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Spenser and the Troubled Theaters

HERE has never been a pure epic: as long as it has been a recognizable kind of literature, it has admitted other modes, genres, or literary forms to its canons of martial heroism. Pastoral and romance have played familiar parts in this story over the course of epic's westerly progress from Greece; by the time it reached England in earnest at the end of the sixteenth century, its arsenal had expanded to include the theater, with tragedians taking the stage in Sir Philip Sidney's *Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*¹ and Milton's Satan waiting in the wings. I deliberately use the word "theater" here, rather than "drama," to suggest that the epic reception of theater reflects more than a confrontation with dramatic poetry. It might be said that all literary forms are also social forms—think of epic's recruitment by imperial ambition, or the romance of the Accession Day tilts—but this is particularly true of theater, where questions of genre (comedy, tragedy) are bound up with the customs and institutions that support performance. It is under the double aspect of a formal structure and a changing cultural phenomenon that the theater enters Edmund Spenser's epic romance, *The Faerie Queene*. Spenser is fascinated with the formal problems posed by the stage, especially the passive or contemplative role imposed upon the spectator and its implications for theatrical didacticism. He repeatedly exploits the relationship between this detachment and the rigors of allegorical reading. At the same time these problems are bound up in his great poem with the history of the stage as it unfolded over the course of the century, from the overtly allegorical plays of the medieval inheritance and the schoolroom theater of the humanists to the Elizabethan obsession with the London playhouses. During his lifetime widespread acceptance of the idea of drama as

1. The tragic actor Clinias is a leader of the rebellion in Arcadia. Sir Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, ed. Maurice Evans (Harmondsworth, 1977), p. 387.

a didactic instrument was undercut by the flood of antitheatrical writing that followed the rise of the public theaters. This essay will examine two passages of *The Faerie Queene* that do the double work of engaging both the formal properties of theater and the matter of its transition, broadly sketched, from education to entertainment (or seduction). The first is Book II, where recurrent theatrical metaphor in the Amavia episode reveals an interest in older, moralized forms of drama, an emphasis transformed over the course of the book as Guyon works his way toward the alluring spectacle of the Bower of Bliss. The second is the story of Cambell and Triamond in Book IV, which portrays a tournament transformed from the ceremonial order of royal pageant to the debased atmosphere of the "troubled Theaters,"² then confronted by high allegory in the form of Cambina's chariot. A fairly doctrinaire antitheatricalism is often said to be at work in *The Faerie Queene* as a whole, and it would be foolish to deny that Spenser shared some of the prejudices, or convictions, of his Protestant countrymen in this respect. But what I hope these episodes will show is that he was equally suspicious of antitheatrical excess, and conscious of the affinities between criticism of the theater and his own, apparently conservative allegorical program. Taken in the richness of its demanding structure and its peculiar history, the theater becomes for Spenser both an object of commentary and a means of severe reflection on his own art.

While Spenser's concern with the public theaters has been little commented upon,³ an influential line of criticism has understood theatrical pageant, an older form, to be an important source of *The Faerie Queene's* allegory. In his *Observations on the Fairy Queen of Spenser* (1752), Thomas Warburton writes, "We should remember that, in this age allegory was applied as the subject and foundation of public shews and spectacles, which were exhibited with a magnificence superior to that of former times. . . . [Spenser's] peculiar mode of allegorizing seems to have been dictated by those spectacles, rather than by the fictions of Ariosto."⁴ A. Bartlett Giamatti takes up Warburton's reminder (and the suggestions of C. S. Lewis in *Spenser's Images of Life*⁵) when he argues that "pageantry

2. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Thomas P. Roche, Jr. (Harmondsworth, 1978), IV.iii.37. Subsequent citations to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

3. In "To Maske in Myrthe: Spenser's Theatrical Practices in *The Faerie Queene*," *The Emporia State Research Studies* 9 (1960), 1-45, Charles E. Walton promises to examine Spenser's acquaintance with "the London theatrical scene (1570-1590)" (p. 5), but his study confines itself to a survey of pageant and court masque. He does make the interesting observation that Lord Hunsdon, subject of one of *The Faerie Queene's* dedicatory sonnets, was patron of the Chamberlain's Men (p. 32).

