rather than a blueprint for moral valuation of his discrete actions. A means of utopian reform and dystopian regression at one and the same time, Spenserian courtesy enforces on readers the “austere dialectical imperative” that Fredric Jameson considers the burden of authentic critical thought, which urges us to conceive historical phenomena as “catastrophe and progress all together.”³⁷⁰

Pursuing a fine-grained and comprehensive reading of Book VI so as to better understand its internal dynamics, this essay also seeks to draw out the broader implications of Spenserian form for the politics of *The Faerie Queene*. Not only co-extensive with, but actually productive of, its barbarous opposite, courtesy registers a crisis of heroic action with a force unique in Spenser’s poem. In this respect, the Legend is not only a prime example of Walter

³⁶⁷ O’Connell, *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, 24; Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates*, 89.

³⁶⁸ *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 186–7.

³⁶⁹ Levinson, “Reflections on the New Historicism,” 358.

³⁷⁰ *Postmodernism*, 47.

Benjamin's famous dictum that "[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism," an insight wholly congenial to recent historicist considerations of the complicity of Spenser's art with the devastating history of Irish colonial subjugation.³⁷¹

Rather, the text is also a self-conscious examination into the conditions in which barbarism and civilization turn into co-terminous phenomena. The result is that Book VI ultimately works less as the instrument of ideological coercion that it is now commonly taken to be, and more as an index of how virtue becomes indistinguishable from the monstrous Other it would seek to transform in fraught political circumstances. Imagined as a corollary to the "wary boldness" that characterizes Arthur's final appearance in the poem, the particular mode of agency that the text thematizes and develops is *critical*, rather than directly social—a form of readerly engagement that is not a politics in and of itself, but instead a "displaced politics, [or] politics at a distance."³⁷² In developing this claim, the chapter seeks to modify prevailing accounts of early modern literature's putatively unmediated bearing on external reality—in Spenser's case specifically, of poetry's status as, once again, "Foreign Policy in Fairyland." In its final section, I reiterate some of the specific ways that the relationship between formalist and historicist modes of inquiry in Spenser criticism has long been one of conflict and contestation, particularly with regard to the extra-textual effects *The Faerie Queene* may be thought to have on a sympathetic reader. I then conclude by arguing, as I did in Chapter 1, that a broadly Adornian conception of the semi-autonomy of the artwork and its consequent proto-political character might make the tension between these reading practices more productive for Spenser scholarship and early modern literary studies more generally.

II. Modalities of Courtesy: Sociability, Dissimulation, Recklessness

Spenser signals the singular promise of courtesy to initiate a process of reformatory social cohesion in the first episode of Book VI, when Calidore redresses the criminal toll road scheme perpetrated by Crudor and Briana. In the knights' duel, Calidore twice subdues his counterpart but ultimately forbears from killing him so long as Crudor agrees to "better ... behave" himself, and profess "court'sie ... as well as armes." Calidore's injunction that Crudor put away "pride and cruelnesse" identifies courtesy with a spirit of empathetic reciprocity: "Who will not mercie vnto others shew, / How can he mercy euer hope to haue?" (i.41-2), he asks. His benevolence induces regeneration not only in Crudor, but in his paramour, as well. Earlier displaying all the "high disdain / And proud despight" that characterized her lover (15), Briana is now "all overcome" by Calidore's "exceeding courtesie," which, in a benign modulation from the violent combat of the knights, is said to "pears[e] / Her stubborne hart with inward deepe effect" (45). The "goodly glee and feast" that Briana subsequently lavishes on Calidore in her castle serves as a material validation of the faith that Calidore has placed in the pair's ethical improvement (46), brought about by his own performance of courtesy. The pleasant surprise—even shock—of the virtue's efficacy as "a peacefully persuasive means towards social equilibrium" is underscored by the clear parallel Spenser establishes with the Pollente and Munera episode from Book V, which also

³⁷¹ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 256.

³⁷² Harpham, *Shadows of Ethics*, 9.

focused on an extortionist toll road but ended in the summary execution of both villains.³⁷³ As Jeff Dolven claims, Crudor's reformation might even be understood as a positive "revolution" in the allegorical practice of *The Faerie Queene*, where a loving, courteous alternative to bodily punishment rehabilitates a character whose very name seems to fix his identity as raw, bloody, and cruel.³⁷⁴

The self-reinforcing sociability that courtesy makes possible is evident throughout Book VI. It is most apparent in the figure of the Salvage Man (his name punning on the prospect of civil regeneration from mere savagery), who is ignorant of "gentlesse" until he feels pity for Calepine and Serena during the villainous knight Turpine's assaults on them (iv.3).³⁷⁵ In the presence of courteous subjects, the Salvage behaves with an experimental hospitality toward the injured pair, conveying his "deepe compassion" by "rude tokens" and "senselesse words, which nature did him teach" (iv.11). His displays of "milde humanity," mirroring Crudor's reformed attitude of "meeke humilitie" (i.38), indicate courtesy's almost miraculous capacity to foster "perfect gentle mynd" in even a "saluage wight, of brutish kynd" (v.29). We also see the virtue's unique efficacy in Mirabella, an emblem of reformed feminine hauteur who seeks to "sau[e] so many loues, as she did lose" through her indifference to worthy suitors (vii.37). Mirabella's mission of social amelioration, requiring her resigned submission to an almost Sisyphean task, thus expresses much the same spirit of "goodly patience" with which Calidore brings about Crudor's reformation (i.40).

With the civil restoration that courtesy makes possible, however, comes a persistent epistemological insecurity. While Briana's hospitality is the outward expression of "her thankfull mind and meaning faine" (i.46), faith in the correspondence between act and intention soon becomes difficult to maintain given that courteous behavior regularly functions as simple fraud. This liability is foregrounded in Arthur's dealings with Turpine, which subvert the optimism accompanying Crudor and Briana's reformation. Raiding Turpine's castle as punishment for his earlier mistreatment of Calepine and Serena, Arthur grants the knight mercy for the sake of Blandina, Turpine's apparently courteous paramour; the villain is forced only to abjure knighthood and is otherwise left unharmed. Arthur then decides to spend the night in Turpine's castle, Blandina lavishing great care on him all the while. "Yet were her words and looks but false and fayned," Spenser soon clarifies, "To some hid end to make more easie way" (vi.41-2). Blandina's "courteous glee and goodly feast" (41) clearly echoes Briana's earlier "goodly glee and feast," and this display of hospitality leaves Arthur, like Calidore before him, "pacifyde" (43). He proceeds to spend the night "in carelesse couch, not weeting what was ment" by the unregenerate Turpine, who meanwhile awaits an opportunity to avenge himself.

Blandina's artful performance is capable of perverting the trusting sociability that courtesy is meant to secure because, as soon becomes clear, the virtue is inherently "rhetorical" in nature. As contemporary commentators recognized, courtesy necessarily eventuates in the exterior displays of speech and bearing, and these are cues that Blandina manipulates, deceiving Arthur

³⁷³ Tonkin, *Spenser's Courteous Pastoral*, 201. For the Pollente/Munera sequence, see V.ii.25-6.

³⁷⁴ *Scenes of Instruction*, 220. See Hamilton's gloss on Crudor's name as a derivation from the Latin *crudus*.

³⁷⁵ While "salvage" in the sense of rescuing property did not enter English usage until the eighteenth century (see OED 2-3), Spenser appears to play on the term's etymology from the Latin *salvare*, "to save." Hamilton notes the aptness of the derivation, as the Salvage Man first appears in the role of Calepine's protector (*FQ*, 626). Given the Salvage Man's larger trajectory in Book VI, however, Spenser seems to intend the character to be an object, as well as subject, of cultural redemption.

“[t]hrough tempering of her words and lookes by wondrous skill” (vi.41).³⁷⁶ Spenser in fact emphasizes that *all* expressions of courtesy, genuine as well as spurious, can only manifest themselves in outward form: even the Salvage Man’s instinctual proofs of courteous intent, wholly unmediated by polite culture, are registered as “faire semblance,” a combination of “signes,” “lookes,” and “other gests” (iv.14). This is not to say that courtesy is the only Spenserian virtue susceptible to feigning; one has only to recall the counterfeit holiness of Archimago and Duessa, or the mock chivalry of Braggadocchio and the false Florimel, to see its continuity with the other Spenserian virtues. But the epistemological impasse to which courtesy gives rise, where its behavioral indicators are skillfully aped by the discourteous, creates especially urgent problems for a virtue that seeks to make “external graces the sign and guarantee of inner virtue.”³⁷⁷ Because courteous semblance is more a means than an end—an attitude of faithful openness that makes social cohesion possible without sufficing to bring it about—the inability to distinguish between genuine and fraudulent expressions renders courtesy particularly vulnerable to subversion.³⁷⁸

Spenser telescopes this very obstruction of critical discernment through the knowing ironies of the book’s proem. Its key stanzas begin by opposing an authentic, antique courtesy to the “fayned showes” of the degraded present, “Which carry colours faire, that feeble eies misdeeme” (4):

Its now so farre from that, which then it was,
That it indeed is nought but forgerie,
Fashion’d to please the eies of them, that pas,
Which see not perfect thinges but in a glas:
Yet is that glasse so gay, that it can blynd
The wisest sight, to thinke gold that is bras.
But vertues seat is deepe within the mynd,
And not in outward shows, but inward thoughts defynd.

But where shall I in all Antiquity
So faire a patterne finde, where may be seene,

³⁷⁶ See Javitch, *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, 197.

³⁷⁷ Grogan, *Exemplary Spenser*, 145.