4. Quoted in A. Bartlett Giamatti, *The Play of Double Senses* (New York, 1975), p. 78.

5. C. S. Lewis, *Spenser's Images of Life*, ed. Alastair Fowler (Cambridge, Eng., 1967), pp. 3-7.

is a language"⁶ much like allegory, in which the disposition of characters on a stage or in a processional order—usually, that is, in an almost emblematic tableau—constitutes an argument about the concepts they represent. The form's influence on *The Faerie Queene* is most visible in such scenes as the parade of sins issuing from the House of Pride in Book I or the Masque of Cupid in Book III, but a debt is evident in any number of other places. If we glance at the progress pageants staged for Elizabeth as an example of the cultural form,⁷ we will see how they characteristically fuse epideictic and didactic ambitions: the Queen is an exemplar who is being respectfully reminded of, and implicitly urged toward, her own virtues. This delicate operation is important for the other spectators as well. The promise of aristocratic pageant for its onlookers was a kind of didactic unity, an entertainment organized by a coherent lesson, an affirmation of shared beliefs. This sense of collective identity was equally important to civic pageants (such as the Lord Mayor's shows). The stability and conservatism of the form contributed to important social effects, as Angus Fletcher explains: "Prophecy, representing its vision in ceremonial pageant, can enforce a feeling of local topocosmic unity among a varied people, creating a court, a family, a city, a culture."⁸ This is to say that if pageant is a language, then the choice of language has a meaning prior to that of any of its sentences, one consistent with the epideictic character of *The Faerie Queene* as a whole. Like "continued allegory" itself, pageant carries the implication of an ordered or well-governed whole, which makes in turn a ready analogy to a disciplined state.⁹

II

Pitifull Spectacle

If theatrical pageant is pervasive in *The Faerie Queene*, it comes under special scrutiny in Book II. The first adventure to befall Guyon after he assumes Red Cross's heroic mantle—his encounter with the suicidal

6. Giamatti, p. 83.

7. For bibliography and a brief account of pageant's relation to Spenser's work, see David M. Bergeron, "Pageants," in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A. C. Hamilton et al. (Toronto, 1990), pp. 524–26.

8. Angus Fletcher, *The Prophetic Moment* (Chicago, 1971), p. 52.

9. Of course, as Angus Fletcher observes, allegory's implication of an ordered "cosmos" only increases its utility as an instrument of subversion: "We cannot then condemn allegory as an instrument of universal conformity, until we have admitted that it is also the chief weapon of satire." *Allegory* (Ithaca, 1964), p. 325.

Amavia—is conspicuously dense with the language of theater.¹⁰ Red Cross calls Guyon’s quest a “pageant” (II.i.33), and Amavia laments the gods’ cruel pleasure in “sad pageants of mens miseries” (II.i.36); the scene of her suicide is twice called a “Pitifull spectacle” (II.i.40), with overtones of Aristotelian pity and fear; and the whole episode is summarized as a “sad Tragedie” (II.ii.1). Other scraps of theatrical idiom tug the ear: “What . . . cursed hand hath plaid this cruell part” (II.i.44). At the same time Guyon and the narrator have frequent recourse to the language of emblem: the scene is called a “sad pourtraict / Of death and dolour” (II.i.39), and twice an “image” (II.i.44, 57). The juxtaposition points to the allegorical theater of the pageant, with its characteristic combination of the two modes. The question that this theater frames, for Guyon and for the reader, is how the knight should *approach* the scene, both physically and interpretively. It is important here to bear in mind that Book II more than any other follows the career of a single hero, in a way that evokes the narratives of growth and education in works like the *Cyropaedeia* or so many medieval romances.¹¹ This emphasis on individual *Bildung* defines such moments of decision both as tests of maturity and as pedagogical exercises. At moments Guyon speaks as though he understands what is before him to be an instructive tableau for which he must supply the maxim: “Ay me, deare Lady, which the image art / Of ruefull pitie, and impatient smart” (II.i.44). Amavia is an image or representation of suffering, not a sufferer; she “means” the impatience for death that is the Christian judgment on suicide. To draw a parallel less remote than it may at first seem, the interpretive situation resembles that of Queen Elizabeth encountering the spectacles that made up her coronation procession in 1558. The Queen moved from station to station of an allegorical pageant, confronted at each stop with a pregnant scene that solicited an acknowledgment of her understanding and agreement. At one such stop a boy was “appointed . . . to open the meaning of the said pageant”¹² just to make sure the point was clear. The author of the best account of the pageant, himself responsible for important examples of the genre, was Spenser’s old teacher Richard Mulcaster.¹³ Guyon has the schoolboy’s

10. Suzanne Wofford has observed this in her treatment of the scene in *The Choice of Achilles* (Stanford, 1992), pp. 246–53, a discussion to which this part of my essay is greatly indebted.

11. Chivalric romances were often both written and read as models for the education of the young aristocrat, as the historian Nicholas Orme observes in his study *From Childhood to Chivalry* (London, 1984), p. 72.

12. *The Quenes Maiesties Passage through the Citie of London to Westminster the Day before her Coronacion*, ed. James M. Osborn (New Haven, 1960), p. 34.

13. See Richard DeMolen, “Richard Mulcaster and Elizabethan Pageantry,” *Studies in English Literature* 14 (1974), 209–21. Mulcaster was responsible for the Merchant Taylors’ Company pag-

instinct to draw lessons that he could have learned in Mulcaster's classroom. Even as he speaks his words of wise detachment, however, he has already intervened to draw the knife from Amavia's breast, throwing himself into the still waters of the emblem and shivering its meaning.

Commenting on this passage, Suzanne Wofford sees Guyon's transgression as part of a larger pattern of action in *The Faerie Queene*: "Spectators in this poem seek to move from the position of distance to that of involvement—they almost all desire to step forward and cross the boundary of the 'stage,' to do precisely what an audience cannot do in a real theater and what an interpreter of a poem cannot do, that is, change the action to mitigate loss."¹⁴ Among her other examples are Calidore entering the clearing on Mount Acidale in Book VI and Guyon's destruction of the Bower of Bliss. Theatrical structure in such scenes (by which I mean here simply the boundary between play and audience) becomes in Book II the instrument of a complex investigation into the conditions of action itself, and the problem of balancing intervention against what may be learned, perhaps learned only, by an opposite stance of analytic detachment. The Amavia episode is laced with contradictory reflections on these problems: a deep and even theologically dangerous confusion about freedom and obligation affects both knight and lady, nowhere more clearly than in Amavia's overheard lament:

But if that carelesse heauens (quoth she) despise
 The doome of iust reuenge, and take delight
 To see sad pageants of mens miseries,
 As bound by them to liue in liues despight,
 Yet can they not warne death from wretched wight. (II.i.36)

Amavia imagines the gods as a passive audience of human suffering—not studious, but delightedly voyeuristic. Their pleasure is taken in contempt of the demands of justice, and moreover their power to intervene is uncertain, since although they have "bound" men to live by their laws against suicide they can do nothing to prevent death. Amavia's tragic tale makes her blasphemous protests understandable as a crisis of faith, but Guyon too seems to have lost his theological bearings. He reads Amavia as an image of "impatient smart," then asks, "What direfull chance, armd with reuenging fate, / Or cursed hand hath plaid this cruell part" (II.i.44). The relation between chance and fate is hardly clarified by arming one

erant when Sir Thomas Roe became Lord Mayor of London in 1568, and for aspects of the Lord Mayor's Pageant of 1561, among others.

14. Wofford, p. 247.

with the other, and the question of responsibility is muddied both by Guyon's strange power to forget (in the space of two lines) that in the first instance the cursed hand is her own, and by the possibility that it was anyhow simply playing a part, following a script. Both of the scene's audiences present important problems: the cruel and distant gods with their contempt for just revenge, and Guyon whose zeal to cross the line that the gods will not blinds him to basic facts about the situation, to say nothing of the larger structures of meaning and cosmic order in which it might participate.

Guyon pleads with Amavia to "Let one word fall that may your grieffe unfold" (II.i.46), words that recall Arthur's attempts to console the swooning Una in Book I: "let me you intrete, / For to vnfold the anguish of your hart" (I.vii.40). Repeated parallels in language and action make it clear that the two episodes should be read against one another,¹⁵ and as ever, this comparison reveals some significant differences. Arthur engages Una in something like a therapeutic dialogue by means of which he can "disclose the breach" (I.vii.42) that has turned her against herself. Guyon wants to know "What . . . cursed hand" has done the deed and assures Amavia, "Speake, O deare Lady speake: help neuer comes too late" (II.i.44). His principal interest, in contrast with Arthur's desire to heal, is the remedy of revenge. In his haste for vengeance it becomes unclear whether the "image . . . Of ruefull pitie, and impatient smart" (II.i.44) is a lesson about suicide or a reflection of his own anguish in confronting the challenge that Amavia's suffering poses to him as a knight. For just as Mortdant set the episode's tragic events in motion when he left his pregnant lady "his puissant force to proue" (II.i.50), Guyon needs to prove his identity to himself by *acting* in a knightly manner. The claim that "help neuer comes too late" is a desperate assertion of his own puissant force in the face of circumstances that are beyond his control—an intolerable admission for a knight bound by his code to render help to damsels in distress.