³⁷⁸ The competing necessities of extending courteous trust to other subjects and remaining vigilant against the dangers of courteous-seeming fraud focus an epistemic and ethical impasse that was a source of anxious concern for Spenser as early as the “May” eclogue of *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579). In the verse dialogue between Piers and Palinode, the former asserts “that it is daungerous to mainteine any felowship, or give too much credit to [Catholics] feyned goodwill,” and tells “a tale of the foxe, that by such a counterpoynt of craftines deceived and devoured the credulous kidde” (*Shorter Poems*, p. 87). The anti-Catholic satire that Piers proceeds to deliver closely follows the text’s Argument: “Such end had the Kidde, for he nould warned be / Of craft, coloured with simplicitie” (ll. 302-3). At this point, however, the concluding emblem of the eclogue unexpectedly gestures to the vital role of trust in bringing about an end to Christian “conteck” [contention]: “Who doth most mistrust is most false,” the first half-line states, followed by the rhetorical question, “What fayth then is there in the faythlesse” (p. 105). The emblem thus insists on the social necessity of a trustworthy concord that the fable has emphatically urged us to deny for the sake of self-preservation. The maxim may can be resolved with the rest of Spenser’s fiction only with great awkwardness. The figure of E.K. further reinforces this tension in his summary commentary when he compares the whole of the dialogue to a seemingly authoritative biblical intertext: Christ’s “carefull watchewords ... to beware of such doubling deceit” (p. 102-3).

The goodly praise of Princely curtesie,
 As in your selfe, O soueraine Lady Queene,
 In whose pure minde, as in a mirrour sheene,
 It shoves ...

(5-6)

Courtesy ultimately merges with the subjective interiority of Elizabeth-Gloriana, insulated within her “pure minde” from the “forgerie” of external display. Subordinating “outward shows” to “inward thoughts,” the passage invokes two analogous Pauline intertexts in the process. It allusively sets the “glas” through which the undiscerning “se ... darkely” (1 Cor. 13) against the “mirrour sheene” of queenly courtesy, in which we “beholde as in a mirrour the glorie of the Lord with open face” (2 Cor. 3). But the near identity between Spenser’s “glas” and “mirrour” does nothing so much as point out the sensory equivalence of the two when realized in practice. The virtue’s necessary passage from mind to signs, words, and looks means that it is available to intersubjective experience only as a kind of reflective surface or “semblance,” exhibiting to a viewer his own disposition to trust or suspicion rather than the subjective essence of the observed. The tendency to misconstrue false courtesy therefore extends not only to “feeble eies,” but to the “wisest sight,” a point strengthened by Paul’s gesture to those who “see not perfect things but in a glas”: not merely the unredeemed, that is, but all subjects of pre-apocalyptic history.³⁷⁹

Spenser further underscores the epistemological ambiguity that governs courteous conduct by demonstrating how easily the virtue shades into dissimulation even among the book’s protagonists, who frequently expose others to what Spenser at one point terms a “menage,” or discreet manipulation.³⁸⁰ We might think of Calidore’s accompanying the lady Priscilla back to her father’s house, after she is found making love with the young knight Aladine: considering “how she the blame might salve with coloured disguise,” Calidore ultimately vouches for her “perfect pure, and guiltlesse innocen[ce]” (iii.8, 18). The vocabulary of the passage, in which Spenser labels Calidore’s testimony a “counter-cast of slight” (iii.16), ironically reproduces the poem’s denigration of courtly artifice as “fayned shoves” and “colours faire” (4), though here

³⁷⁹ The terms of the poem closely resemble those in Spenser’s own *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* (written c.1591, published 1595), where lightly allegorized Elizabethan court is the source of a merely “painted blisse,” and where “single Truth and simple honestie” are subverted by “fained forgerie” and “faire dissembling curtesie” (*Shorter Poems*, ll. 685, 727, 696, 700). Indeed, *Colin Clout* is a key intertext throughout the Legend of Courtesy, for at the center of the long pastoral lyric is Spenser’s most sustained representation of the historical court, figured through highly equivocal rhetoric that prefigures the Book VI poem. The court is first praised by Colin Clout, Spenser’s alter ego, for the “greatnes” of the queen and the illustrious poets who “glorifie” her name, but it is later condemned for its inhabitants’ pervasive “enormities” (335, 379, 665). The “fayned shoves” and “colours faire” of the poem thus closely adapt *Colin Clout*’s “painted blisse,” while the epic’s description of discourteous “forgerie” compresses the eclogue’s earlier “fained forgerie.” This vocabulary will recur once again in Book VI, when the “happy peace” and “perfect pleasures” of the pastoral world are juxtaposed with the “painted show / Of such false blisse” as characterizes court life (x.3). See the comparably embittered representations of the court in *The Faerie Queene* I.iv.16-37 and *Mother Hubbard’s Tale* (pub. 1591), 631-793.

³⁸⁰ *FQ*, VI.ix.46; Spenser takes the term from horsemanship.

with an apparent lack of moral censure.³⁸¹ The next canto presents a similar occurrence, when Calepine, in the course of an errant ramble through the woods, rescues an infant from a bear, and then happens on the infertile queen Matilde. As she describes her desperate need to deliver an heir for her husband's kingdom, Calepine devises the "fit reliefe" of having Matilde raise the child (iv.34); pleased at her good fortune, "she so wisely did / And with her husband under hand so wrought" that he believes himself the father (38). Matilde's sly manipulation neatly parallels Calidore's earlier handling of Priscilla's father, and the knight again assumes the same type of "courteous guize" in his dealings with the hapless Coridon (ix.35), his ineffectual rival for the affections of Pastorella. Even as the shepherd is eventually exposed for his cowardice when he fails to protect Pastorella from a tiger, Calidore nevertheless "did not despise him quight, / But usde him friendly for further intent, / That by his fellowship, he colour might / ... [his] love from skill of any wight" (x.37). Calidore's consummation of his courtship of Pastorella in the very next stanza is the reward for his apparently untroubled exhibition of strategic disguise.³⁸²

As these instances of worldly calculation demonstrate, a courteous "menage" frequently operates as simple expediency, a repetition of the way Blandina deceives Arthur, "to some hid end to make more easie way." We might seek to resolve the subversive potential of this mirroring effect by bringing to bear Castiglione's apology for courtly dissimulation as an expression of prudence, as in the politic proverb "a little well is lent, that gaineth more withall" (xi.6).³⁸³ Spenser's version of courtesy could then be construed as registering the period's divergent attitudes toward the virtue, while still maintaining a theoretical distinction between its ideal and parodic manifestations. But even this differentiation proves difficult to preserve given the congruence of his benign and malign characters' conduct. How exactly, Spenser prompts us to ask, are we to reconcile a benign "counter-cast of slight" with Spenser's later claim that "t'use shifting slight" is the sign of "a vile donghill mind" (vii.1)? What is the interpretive mechanism that could accurately discriminate between the "faire colour" of Calidore's generous assistance to Priscilla and the "colours faire" of courtly hypocrisy (iii.16, proem.4)—especially in a work that ambiguously "shadow[s]" its royal dedicatee, Elizabeth, "in colourd showes" (III.proem.3)? Spenser provides his readers with no criteria for maintaining these distinctions, leaving us unsure whether "good grace and comlinesse," in the words of *A View*, more often serve "to adorne and beautifie vertue" or, instead, "wickednes and vice."³⁸⁴ What these examples ultimately indicate, then, is the radically equivocal quality of courtesy, the way that it "makes virtue and virtuous

³⁸¹ The *OED*, using this line as its sole example, defines "counter-cast" as an "antagonistic contrivance or artifice." Hamilton explains the phrase as meaning a simple "counterplot," but see also *FQ* I.vii.4, where Duessa is said to "Cast her colours / To seeme like truth..."

³⁸² A number of these instances have been noted by other readers. See Dolven, *Scenes of Instruction*, 231; Charles E. Mounts, "Virtuous Duplicity in *The Faerie Queene*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 7 (1946): 43-52; Neuse, "Book VI as Conclusion," 345-7; Northrop, "The Uncertainty of Courtesy," 226-8. Nohnberg describes these tensions with clarity: "[T]he allegorically veiled truth of a legend of courtesy will be the polite white lie; subtlety, indirection, the disguise of ulterior motives, and the studied use of misrepresentation may all serve its cause. In such a legend truth will seldom be wholly simple, and the polarization of truth and falsehood will dissolve into questions of essential and feigned sincerity." See *Analogy*, 668.

³⁸³ See Javitch, *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, 197.

³⁸⁴ *A View*, 77. See also 89-90, where Irenius describes duplicitous, time-serving English military captains in Ireland instituting superficial policies merely "for colour sake," and who suffer malicious practices among the Irish "with coloured countenance, or such sinister meanes."

behavior possible” among individuals by preemptively extending trust, while also provoking in them a corrosive distrust of outward appearance.³⁸⁵

The ethical opacity of courteous performance in *The Faerie Queene*, moreover, involves not just the shading of the virtue into its negative aspect, but also the peculiar process whereby the virtue actually *generates* its opposite impulse. This process is best illustrated by the culmination of Arthur’s misadventures with Turpine. It is here necessary to delineate the scene in schematic form so as to bring into sharper relief its abrupt and tortuous reversals. After Arthur departs his castle, Turpine enlists two mercenary knights to murder him. The assailants soon find Arthur in a serenely trusting attitude, “devising of his love more, then of daunger drad” (6). In the combat that follows their assault, Arthur kills off the first knight, but once again grants “mercie” to the second (later named Enias); apprised of Turpine’s plot against him, Arthur then makes Enias “[swear] by his sword” to bring Turpine to him for fresh retribution (12-3). Even after the chivalric oath of the previous day, when Turpine forswore arms, has just been proven worthless, Arthur again places his faith in a stranger knight on the basis of just such an oath. This trust, in fact, proves so absolute that Arthur, in a seemingly suicidal display of dubious judgment, is next seen “loosely displayd upon the grassie ground, / Possessed of sweete sleepe,” with “his armes and warlike things undight” (18-9). Having arrived in Arthur’s presence, Turpine once more exhorts Enias to kill the prince in accordance with their original transaction, but Enias refuses on the basis of his newly pledged “faith” (23). As the two continue to dispute, Arthur re-awakens and “baffles” Turpine once and for all.

How are we to make sense of Arthur’s manifest imprudence, even “stupidity,” in the context of the episode’s emphatically optimistic resolution?³⁸⁶ I suggest that we should understand his conduct here as a dramatization of the ironic logic of Castiglione’s *sprezzatura*, the studied nonchalance that Thomas Hoby’s early-Elizabethan translation described as the appearance of “a certain *Reckelesness*.”³⁸⁷ Arthur is Spenser’s embodiment of “magnificence,” the virtue that the Letter to Raleigh describes as “the perfection of all the rest,” and so is capable of disseminating social harmony even while half asleep—a supreme example of *sprezzatura* as the “art that appeereth not to be art.”³⁸⁸ But Hoby’s translation of the attitude as “recklessness” (a term that then, as now, had decisively negative connotations) also underscores the condition of careless vulnerability with which courtesy is here associated.³⁸⁹ Arthur’s swerve from imminent calamity to miraculous evasion and back again focuses the uniquely double-sided nature of the virtue: its simultaneous mediation of reformatory efficacy and precarious exposure. Blandina’s sham-courtesy had earlier engendered in Arthur a dangerous security of which Turpine had

³⁸⁵ Berger makes these contrary points at different ends of his career: see *Revisionary Play*, 22, for the above quote, and his discussion of the culture of distrust that *sprezzatura* creates in *The Absence of Grace: Sprezzatura and Suspicion in Two Renaissance Courtesy Books* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 1-25. See also Prescott’s apt description of courtesy as an “empathic if devious grace” in “Foreign Policy in Fairyland,” 208. On the casuistical principle of the “good deceit,” see Lowell Gallagher, *Medusa’s Gaze: Casuistry and Conscience in the Renaissance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), esp. 191-7.

³⁸⁶ Burrow, *Epic Romance*, 132.

³⁸⁷ *The Courtier of Count Baldessar Castilio*... (London: 1561), E2r.

³⁸⁸ *FQ*, p. 716; Hoby, *The Courtier*, E2r.

³⁸⁹ For the meaning of “reckless” as inattentive, irresponsible, or rash, see *OED* 1-2. On the Sidney-Leicester circle’s use of sleep as a politically loaded metaphor for the fatally naïve security of military idleness, see Blair Worden, *The Sound of Virtue: Philip Sidney’s Arcadia and Elizabethan Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), esp. 58-70.

sought to take advantage. But at the moment we would expect Arthur's faith in the identity between act and intention to be subverted by Turpine's treachery in hiring the mercenaries, concord is once again reestablished by the courtesy that Enias displays in revealing that treachery—an assurance so far-reaching that it induces Arthur to fall asleep, and once again put himself at mortal risk. It is courtesy *itself* that first fosters, then subverts, and finally re-instantiates trusting faith between Spenser's characters, and all within a very brief amount of textual space.

The narrative compression of the scene indicates the fundamental duplicity of Spenser's virtue and the peculiar temporality that it involves. Courtesy creates and destroys the conditions of sociability at one and the same time, and its benign and malign manifestations become indistinguishable from one another because—absurdly—courtesy engenders the opposing impulses that nullify it, and vice versa. The rapid oscillation between courtesy and discourtesy that we observe here, I am arguing, establishes not only a narrative simultaneity and epistemological uniformity between the two, but something like an ontological identity, as well. Spenser's thematization of the always-already equivocal nature of courtesy and the uncanny temporal regime it creates is what makes Spenser's representation of the virtue authentically dialectical in the manner Jameson describes above. And nowhere is this dynamic more richly figured than in the fleeting appearances of the Blatant Beast.

III. Monstrous Courtesy: Calidore and The Blatant Beast

Readers of *The Faerie Queene* have occasionally gestured to the homologous relationship between Calidore and the Beast without attending to the narrative logic that governs the pair's relationship in a more systematic way. The most specific point of intersection that has been remarked is the duo's repeated violations of private enclosures. As Berger once remarked, the persistent motif of "a character surprised in a moment of diversion" is associated with protagonist and antagonist in equal measure, and Frank Whigham links their characteristic "invasion of privacies" when noting "the subtle homology between the Beast and his knight Calidore."³⁹⁰ The antithetical force of this useful starting point is made stronger when we recognize how often courtesy is equated with the pursuit for idyllic concealment. The amiable knights Aladine and Calepine are first discovered in "couert glade" and "couert shade," divested of their armor while enjoying "ioyous iolliment" and "solace" with their paramours (ii.16, iii.20); the Hermit and Meliboe delight in the "lowly quiet life" of contemplative retirement that they interrupt only to dispense "sage counsell" (ix.25, vi.3); and Calidore himself is overcome with a desire for "small repose" he temporarily finds in his pastoral retreat (ix.31). Since Calidore is also frequently responsible for disrupting this very impulse—for "creeping close into [the] secrecie" of others, as Spenser puts it in a related context—appreciating the self-divided nature of the virtue he

³⁹⁰ Berger, *Revisionary Play*, 219; Whigham, *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, 196. See also Neuse, "Book VI as Conclusion," 335-7; Nohrnberg, *Analogy*, 693; Northrop, "Uncertainty," 221; Patricia Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 103-4; and Tonkin, *Spenser's Courteous Pastoral*, 142.

embodies prepares us for his close identification with the Beast, who, in turn, becomes as much an epitome, or precipitated concretion, of courtesy as Calidore himself.³⁹¹

Spenser delineates this allegorical economy in the Beast's first materialization in Book VI, when Calidore stumbles on Calepine and Serena as he pursues the creature. Like Aladine and Priscilla before them, the lovers are startled just as the knight has removed his armor, thinking himself "from daunger free, / And far from envious eyes that mote him spight." Insofar as the passage opposes courtesy to the world of heroic action—Serena is "courteous withall" in displaying herself to her lover, while Calidore's martial intrusion goes "gainst courtesie"—the virtue is here inseparable from the "solace" of thinking oneself "from daunger free" (iii.20-1). It is co-extensive, that is, with an Arthurian spirit of sociable recklessness.³⁹² Calidore consequently receives pardon from Calepine, and as the two proceed to "treat of things abroad at leasure" (22), Serena "wandre[s] about the fields, as liking led / Her wavering lust after her wandring sight ... Without suspect of ill or daungers hidden dred" (23). It is amidst this ambiance of extreme nonchalance that "All sodainely out of the forrest nere / The *Blatant Beast* forth rushing vnaware, / Caught her thus loosely wandring here and there" (24). As with Arthur and Turpine, the episode presents an atmosphere of trusting security, then shatters it with the intrusion of a stranger knight, and then quickly reestablishes and breaks it up again. Calidore's performance of courtesy with Calepine and Serena responds to his initial act of discourtesy, but it succeeds in restoring a sociability that is then immediately exposed to a near-identical act of invasion. It is only at this point, after Calidore's reproduction of the reckless openness he has just violated, that the Beast appears—the embodiment of discourtesy which was nowhere to be found until it destroys the scene's amicable harmony in the same way the knight of courtesy already has.

A similar narrative structure governs the Beast's next appearance in canto v. Spenser tells us that Arthur's squire, Timias, has finally grown "assured" of the love of his divine paramour Belphebe after their tortuous courtship throughout Book IV, and is now "[n]either of enuy, nor of chaunge afear'd" (12). The amorous security that Timias achieves generates the trusting faith that characterizes all courteous interactions, but also calls forth an antisocial animus with something like deterministic force. His ensuing confrontation with the Beast is prepared by

³⁹¹ See *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, where this act is one of the telling signs of the discourteous (*Shorter Poems*, 698). The *Blatant Beast*, of course, first appears at the end of the Legend of Justice as a figure for the courtly slander that helps undermine Artegall's reformation of Irena's kingdom. While it is therefore an exaggeration to say, as Angus Fletcher does, that "Calidore imagines the *Blatant Beast*" as a daemonic projection of his own psyche, the Beast operates almost exclusively in opposition to Calidore and his confederates in the course of its career. The allegorical overdetermination of courtesy's relation to the Beast is also signaled in the narrative handoff from Artegall to Calidore: "where ye ended haue" in pursuing the monster, Calidore tells his predecessor, "now I begin...." (VI.i.6). See Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964), 36.

³⁹² It is worth remarking here that courtesy essentially mandates the sexual availability of women throughout Book VI, since blameworthiness among female characters is often equated with their withholding of amorous favors. This is explicitly the case with Mirabella, an emblem of feminine *hauteur* who has scorned to be "serued ... of noblest knight" (vii.29). Her benign counterparts, Priscilla, Serena, and Pastorella, in contrast, are courteous precisely insofar as they refuse to distinguish between verbal and bodily intercourse: Priscilla "shew[s] all louely courtesyes" to Aladine during their lovemaking (ii.16), Serena is "full faire to see, / And courteous withall" toward Calepine (iii.20), and Pastorella finally accedes to Calidore's courtship, "ioy[ing] long in close felicity" (x.38). As a means to "requite" knightly courtesy (iv.39), the erotic accessibility of women parallels the social openness celebrated throughout the Legend, but their subjection to physical invasion (in however benign a form) reemphasizes the vulnerability to which the courteous programmatically expose themselves.

Despetto, Decetto, and Defetto, figures for the “vniust detraction” that results from Timias’ successful courting (*ibid.*), who successfully deploy the monster to draw the squire “Vnwares into the daunger of defame” (15). Spenser presents Timias’ extreme recklessness as both cause and effect of the Beast’s presence: it is loosed in consequence of his assurance, and then leads him into an even more profound condition of precarity, as he is eventually bitten “heedlesse ... the whiles he was thereof secure” (16). The injury, though, weirdly fails to alter Timias’ careless attitude: after this “secure” completes one stanza, the next begins, “Securely [Timias] did after him [the Beast] pursew” (17). The squire’s state of courteous heedlessness continues to diffuse itself precisely when we most expect it to be extinguished by the martial exigencies of the scene; it is almost as though he were trying to counter the Beast’s malign influence simply by being *more* courteous. Yet, as with Arthur and Turpine, even as this unwary disposition seems to presage disaster, it in fact signals Timias’ providential rescue. Amidst uncertain fighting with Despetto, Decetto, and Defetto, “vnwares he in the forrest heard / [The] trampling steed” of Arthur (21), who quickly scatters the villains. Timias moves throughout the entire scene in a distended state of security, productive of salvific benevolence and implacable menace in equal measure. Courtesy and discourtesy once again substitute for one another with such swiftness and ease that they effectively become coterminous, implying that the antisocial impetus is inherent to the virtue’s very enactment.