The rest of Book II (and indeed *The Faerie Queene* generally) is ambivalent (to say the least) about action.¹⁶ Intervention either fails outright, as

15. For example, Una's triple faint (I.vii.24) is repeated in Amavia's "thrise she sunke againe" (II.i.46)—indeed overgone, since Amavia swoons four times in total. Verbal parallels include the rewriting of (I.vii.40) as (II.i.46), stanzas ending respectively with the lines "Found neuer helpe, who neuer would his hurts impart" and "He oft finds present helpe, who does his grieffe impart."

16. Nor is this simply a critique of the imperatives of chivalry: it was a commonplace of sixteenth-century educational theory that virtuous action was the proper end of all study, indeed of all reading. Spenser probably believed something like this himself, but he was sensitive to the ways in which the call to action could be used to foreclose understanding, and how difficult and complex the relation of interpretation to act can be. On reading, see Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine,

with the attempts to rescue Amavia and cleanse Ruddymane's bloody hands, or it achieves the ambiguous success of the destruction of the Bower of Bliss. Deliberate passivity, Guyon's abandonment of Pyrocles to his fate or his restraint in Mammon's cave, has a similarly mixed record: it is clearly not enough just to keep one's seat in the theater of events. Still, it seems that the Amavia episode at least argues the importance of deferring action, not as a member of the audience of cruel gods but as a student of a complicated and delicate situation. If some kind of didactic theater is envisioned here, what could be the value of its lessons? A theater of allegory might be understood to provide its spectators with *sententiae* to be translated out of the spectacle and then applied to ordinary life. The immediate role of the spectator would be to listen carefully and get it all down; he stands to learn the lessons that will help him lead a moral life, and that bind a moral society. Among such lessons the danger of "impatient smart" is not a bad one to keep in mind, although again the subsequent narrative will raise the question whether education *by* passive moral-drawing is not education *to* passivity. Still, the experience of tragedy—and that is what the Amavia episode seems to be, a "sad Tragedie" (II.ii.1)—strains the boundaries of such a deliberate program. In writing about the most harrowing of Renaissance tragedies, *King Lear*, Stanley Cavell offers an alternative account of the genre's force: he claims that acknowledging the absoluteness of our detachment from tragic action purges us of the false impulse to help where we cannot help, to understand what we cannot understand. Our anguished questions about whether or when to intervene in the thousand real-world tragedies always before us are a kind of shelter from full recognition of those tragedies. "But if I do nothing because there is nothing to do [a helplessness enforced by theater], where that means that I have given over the time and space in which action is mine and consequently that I am in awe before the fact that I cannot do and suffer what is another's to do and suffer, then I confirm the final fact of our separateness. And that is the unity of our condition."¹⁷ Cavell's is not obviously a Renaissance conception of tragedy. In its original setting (a book of mostly philosophical essays called *Must We Mean What We Say*¹⁸) his argument seems to owe its greatest debt to the neutrality of the ordinary language philosopher, who

"'Studied for Action': How Harvey Read his Lily," *Past and Present* 129.4 (1990), 30–78, and Eugene Kintgen, *Reading in Tudor England* (Pittsburgh, 1996).

17. Stanley Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love," in *Disowning Knowledge* (Cambridge, Eng., 1987), p. 110.

18. Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say* (New York: 1969).

must recognize strict limits to his activity, limits that have important (if often unstated) moral implications: in Wittgenstein's words, "don't think, look!"¹⁹ It is nevertheless an unmistakably Spenserian problem that Cavell takes up, one that in the terms of *The Faerie Queene* becomes the way that chivalry's reflexive call to action can serve as a moral evasion, allowing us to escape the full burden of tragedy because we never have to acknowledge our own helplessness. Recall again Guyon's "help neuer comes too late" (II.i.44). Arthur saves Una by a scrupulous dialectical probing of her sorrow, promising only that no one ever "Found . . . helpe, who neuer would his hurts impart" (I.vii.40). His recognition of her otherness, the difficulty of knowing her pain, is the beginning of the cure he offers. Guyon's peremptory action and his conviction that help never comes too late not only cost him whatever moral may be legible in the spectacle of Amavia's death, but shelter him from the self-knowledge that only tragedy can confer, and from the larger problems of action, freedom, and piety framed by the notional stage that he so impetuously violates.