The most concentrated expression of this dialectical yoking of courtesy to discourtesy occurs when Calidore once more pursues the Beast after an absence of several cantos. Arriving in the countryside, Calidore greets the shepherds he finds there and “to them courteously besought, / If such a beast they saw, *which he had thether brought*” (ix.5; emphasis added). Not only is the Beast described as having been conveyed into the rustic community by Calidore’s pursuit, but this description now constitutes the creature’s sole distinguishing feature. Moreover, the Beast’s textual materialization is once again anticipated by a specific exercise of courtesy. The line announcing that Calidore has conveyed the Beast into the pastoral world follows the almost tautological description of the knight’s “courteous” seeking after information, itself a response to the shepherds’ “layes of sweete loue and youths delightfull heat” that establish a new atmosphere of idyllic ease (4). Spenser once again also indicates the elusive relation to temporal progress that courtesy instantiates, as Calidore seems both to anticipate and succeed the presence of the Beast. His foray into the shepherd world results from pursuing the creature, whom he “followe[s] fast” into the “open fields” (4), but Spenser’s description of Calidore’s bringing the Beast “thether” implies that it instead shadows and obeys the knight’s own movements. Discourtesy simultaneously results from and comes before the virtue it shadows, a confusion that makes the search after causal origins a pyrrhic endeavor.

These parallels should sharpen our awareness of the structural homologies and verbal echoes between the Beast and courtesy elsewhere in the book. In a sketch of the creature’s mythical genealogy, the Beast is said to have been “fostred long in *Stygian* fen, / Till he to perfect ripeness grew, and then / Into this wicked world he forth was sent” (i.8). The passage’s arboreal vocabulary links the Beast’s invasive amplification to the mythological virtue we have read about just a few stanzas earlier: courtesy, the privileged “flowre” in the divine nursery of virtue, is “long with carefull labour nurst, / Till it to ripenesse grew, and forth to honour burst” (proem.3). Analogously, the Beast’s attainment of uncontrolled liberty at the end of the book, when its malign energies are released into the present scene of reading (“So now he raungeth through the world againe ... / Ne any is, that may him now restraine” [xii.40]), comes close to reiterating

Colin Clout's grief at the vanishing of the Graces on Mount Acidale, the most famous scene in Book VI and, arguably, the entirety of *The Faerie Queene*.³⁹³ Colin laments Calidore's disruption of the dancers, "Whom by no means thou canst recall againe / For being gone, none can them bring in place" (x.20), linking these figures for courtesy in its cosmic scope with the Beast's antisocial monstrosity. Seen in this light, the pervasive irony of the Acidale episode, in which "the supposed representative of courtesy" is also the agent "who makes its [cosmic] manifestation disappear," comes to seem as inevitable as it is mystifying.³⁹⁴

The apprehension that the Beast is an embodiment of courtesy's equivocality, as much a part of the virtue's semic organization as Calidore himself, is only intensified by the nature of the creature's escape. At the start of canto xii, it again roams free as a result of Calidore's pastoral distractions, but the knight eventually arrests it despoiling a monastery. When Calidore displays the now submissive Beast to the gawking populace of Faerie Land, however, it breaks "into the world at liberty againe," never to be "maystred any more" (38-9). At this climactic moment, Spenser prevaricates about whether the Beast's escape is the result of "wicked fate" or "fault of men" (38), but it tellingly frees itself only after acquiescing to Calidore "as if [it] learned had obedience long" (37). The previous stanza had prepared us for this revelation of the Beast's mock-docility when we were told that it "trembled vnderneath [Calidore's] mighty hand" even as it "chauffed inly" (36), signifying the divergence between act and intention familiar from the book's earlier paradigms of false courtesy. We might understand the Beast's escape, then, as a result of its having *behaved courteously*. Indeed, just before the report of its now ungovernable liberty, Spenser mentions that the townspeople before whom Calidore brings the monster in triumph "much admyr'd the Beast, but more admyr'd the Knight" (37). As throughout Book VI, courtesy and discourtesy appear identical, shading into one another within the same line of verse as the mutual objects of specular admiration. They do so because, like the "glas" and "mirrour" of the proem, they are made of the same stuff.

IV. Courteous Intervention, Courteous Invasion

If Spensersian courtesy identifies the foundational duplicity that at once makes possible and obliterates a sociability redeemed from both barbarism and courtly hypocrisy, then a disconcerting question emerges regarding the form that the virtue might take. What are Spenser's heroic agents actually to do in the world, given that courtesy is both necessary for fostering the "milde humanity" of others and productive of the antisocial malice that undermines the communal enterprise? One possible answer is that action itself should be radically curtailed—that courtesy is most beneficial when reduced to the state of passive receptivity and "moral attention" featured in the book's many scenes of pastoral intercourse.³⁹⁵ Indeed, this aspect of courtesy continues to inform critical idealizations of the virtue as a whole: for Teskey, courtesy at its best "does not take possession, nor does it invade [an] object to discover ... its essence," but instead "invites a partial disclosure and opens itself in turn to attention from the other," a claim

³⁹³ See the Conclusion for a further consideration of this episode and its place in theories of Spenser's poetics more generally.

³⁹⁴ Hadfield, *Literature, Politics and National Identity*, 191.

³⁹⁵ See Phillips, "Monasticism and Idleness": "In book 6, empathy is passive... [I]t does not require action per se but moral attention" (73).

that chimes with George Rowe's belief that courtesy results in "a controlled sort of openness," setting "limits to how much we reveal to, or demand of, those around us."³⁹⁶ The virtue would thus be a proleptic instance of the celebration, featured in much contemporary thought, of "precarious life" and "the virtue of vulnerability."³⁹⁷ These readings, it is true, accord with the fact that a signal manifestation of discourtesy throughout Book VI is its exposure of idyllic solace and corporeal integrity to acts of invasive scrutiny. Aladine and Priscilla are interrupted while thinking themselves secure against "too curious eyes" (ii.16); Calidore startles Calepine and Serena when they are ostensibly "far from envious eyes" (iii.20); Serena is stripped naked by the cannibalistic Salvage Nation, her "daintie parts" "prophan'd of common eyes" (viii.43); and Calidore disturbs the fragile vision of the Graces out of an excessive desire "to know" the nature of their "straunge sight" (x.17). The term "invasion," in fact, occurs frequently in these moments of social and bodily threat: a villainous knight is said to "inuade" Aladine out of sexual envy (iii.8); Despetto, Decetto, and Defetto attempt to "inuade" Timias with blows that would "perc[e] thorough [him] quite" (v.18); and the murderous brigands "inuade" and abduct the shepherd community during Calidore's untimely absence (x.39). Restricting courtesy to the tranquil ease that preserves a respectful distance toward the surrounding world would seem to mitigate against the disaster of overly reckless intrusion.

But if the violence of discourteous invasion seems to encourage a remove into passive retirement, this condition also amounts to the withdrawal from public life and political exertion that Spenser regards as an ever tempting threat to his project of "fashion[ing] a gentleman."³⁹⁸ Indeed, such an inducement is countered by the clear necessity of reformative intervention that Spenser enjoins on his courteous knights. Calidore's liberation of Pastorella from the brigands' cave complex, for example, effects a vigorous passage from outsides to insides and is commonly analogized with Christ's harrowing of Hell: "*Calidore* with huge resistlesse might, / The dores assayled, and the locks vpbrast," restoring Pastorella to "ioyous light" from subterranean darkness (xi.43, 50). Similarly, while Turpine's attempts on the life of a slumbering Arthur are a paradigm of invasive cruelty, that characterization is complicated by the incursion that the prince and the Salvage Man make into the villain's castle in the preceding canto: the Salvage leaves a heap of retainers' "slaughtred bodies" as Arthur chases Turpine "from roome to roome, from place to place," and finally ends his pursuit in Briana's privy chamber (vi.38, 29). This homology between destructive invasion and salvific intervention is also discernible in Calepine's rescue of Serena from the barbarous Salvage Nation. Just after Spenser emphasizes the intrusive violence done by

³⁹⁶ Teskey, "Courtesy and Thinking," 344; Rowe, "Privacy, Vision, and Gender in Spenser's Legend of Courtesy," *Modern Language Quarterly* 50.4 (1989), 313, 311. See also Nohrnberg, *Analogy*, 662.

³⁹⁷ These terms are taken from a recent study on "precarious life" in *The Faerie Queene*. See James Kuzner, *Open Subjects: English Renaissance Republicans, Modern Selfhoods, and the Virtue of Vulnerability* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 39-83. See also Joseph Campana's related discussion of "the painful vitality of lived experience," which he sees at the heart of Spenser's poetry, in "On Not Defending Poetry: Spenser, Suffering, and the Energy of Affect," *PMLA* 120.1 (2005), 35. Spenser's attention to "the vitality of bodies endowed with pain, affect, a vulnerability to change, and a capacity for motion" (38) is also the subject of Campana's expanded study, *The Pain of Reformation: Spenser, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Masculinity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

³⁹⁸ See Grogan, *Exemplary Spenser*, 162, and Berger's repudiation of such retirement as an "excuse for laziness" in *Revisionary Play*, 233.

the savages' "loose lasciuious sight" of Serena's naked body, Calepine "thrusts into the thickest throng" of the bandits to free her (viii.43, 49).

Spenser therefore troubles the distinction that Teskey posits between the courteous, which "moves into nearness with the otherness of the stranger," and the discourteous, which "seizes the object or dives into its center."³⁹⁹ And if courtesy for Rowe amounts to respecting the "limits of what should remain unseen," whereas discourtesy "would make public and visible what is private and hidden," separating the two becomes a self-defeating exercise given that the virtuous are so often required to bring concealed depravity to "open light" (xi.47).⁴⁰⁰ The fine discriminations delineated by critics fold in on themselves because Spenser's courtesy—effecting passages from exteriors to interiors, making public what was private, exposing dark interiors to social visibility—identifies precisely the equivocality that makes destructive invasion and reformatory intervention indistinguishable from one another in practice.

Spenser had in fact mobilized the dynamics of this equally enabling and disabling double bind at the start of canto vi. In one of the seeming "core" or "templar" episodes of the book, Timias and Serena convalesce from the "sore maladies" they have suffered from the Beast's assaults in the cottage of the Hermit (Argument). The pair's cure is eventually procured through their development of rigorous social discretion: they must learn to "restraine," "containe" and "Subdue" their wayward senses (vii, xiv). Spenser seems to leave little doubt that the problem with Timias and Serena has been one of subjectivity rather than external circumstance: their injuries multiply even during their sojourn within the cottage "[f]or want of taking heede vnto the same" (ii), and the Hermit is insistent that their cure must come from their "owne will" (vii) rather than through any "art" or "leaches might" (i). But even as his instruction is made to seem almost magical in its efficacy—having diligently followed his prescriptions, "in short space their malady was ceast" (xv)—a discordant emphasis on social context is later intruded. The injunction to "Subdue desire, and bridle loose delight" modulates into the suggestion that Timias and Serena simply "Shun secrecie, and talke in open sight," and the Hermit's summary statement of "the best" advice he can impart "Is to auoide the occasion of the ill" they have suffered (xiv). As we have seen earlier, however, the essential problem of courtesy is that the "occasion" for its exercise is the same as that of its demonic counterpart: the open sociability or "recklessness" that eventuates in "loose delight" is the very subjective disposition that also exposes one to the malign energies of the discourteous. To "auoide the occasion" of the virtue itself, as the Hermit finally suggests, would be to withdraw into the condition of antisocial privacy, removed from historical contingency, that Spenser clearly regards as an ever tempting menace to his project of cultural reformation.⁴⁰¹

This mode of privacy is, of course, the very one to which the Hermit, like Meliboe later on, restricts himself in his retirement, "alone, like carelesse bird in cage" (iv).⁴⁰² Moreover, even as the priority of the inward over the outward—a priority that reiterates the hierarchies of the poem—would seem to guarantee the integrity of the virtuous subject, the reformatory efficacy

³⁹⁹ Teskey, "Courtesy and Thinking," 344.

⁴⁰⁰ Rowe, "Privacy, Vision, and Gender," 314, 313.

⁴⁰¹ As Grogan remarks, "The success of [the Hermit's] isolationist remedy counters the courteous emphasis on social and verbal interaction as well as the poetic values underlying Spenser's poem" (*Exemplary Spenser*, 162).

⁴⁰² Bates similarly observes that "the Hermit seems to be strangely trapped by his own principles of constraint" (*Rhetoric of Courtship*, 160). Berger famously repudiates the perceived sentimentality of Meliboe's representation, arguing that his "morality" is in fact [an] excuse for laziness" (*Revisionary Play*, 233).

that Timias and Serena experience is largely evacuated when the Hermit observes that the Beast “his tongue doth whet / Gainst all, both good and bad, both most and least, / And pours his poysnous gall forth to infest / The noblest wights...” (xii). Just as the proem had undermined its own criteria for a critically judging courtesy by admitting that even “wisest sights” misconstrue the interiorized virtue’s presence or absence in social performance, the “good” or “bad” character of the social agent is severed from any causal relationship to the Beast’s assaults.⁴⁰³ Indeed, as I have argued throughout this essay, it seems the case that it is precisely “the noblest wights” who call forth the Beast’s manifestations, since the actions of courtesy are so often indistinguishable from those of discourtesy. The Hermit’s counsel, then, might be understood to represent a severely limited attempt to make “the best” of an unavoidable dilemma, one that becomes increasingly untenable the more a virtuous Spenserian subject exposes him- or herself to the condition of publicity necessary for the courteous sociability.

Indeed, the identity between the representative movements of courtesy and discourtesy is also the reason that the Blatant Beast’s attack on the monastery remains such a vexing episode. Having hunted the Beast “[t]hrough all estates,” Calidore finally locates it “despoiling” a cloister, “In which what filth and ordure did appear, / Were yrkesome to report” (xii.23-4). Two incompatible ways of assimilating the episode to the rest of the Legend seem plausible. On the one hand, we might understand the perversion of sacred monastic order into “ordure” as a symptom of the Beast’s own polluting influence, as Spenser’s designation of the clerical space as a “Monastere” identifies it with the “Monster” whose iconoclastic fervor seems the primary reason for the space’s disorder (23, iii.26).⁴⁰⁴ On the other hand, the “filth” that the Beast reveals apparently predates its arrival, existing independently of its presence. Located deep within the building’s innermost “cels and secrets neare” (24), this spiritual excrement could just as well be a function of the monastery’s own perverse secrecy. If the Beast’s exposure of spiritual corruption to public visibility seems ironically consonant with the Reformed-humanist ideal of active virtue promoted throughout *The Faerie Queene*, then Calidore’s own presence within the scene further confuses the issue: his pursuit of the Beast reproduces the monster’s own advances, and might be construed in equal measure as overly zealous disturbance and redemptive purgation. Reflecting on these parallels, we might ultimately identify the representative momentum of Book VI, the progress from periphery to interior that renders the latter visible to scrutiny, to be both parody and realization of the proem’s hopeful passage from “outward showes” to “inward thoughts.”⁴⁰⁵

The question therefore persists: what sort of heroic agency are we to imagine being practicable either for Spenser’s virtuous characters or the readers whom he would “fashion”

⁴⁰³ Kenneth Gross similarly suggests that the rapid efficacy of Timias and Serena’s cure must be construed as a “fantasy” through which Hermit’s therapy could be “a means to avoid the Beast’s poison *before* it has struck—a way of outwitting the proliferations of slander in a realm beyond the subject’s control.” See “Reflections on the Blatant Beast,” *Spenser Studies* 13 (1999), 108-9. He also notes that Spenser follows both Guazzo and Castiglione in indicating that within the “public, politicized domain of ‘Courtesy’ ... the wounds of slander seem perfectly unavoidable, partly because the tools of courtly speech—praise and blame, flattery and abuse—often touch the domain of the slanderous” (105), a judgment with which I concur, and have tried to develop in greater detail.

⁴⁰⁴ Spenser’s punning on “ordure”/“order” and “monastere”/“monster” are discussed by Phillips in “Monasticism and Idleness,” 67-9.

⁴⁰⁵ Maryclaire Moroney similarly sees in the Beast’s destruction of the monastery “the impossibility of distinguishing sacrilegious destruction from righteous iconoclasm” (“Spenser’s Dissolution: Monasticism and Ruins in *The Faerie Queene* and *The View of the Present State of Ireland*,” *Spenser Studies* 12 (1998), 125. See also Hadfield, *A Life*, 224-5, and Herron, *Spenser’s Irish Work*, 218.

through engagement with his poem.² The tentative answer the poem offers may perhaps be located in the readerly discipline that Spenser ironically terms “wary boldnesse” (viii.15), a heightened sensitivity to both the necessity and contingencies of political action. The phrase appears in what turns out to be Arthur’s last appearance in the poem, his attempted rescue of Mirabella from the giant Disdaine, and differentiates his exercise of judgment from the heedless and ineffectual interventions of Timias and Enias that precede his own. At the sight of Disdaine’s mistreatment of the lady, Timias, “with indignation sweld,” cannot resist interceding straight away (vii.45), while Enias is similarly “much emmoued” at the sight of the giant’s captives, and seeks to free them as “soone” as he can (viii.5-6); both are quickly overcome and captured. Arthur, in contrast, exercises the prudential restraint that leads him, cautiously, to “wayt aduantage” before subduing Disdaine (viii.14). This model of critical reading is thematized elsewhere in *The Faerie Queene*, as well, most notably during Britomart’s progress through the House of Busirane. In that episode, the knight negotiates the contradictory imperatives written on the building’s interiors to “*Bee bold*” but “*not too bold*,” which incite her both to advance “forward with bold steps” and also to pause indefinitely: to “muz[e],” “construe,” and “ouer-re[a]d” the signs of her surroundings in a state of hesitant, watchful “sickernes” (III.xi.50-5). Like Britomart’s ambiguously contemplative form of vigorous interventionism, wary boldness indicates a nimbleness of body and mind that is nevertheless capable of tempering the chivalric imperative to aid the distressed without hesitation. The phrase thus telescopes the discriminating critical agency that Spenser believes must inform and modify the promptings of a fierce moral urgency, which tempts its subject to rush recklessly into social action.

The attenuated model of political agency that Spenser develops throughout the Legend of Courtesy, however, still pulls in two opposing directions at once. Wary boldness and the course of paradoxically deliberative activity it prescribes present us with a trope “that blurs activity and passivity to the point where one no longer can sustain a meaningful distinction between those terms.”⁴⁰⁶ It presents us, that is, with an interpretive injunction that is just as likely to perpetuate, as it is to resolve, crises of social action. Equal parts *gnosis* and *praxis*, “wary boldness,” like most any readerly activity, guarantees nothing for empirical reality—no particular course of socio-political action—with the only exception that, as Robert Kaufman puts it, “contingency could be more perceptively engaged by a critical consciousness strengthened by its experiences of judgment.”⁴⁰⁷ But the reader’s progress from the literary to the extra-literary necessarily occupies the realm of the subjunctive—of what would, could, or should occur in public affairs. While Spenser holds out something like the promise that “unfettered consciousness will individually and then in mutual interchange purge error from thinking and so, from action,” translating the “development” of critical agency to its “deployment” remains only a hopeful “goal,” rather than a surety.⁴⁰⁸ If Spenser finally impresses on his readers the vital necessity of a courtesy that we are also meant to distrust at every turn, then action will always be forced to negotiate the indefinitely prolonged interpretive impasse in which authentic exercises of

⁴⁰⁶ Goldsmith, *Blake’s Agitation*, 84. This passage is taken from Goldsmith’s account of the way that Blake’s work perpetually “borrows on [feelings of] revolutionary strength while also suspending it, transferring its heroic labor to the urgent but hesitant agency involved in critical engagement” (117).

⁴⁰⁷ “The Sublime as Super-Genre of the Modern,” 571.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 562-3.

judgment occur, with Book VI offering equal parts affirmation and negation for any particular decision at which we might arrive.

V. "Red Spenser": Historicism, Formalism, and Adornian Aesthetics

The claims that this discussion, and the dissertation as a whole, has worked toward will no doubt strike some as decidedly old-fashioned. For by discovering in *The Faerie Queene* the textual complications that eventuate in paradox and cognitive stasis, it reproduces many of the distinguishing features of New Critical formalism in general, and mid-twentieth-century theories of Spenserian poetics in particular. For many of the period's most prominent critics, as we have seen, Spenser's verse was marked by its establishment of a "still, brooding attention" and "robust tranquility" that did not necessitate formulating "a judgment as if for action." Corresponding, as achieved form, to "a poised intelligence seeing all around a spiritual phenomenon," Spensersian poetics were thus thought to "require detachment rather than involvement."⁴⁰⁹ Arresting readers in "a labyrinth of sweet sounds" whose "contemplation is a kind of lingering trance," *The Faerie Queene*, for the Romantic tradition as well, maintains its audience in an entirely "mental space," rather than directing us outward into external reality.⁴¹⁰ These formulations are likely to strike us now as unmistakable symptoms of the "aesthetic ideology" whose specter we have repeatedly encountered in this study: the privileged celebration of a "formalist, static, self-reflexive, Kantian essentialism" over and against the claims of "the material, the social, and the historical," which a responsible criticism will engage "from a political, interventionist standpoint."⁴¹¹ This is especially the case, as we have also seen, for Books V and VI of *The Faerie Queene*, which historicist scholarship of the past generation has conclusively shown to be motivated, at a foundational level, by urgent debates on contemporary colonial policy. In the case of courtesy, we have rightfully grown suspicious of "formalist" readings that would distract from or recuperate the Legend's political agenda: figuring plantation as the benevolent transmission of an Anglo-Protestant political order predicated on the evisceration of Irish civilization. As David James has recently put the general point, in contemporary literary studies, "[w]e are [now] used to seeing consolation as the aesthetic gift that any vigilant and conscientiously chary reader should refuse."⁴¹² More pertinently in the case of Spenser, Joseph Loewenstein has recently reflected that the colonial atrocities memorialized in, and endorsed by, *A View* (its notorious rehearsal of the Munster famine in particular) "has become our own insistent cynosure," the chastening intertext against which historically and morally responsible discussions of the late poetry must be set.⁴¹³

⁴⁰⁹ Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, 392-3; Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 34; Alpers, "How to Read *The Faerie Queene*," 436-7; Berger, *Revisionary Play*, 220.

⁴¹⁰ Hazlitt, *Critical Anthology*, 138; Yeats, *Critical Anthology*, 177; Coleridge, *Critical Anthology*, 144.

⁴¹¹ Kaufman, "Red Kant," 686, 682-3.

⁴¹² See "Critical Solace," *New Literary History* 47.4 (2016), 500. For an example of the kind of attitude this line of criticism seeks to correct, however, see Alpers' belief that Spenser's ideal reader surrenders himself to a "restorative" trust in the "traditional wisdom" and "ultimate goodness" of the world ("How to Read *The Faerie Queene*," 442). Alpers' assertion was itself a rehearsal of some traditional Romantic and "aestheticizing" views—Coleridge's claim, for example, that Spenser's mind was marked by "a deep moral earnestness which produces a believing sympathy and acquiescence in the reader" (*Critical Anthology*, 146).

⁴¹³ Loewenstein, "Response: They Speake Like Ghosts: Spenser, the Human, and the Humane," *Spenser Studies* 30 (2015), 197. See Katarzyna Lecky's "Irish Nonhumanness and English Inhumanity in *A View of the Present State*

But what Book VI finally registers, I have been arguing, is the very facility with which virtue shades into and calls forth its monstrous opposite amidst the dangers and confusions of an environment like Elizabethan Ireland. The text represents an act of genuinely dialectical thinking of the kind that Jameson described above, “invent[ing] a space from which to think these two identical yet antagonistic features”—in this case courtesy and its shadowy Other—“together all at once.”⁴¹⁴ The Legend indexes, with an almost paranoid intensity, the way that virtuous motives eventuate in barbarism as often as culture, and the implication of even the most well-intentioned heroic action in this process. The text therefore offers itself not as an incitement to any cohesive political program, but as the occasion for exercising and refining critical awareness of this fundamental impasse through that of the reading experience. Richard McCabe rightly remarks that Book VI “interrogate[s] the folly of escapism by illustrating the urgency of ‘history.’”⁴¹⁵ Indeed, it does. But—and this is a crucial qualification—it also shows that if scrupulous attention to the poem’s vertiginous formal complexity runs the risk of becoming an escapist indulgence, then this attention also constitutes the only adequate way of elucidating historical process itself.

Given the insistence on the functional identity between aesthetics and politics in contemporary Spenser scholarship and early modern literary criticism, moreover, making the case for the provisional autonomy of literary experience in this way offers us “at least the minor valence of critical negation,” in W.J.T. Mitchell’s formulation.⁴¹⁶ This is especially the case given that the features of a contemplative, “non-purposive” aesthetics remain operative in much contemporary Spenser criticism, but, again, only insofar as they have been made conducive to political action. Hence Prescott’s observation that the process of reading Spenser’s poem incessantly “resists [and] complicates judgment,”⁴¹⁷ but that this potentially endless interpretive irresolution is somehow wholly compatible with the implementation of a positive political program. But the accents of New Critical self-reflexivity in her remarks might also remind us of the ways that attending sensitively to the formal processes that resist and complicate our judgments “as if for action” will almost necessarily jar with a transition from “well-knowing” to “well-doing,” in Sidney’s words. As in Derrida’s portrait of the deconstructive critic, our encounters with the Legends of Justice and Courtesy impress on us a feeling of “political and historical urgency” intolerant of precisely the “reflection and theoretical deliberation” that they simultaneously call forth from the attentive reader.⁴¹⁸ Spenser, therefore, ultimately posits the wary boldness of critical judgment as a practice for *engaging* the political, for modeling and molding the “active reading subject” whose social action nevertheless remains potential, rather than kinetic, and for whom politics retains its difference from aesthetic reflection.

The Faerie Queene thus dramatizes the simultaneous attraction and repulsion between the wariness of artistic experience and the boldness of political action, a dynamic both thematized within and enacted through the Legend of Courtesy with singular force. It is this generative tension that, as I have already argued, makes Adornian theory so useful a vocabulary for conceptualizing aesthetics-and-politics in Spenser and the English Renaissance more generally.

of Ireland,” 133–50, one of the essays to which Loewenstein is responding, for a recuperative reading of *A View* based on its (putative) formal complications.

⁴¹⁴ *The Political Unconscious*, 235.

⁴¹⁵ McCabe, *Spenser’s Monstrous Regiment*, 234.

⁴¹⁶ “The Commitment to Form; or, Still Crazy after All These Years,” *PMLA* 118.2 (2003), 324.

⁴¹⁷ Prescott, “How to Read *The Faerie Queene*: A Forum.”

⁴¹⁸ *Politics of Friendship*, 79.

For Adorno, artistic experience is, once again, defined by its “double character” as “something that severs itself from empirical reality and thereby from society’s functional context and yet is at the same time part of empirical reality and society’s functional context.”⁴¹⁹ “[H]istorical right into its innermost cell,” the work of art also “confronts society autonomously,” which means that its historicity, the heteronomous presence of “what is itself not art,” is paradoxically “immanent” to the work itself.⁴²⁰ As he insists in a key formulation, “[t]he unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form.”⁴²¹ It is only by thinking through the play of “micrological figures” and “technical procedures” in literary texts that “aesthetically derived critical thought,” as Kaufman calls it, becomes activated and points the way for a redeemed *praxis*.⁴²² Reflective judgment thus becomes for Adorno the means of accessing “correct consciousness,” the perception of social “antagonisms on the horizon of their possible reconciliation.”⁴²³ As I have argued above, Spenser makes dimly visible something like this harmonization of intractable opposites in his representations of the warily bold agent of courtesy. Seeking to neutralize the noxious energies of the Blatant Beast and the historical evils for which the monster stands, Spenser’s readerly agency is generated through “a critical poetics and aesthetics that in turn *may* ... offer their own contributions to extra-aesthetic thought and praxis.”⁴²⁴ But for the proto-politics of Spenser’s poem, as for a major strand of post-Enlightenment aesthetic theory, moving from the literary to the social in this manner remains a mere possibility—not only an enabling *condition* of politically-engaged artistic experience, but its enabling *fiction*, as well.

⁴¹⁹ *Aesthetic Theory*, 252.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, 191, 348. Rather than a work’s “vague timeliness,” as in much contemporary literary criticism (*ibid.*), the historical character of aesthetic experience for Adorno can be accessed only through the interpretation of artistic detail.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, 358, 27; Kaufman, “Negatively Capable Dialectics,” 382.

⁴²³ *Aesthetic Theory*, 191.

⁴²⁴ Kaufman, “Negatively Capable Dialectics,” 384.

Conclusion

Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, as I have argued, stands as a privileged limit case of the quasi-autonomy of aesthetic experience. A poetic heterocosm that "insist[s] fetishistically on [its] own coherence" as an autonomous fictional world, it also persistently refers to "what is itself not art" in historical reality, and Spenser's colonial environment in particular.⁴²⁵ The Legends of Justice and Courtesy mediate this tension by training readers in a wary boldness that, like Adorno's aesthetic reflection, eventuates less in a positive politics than in the refined critical judgment necessary, but not sufficient, for—and, in some ways, inimical to—collective action. A key task for a historically-informed formalist criticism of Renaissance literature, in turn, would be to elaborate the politically enabling and disabling aspects of the period's works, as they dialectically channel readerly energies inward and outward at the same time, in accordance with an Adornian understanding of the artwork's "double character." A self-exiled poet laureate writing from the margins of empire, Spenser, especially in his later writings, accommodates this focus in uniquely revealing fashion, both launching his readers' critical attention outward into the realm of action and arresting those same energies within the rich aestheticization of his Fairy legends.

Spenser's most hopeful representation of this proto-political aesthetic, marrying a vigorous social activism to the empowered critical reflection of readerly agency, occurs toward the end of Book I, in the House of Holiness. As the Red Cross Knight nears the completion of his spiritual recovery, he arrives atop the Mount of Contemplation, where he is granted a vision of the New Jerusalem. As in Revelation 21, it appears to Red Cross "a goodly Citty," in which "eternall peace and happinesse doth dwell" (x.55). Unlike in the biblical intertext, however, it bears an unmistakably *communal* aspect, as well: accommodately human in scale, the New Jerusalem is "empeopled" with angelic host that mingle "in gladsome companee," "As commonly as frend does with his frend" (56). This vision represents the sociability of the saints in eternity, but it's also an especially fitting climax to the canto since the House of Holiness predominates in images of collective life and acts of charity. When Red Cross subsequently remarks on the surpassing beauty of the New Jerusalem in comparison with the earthly city of Cleopolis (Fairyland's equivalent of London), Contemplation responds by emphasizing the similarities, rather than the differences, between them: "Yet is *Cleopolis* for earthly fame, / The fairest peece, that eie beholden can," he declares. Gloriana's knights should, therefore, continue to "doen their service to that soueraigne Dame" (59). The wise man thus analogizes the divine *gnosis* of the New Jerusalem, for which he himself stands, with the earthly *praxis* signified by Cleopolis, making the two realms continuous with one another.⁴²⁶

What Contemplation also stresses, however, is the indispensability of earthly labor, or "painefull pilgrimage" as such, to achieving salvation, and the canto's close provides the most fully integrated vision of this mediation. Having been assured of "a blessed end" (61), Red Cross sounds the overly hasty *contemptus mundi* theme he often does in moments of spiritual anxiety,

⁴²⁵ *Aesthetic Theory*, 228, 348. See also M.H. Abrams's discussion of "The Poem as Heterocosm" in *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 272-85.

⁴²⁶ Indeed, the "christall clene" and "glas" out of which the Fairy city is built make Cleopolis into something like a transparent windowpane or telescopic lens (58)—a perceptual medium of worldly activity through which one glimpses the radiant truths of eternity. As Berger once observed, "Glorytown, the capital of Faerie ... is both bright and transparent, allowing communication with a source of light beyond itself, though its own brightness first attracts the eye." See *Revisionary Play*, 85.

entreating his guide immediately to grant him the heavenly state of which he has just obtained a glimpse: "O let me not (quoth he) then turne againe / Back to the world, whose ioyes so fruitlesse are, / But let me heare for aie in peace remaine, / Or straight way on that last long voiage fare" (63).⁴²⁷ In response, Contemplation offers a firm *not yet*: "That may not be (said he) ne maist thou yitt / Forgoe that royal maides bequeathed care" (63), the quest to liberate Una's parents from the Satanic dragon who holds them captive. Contemplation here posits a *via media* between the millenarian urgency of Revelation and the endless deferrals of the romance quest—between, in the terms this study has developed, wariness and boldness. Accepting the burdens of historical experience and social engagement, Red Cross then returns to a point that Contemplation had elliptically raised earlier in his address: the knight's descent from "*Saxon kinges*" in "*Britans land*" (65). The guide responds by informing Red Cross that, in spite of his royal lineage, he was raised "in ploughmans state," having been discovered "in an heaped furrow" in Fairyland; his attachment to the land thus gives rise to his alternate name *Georgos*, or St. George (66). Spenser here puns on the Latin *versus*: as "line" or "row," the term refers in the Vergilian tradition both to agricultural "furrows" and to verses of poetry, particularly in the georgic mode. Red Cross's alter ego of St. George, England's legendary patron, thus emerges from both the tilled soil of earth as well as the very text we are presently reading, his identity fashioned through linguistically harmonizing the equal but opposed activities of vigorous material toil and contemplative artistic reflection.⁴²⁸

In the conclusion to I.x, Spenser therefore distinguishes between and also provisionally coordinates: 1) the heavenly and earthly perspectives signified by the New Jerusalem and Cleopolis, 2) the cognitive rhythms of apocalyptic and chivalric temporalities, and 3) the worldly labor and deliberative agency mutually implied by the georgic *versus*. The most concentrated epitome of such acts of synchronization, however, occurs in stanza 67, in a little-discussed passage that effectively concludes the House of Holiness narrative. Having discovered his fate, Red Cross now asks Contemplation how he might requite the spiritual illumination he has been granted:

This saide, adowne he looked to the grownd,
To haue returned, but dazed were his eyne,
Through passing brightnes, which did quite confound
His feeble sence, and too exceeding shyne.
So darke are earthly thinges compar'd to things diuine.

Throughout his colloquy with Contemplation, the knight has been standing atop a great mountain, in view of and connected (via pathway) to the even more elevated New Jerusalem, but in anticipation of Contemplation's reply he counter-intuitively glances *downward*, "to the

⁴²⁷ Compare this passage with the words of Despaire in the previous canto: "Then doe no further goe, no further stray, / But here ly downe, and to thy rest betake ..." (ix.44).

⁴²⁸ Spenser's pun on *versus/versi* as both textual and georgic labor, and his corollary self-presentation as poet-ploughman, occurs at a number of subsequent points in *The Faerie Queene*, as well. See, for example, the similes at III.xii.47, IV.v.46, and VI.ix.1, all of which are re-workings of a passage from the second book of Vergil's *Georgics*. For an extended reading of "the poet's self-vaunting georgic labor, as Spenser's structured verses become Latin *versi*, or 'furrows,'" see Herron, *Spenser's Irish Work*, 185-224. See also Jane Tylus, "Spenser, Virgil, and the Politics of Poetic Labor," *ELH* 55.1 (1988): 53-77.

grownd” from which he himself was once taken. Mysteriously irradiated, it is the earthly terrain on which he stands, rather than the heavenly city of “perle and precious stone” (55), that overwhelms his eyesight with “passing brightnes.” The concluding hexameter, however, once again confounds the stanza’s spatial logic, analogizing Red Cross’s “feeble sence” with the obscurity of “earthly thinges compar’d to things divine.” But the heavenly brilliance that momentarily blinds the knight comes *precisely* from “earthly thinges,” from “the grownd” that signifies his plowman ancestry. What Spenser dramatizes in this initially bewildering passage, then, is the absolute collapse of divine and worldly modes of vision—the achieved harmony of a consciousness that puts spiritual and secular, contemplative and active, and finally aesthetic and political perspectives in tune with one another.⁴²⁹ Having done so, Red Cross assimilates the “heavenly learning” in which he has been instructed (18), and proceeds to slay the dragon in the following canto. This culmination of Red Cross’s “celestial discipline” (*ibid.*) in turn becomes an idealized model of the “vertuous and gentle discipline” that Spenser’s reader himself undergoes in his critical engagement with *The Faerie Queene*.

But the concord that the poem here projects is always an extremely fragile thing, and necessarily transitory in its worldly realizations. If Red Cross is capable of achieving the cognitive and spiritual wholeness that characterizes this readerly discipline, then Spenser nevertheless remains skeptical of any merely human agent’s ability to harmonize these perspectives in the realm of historical contingency. The most radical manifestation of this suspicion occurs in “the episode that has long been felt to be definitive of the poetics of *The Faerie Queene*”: the dance of the Graces in Book VI, canto x.⁴³⁰ Calidore has here stumbled on the mystical materialization atop Mount Acidale that Spenser’s longtime alter ego, Colin Clout, instigates through his virtuoso musicianship. The “glorious gaze” to which Calidore silently bears witness (4), “Beholding all, yet of them vnspyde (11), is an elaborate and comprehensive aesthetic delight, a supernatural conjunction of cosmic song and dance.⁴³¹ Spenser compares it first to the material beauty of “a ring most richly well enchaced,” and then to the constellation Corona Borealis, which represents “the Crowne, which *Ariadne* wore” to her wedding with Theseus (12-3). The scene thus unites the “order excellent” of the heavens with that of manual artistry and workmanship (13), aesthetically linking contemplative vision with worldly activity.⁴³² In this respect, it corresponds closely with Red Cross’s visions with Contemplation, especially his

⁴²⁹ See Alpers’ related point about the end of the preceding canto, when Una snatches the knife away from Red Cross after his suicidal conversation with Despaire: the “heroic self-consciousness [of his earthly quest] is made compatible with—indeed, it directly produces—the Christian self-awareness to which Una appeals.” Nevertheless, Alpers believes (incorrectly, in my view) that the House of Holiness episode severs the two mentalities once again. See *The Poetry of “The Faerie Queene,”* 117.

⁴³⁰ Alpers, “Narration in *The Faerie Queene*,” *ELH* 44 (1977), 33. For generations of readers, the dance of the Graces has been viewed not only as the “core” episode of Book VI, but also the capstone of Spenser’s literary career. Hamilton and Frye, among others, see Spenser’s sudden introduction of his alter ego, Colin Clout, as a bravura culmination of the epic, “the poet intruding himself into the poem,” leaving readers with the satisfying sense that “he had done his work, and his vision was complete.” See Hamilton, *FQ*, 14; Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 87.

⁴³¹ Calidore spies Colin, “a Shepheard piping,” in the midst of “An hundred naked maidens lilly white, / All raunged in a ring, and dauncing in delight” (10-1); then, “in the midst of them / Three other Ladies [who] both daunce and sing”; and, finally, “in the midst of those same three, was placed / Another Damzell” (12).

⁴³² The Acidale scene thus offers what Berger regarded as the best opportunity in Spenser’s oeuvre to “see the luminous compression of [the poet’s] thought,” with its virtuosic harmonization of “the heavenly and imaginary dances, the physical and mental orders, the actual zodiac and the zodiac of the poet’s wit.” See *Revisionary Play*, 237.

glimpse of the divinely irradiated earth beneath his feet. It further recalls the earlier mountaintop sequence, moreover, in its remove from historical process and social circumstance, and in its projection of timeless presence. At two striking moments, Spenser abandons the indicative mood of his sequential narration and inserts an imperative: “Look how the Crowne, which *Ariadne* wore,” he first instructs, “Through the bright heauen doth her beams display” (13), and then addresses Colin’s playing to his the figure of his beloved by urging, “Pype iolly shepheard, pype thou now apace / Vnto thy loue ... / Thy loue is present there with thee in place, / Thy loue is there aduauunst to be another Grace” (15). These direct addresses to the reader, contemporaneously re-created with each imagined utterance, is what has always suggested the uniquely autonomous aesthetic of the Graces episode—the self-contained lyric immediacy that has long struck critics as Spenser’s idealized “spectacle of the poet creating,” and through which we hear “a poem talking about itself.”⁴³³ The insistently timeless and self-sufficient poetics of the scene thus becomes the vehicle of visionary reflection and critical insight, the means through which Spenser’s characters and readers alike gain privileged access to the virtue of courtesy in its divine and earthly manifestations.

What the episode also conveys, however, is that, without Calidore’s interruption of the vision, it does not appear that anything else *could ever happen* on Acidale. We are provided with no information about where Colin has come from, how long he has been piping, or for how much longer he means to play, and nothing in the sequence provides any indication that the singing and dancing would do anything other than merely persist as pure atemporal stasis, on into eternity. Indeed, as soon as Calidore—who has been “standing long astonished in spright, / And rapt with pleasaunce” for an indeterminate amount of time—moves to intervene, “resolving ... to know” more about the Graces and their singer, the vision immediately dissolves. Everyone besides Colin is “cleane ... gone, which way he neuer knew” (18), and apparently forever vanished. The whole sequence shows, as Alpers once remarked, a “moment of awareness and repose” that separates these qualities off from any particular “intended action in the world.” As a result, Spenser seems to question the relevance, at this climactic point in the poem, of what had always seemed “the foundational notion of *The Faerie Queene*”—that knight and poet alike should pursue “a life of active service to his monarch” as the culmination of their respective readerly activities.⁴³⁴ The sequence, in fact, bears a startling resemblance to Schiller’s theory of aesthetic experience, which we encountered in Chapter 2. The realm of aesthetic play, for Schiller and Spenser’s courteous agents, is the uniquely privileged space where human beings can realize cognitive and spiritual wholeness, achieving a state of psychic harmony unavailable to worldly, historically-determinate activity. But because such fulfillment is *merely* aesthetic—a realm of contemplative vision and *intellectual* labor—it must always be “nothing but form and empty potential,” surrendered “in practice with every determinate condition into which [a subject] does enter.”⁴³⁵ The Spenser of the Graces episode, like Schiller two centuries later, makes the attainment of aesthetic perception co-terminous with “a freedom from having to participate in history,” a freedom that not only enables but positively demands the abandonment of socio-political agency.⁴³⁶ If the model of artistically-derived critical thought gestured to on

⁴³³ Tonkin, *Spenser’s Courteous Pastoral*, 138, 142.

⁴³⁴ Alpers, “Spenser’s Late Pastorals,” *ELH* 56.4 (1989), 803–4, 810.

⁴³⁵ . *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 77, 147.

⁴³⁶ Goldsmith, *Unbuilding Jerusalem*, 8.

Mount Contemplation had idealistically integrated these spheres of experience, our reading of the scene on Mount Acidale seems to render them mutually exclusive in the realm of historical contingency.

It is between the contrary movements of wariness and boldness that *The Faerie Queene* ambiguously steers its course, with the one not only accompanying, but determining, the other, and “crowned by it as its necessary backlash.”⁴³⁷ The ambiguously proto-political aesthetic that I have examined throughout this study, informing Spenser’s poem and Renaissance literary culture more broadly, is finally detectable in what are traditionally taken to be the last lines of poetry that Spenser ever composed.⁴³⁸ In 1609, a full decade after his death and thirteen years after the publication of Books IV–VI, *Two Cantos of Mutabilitie* concluded the first folio edition of *The Faerie Queene*. Presented as cantos vi and vii of an unfinished Legend of Constancy, the new material also included two stanzas of an eighth, and “vnperfite,” canto. Reflecting on the momentous events of the preceding narrative, the trial for universal supremacy between Jove and Mutability, Spenser avers that the latter “beares the greatest sway” in earthly affairs, making him “loath this state of life so tickle, / And loue of things so vaine ...” (1). But this complaint then modulates into a direct prayer to God, as Spenser recollects the prophetic judgment that the trial’s supreme arbitress, Dame Nature, has just passed in favor of cosmic constancy. Anticipating the time to come when “all shall changed bee, / And from thenceforth, none no more change shall see” (vii.59), Spenser remarks:

Then gin I thinke on that which Nature sayd,
Of that same time when no more *Change* shall be,
But stedfast rest of all things firmly stayd
Vpon the pillours of Eternity,
That is contrayr to *Mutabilitie*:
For, all that moueth, doth in *Change* delight:
But thence-forth all shall rest eternally
With Him that is the God of Sabbaoth hight:
O that great Sabbaoth God, graunt me that Sabaoth’s sight.
(2)

With these verses, *The Faerie Queene* concludes, suspending readers on the brink between life and death, between an earthly existence impelled by social struggle and a heavenly salvation in the sight of “that great Sabbaoth God.”

As critics since the mid-eighteenth-century have observed, however, the stanza’s concluding couplet involves either an authorial confusion or, more likely, a deliberate pun. John Upton was the first, in 1751, to remark on the semantic difference between “Sab[b]aoth” and “Sabbath,” the first referring to “hosts or armies, as in Romans 9.29,” the second to the day of rest.⁴³⁹ Upton was troubled by what he took to be a printer’s mistake, and suggested that the final

⁴³⁷ Harpham, *Shadows of Ethics*, 3.

⁴³⁸ See F.J. Furnivall’s 1875 comments on VII.viii, where he credits an audience member at one of his lectures for the insight that “the latter stanza ... may well be, and most probably is, the last lines that Spenser wrote, on, or in view of, his sad deathbed ...” Quoted in *Variorum*, VI:315.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*

use of the word in line 9 should be amended to “Sabbath,” but subsequent generations of readers have since inferred that Spenser consciously conflates the two terms. What has been less commonly discussed, however, is the paradoxical conflation that results from Spenser’s yoking of the two concepts together in the neologism “Sabbaoth.” The plea for a vision of apocalyptic rest is, of course, suggested by the surrounding passage, as the poet envisions the end of secular history, the point past which “no more *Change* shall be,” when “all shall rest eternally.” In this respect, what Spenser seeks is the ultimate Sabbath, which is both universal salvation and a uniquely personal achievement of “his place of rest after the six days of creating the six books” of *The Faerie Queene*.⁴⁴⁰ These lines thus chime with the poem’s repeated expressions of longing for ease after toil, relaxed contemplation after vigorous labor, as in Red Cross’s swerving from his quest into Errour’s wood at the start of Book I to Calidore’s pastoral sojourn among the shepherds near the end of Book VI.⁴⁴¹ The psychic and physical release of pastoral *otium*, usually resisted as the temptation against which both Spenser and his martially purposive knights must guard, is finally transmuted into an identification with the sacred, or that which is “firmely stayd / Vpon the pillours of Eternity.”

But the allusion to “the God of Sabbaoth” points us in a very different direction. As Upton had observed, it refers to a verse in which Paul warns, “Except the Lord of hostes had left vs a seede, wee had bene made as Sodom, and had bene like to Gomorrha.” In the Geneva Bible, the “hostes” of the Sabaoth God are glossed as “Armies, by which worde the chieftest power that is, is giuen to God.” Spenser therefore seeks to incorporate himself not only into “the body of the redeemed,”⁴⁴² or into the strictly metaphorical army of the saints, but into something much closer to an *actual* army: the living might of the righteous, which asserts itself not only as a sign of divine efficacy in the abstract, but intervenes in “this state of life” on behalf of the godly. It is this historical and secular agency, as much as the “stedfast rest” of the apocalyptic Sabbath, of which Spenser seeks a vision at the end of the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, with the former a mark of the humanist impulse to alter public affairs, rather than to place one’s faith entirely in the next world. Such an agency also corresponds to the interventionist strain of Spenser’s epic in its attempt, once again, “to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline.” This is a poetry that seeks precisely to “moueth,” to impel its readers not only to *gnosis* and “well-knowing,” but also to *praxis* and “well-doing”; or, in Marx’s terms, it is a poetry that dimly glimpses the possibility of not merely interpreting the world, but changing it, as well. The transitive action that the work seeks to perform in the realm of historically-determinate political experience is therefore predicated on the possibility of “*Change*,” on the progressive improvement in human affairs that might, perhaps, hasten the fulfillment of millenarian hopes.

In the terms of this study, then, what Spenser’s pun on “Sabbaoth” conjoins are two models of aesthetic experience that are mutually dependent on one another, as well as mutually exclusive. On the one hand, his poetry, in this its culminating instantiation, becomes a function of the desire for a critical vision (a Sabbath “sight”) that is static, timeless, contemplative—one that dwells in readerly equipoise and “stedfast rest,” and anchors itself “firmely” in such

⁴⁴⁰ Hamilton, *FQ*, 712.

⁴⁴¹ Spenser articulates a similar desire for himself earlier in the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, when he digresses from the cosmic trial to speak of “hilles and woods,” rather than “warres and Knights,” temporarily “abat[ing] the sternenesse of [his] stile” to “mingle soft delights” (vi.37).

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*

redemptive *inaction*. On the other hand, the verses express the counterpoised desire to join themselves to the martial energies of the Lord of Hosts, a capacity for heroic mobilization in secular history. These lines, that is, constitute another expression of Spenser's attempt to instill in his readers the disposition of wary boldness that we have examined in the previous chapters. This attitude assumes that an empowered critical agency is the vital precondition for efficacious political action, but that the two conditions remain antithetical, as well. Just as the eternal rest of the Sabbath is incompatible with the same worldly activity that the Sabaoth God demands, so the potentially limitless mental labor of wary reading precludes the boldness of positive socio-political intervention. Spenser's poem therefore anticipates the "modern" conception of aesthetic experience at a critically-distanced, autonomous remove from the empirical reality it would reform, and makes of this remove both the enabling *and* disabling conditions of its extra-literary agency. If such a tension strikes us as hopelessly contradictory, we might at least imagine Spenser concurring with Adorno that the proto-political work of art, aiming at historical transformation from within the socially-restricted sphere of artistic experience, must nevertheless seek to do "something in which what is possible transcends its own impossibility."⁴⁴³

⁴⁴³ Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society" in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1:50.

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