Before going further into Book II, where other theaters await, it is important to return to the idea of a didactic theater more generally. The "spectacle" of Amavia invokes the instructive power of pageant, albeit with some ambivalence; it also suggests the possibility of a tragic knowledge (claimed for the genre by Sidney, among others, as we will see). But drama at the time had an important role in the schools as well. Jonas Barish observes that early in the sixteenth century "the stage served chiefly as an adjunct to pedagogy . . . [and] it was possible for fierce Protestants like John Bale and John Foxe themselves to write plays and destine them for performance."²⁰ One of Richard Mulcaster's former students, Sir James Whitelocke, records that drama was an important part of the curriculum at Merchant Taylors': "I was brought up at school under Mr. Mulcaster, in the famous school of the Marchanttaylors in London, wher I continued untill I was well instructed in the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin tonges. His care was also to encreas my skill in musique, in whiche I was brought up by dayly exercise in it, as in singing and playing upon instruments, and yeerly he presented sum playes to the court, in whiche his scholers wear only actors, and I on among them, and by that meanes taughte them good behaviour and audacity."²¹ The

19. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York, 1968), § 66.

20. Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley, 1981), p. 82.

21. Whitelocke, *Liber Familiaris*, quoted in Richard Mulcaster, *Positions Concerning the Training Up of Children*, ed. William Barker (Toronto, 1994), p. lxiv.

pedagogical function of the drama as Whitelocke describes it is quite different from the uses of theater in the Amavia episode. The boys in Mulcaster's classroom were taking parts, an exercise in *imitatio* that shares a rationale with their conning of Ciceronian style or even secretary's hand. They were on the other side of the stage's boundary from the audience where Guyon is crucially placed. Nonetheless the fact that plays were sanctioned in schools when Spenser was a boy made the theater more available for the educational role with which he experiments at the beginning of Book II. Of course by the time the adult Spenser was writing *The Faerie Queene*, the place of drama in English life was being redefined by the rise of the public theaters. Something of that change is apparent even in the title of Stephen Gosson's famous antitheatrical tract of 1579, *The Schoole of Abuse*: having long been a tool of the schoolmaster, the theater had become, in the eyes of many, his rival. In following Guyon's career of errancy, Book II describes something like this historical shift. For if, as I have argued, the first two cantos invoke a conservative, didactic theater where Guyon must wrestle with maxim and action, by canto xii descriptions of the theater to which he is exposed sound like what Spenser's contemporaries were railing against in London. On his Odyssean journey to the Bower of Bliss the knight passes the "calmy bay" of a quintet of mermaids, that "did like an halfe Theatre fulfill: / There those fiue sisters had continuall trade, / And vsd to bath themselues in that deceitfull shade" (II.xii.30). Sirens were commonly invoked in anti-theatrical literature and here they are apparently figures for the sensuous temptations deplored by a Gosson or a John Rainolds or a William Prynne (perhaps they are commercial temptations as well, given their "continuall trade"). The Bower itself is the culmination of the book's series of spectacles, the place where we can see with greatest clarity how the original problem of viewing and involvement is being transformed.

Guyon's passivity through the middle of the book suggests that he has taken from the first two cantos only the lesson of noninvolvement. Perhaps this is the danger of any pedagogical mode that emphasizes detachment and analysis, the danger, that is, of allegory.²² From a structural

22. In "The Faerie Queene, Book II and the Limitations of Temperance," *Modern Language Studies* 17:4 (1987), 9–22, Lauren Silberman describes how the obtrusiveness of allegory in Book II (especially Alma's Castle), and the awkwardness of the calculus of temperance it often embodies, calls the mode itself and the analytic detachment of its interpreters into question. She sees Spenser constructing "a coherent poetic strategy of discrediting Classical Temperance as a moral standard in order to put in question the actual relationship between ethical principle and moral action and to examine allegory itself as a methodology" (p. 9).

point of view Spenser is interested in the tendency of theater to concretize this problem, to create confusion or anguish about (or, perhaps worse, unthinking respect for) its formal boundaries. As we have begun to see, it is often difficult to construe moments when characters in *The Faerie Queene* break an apparently theatrical limit as a “move from the position of distance to that of involvement,” in Wofford’s words, or as a gesture of moral responsibility. In canto xii Guyon seeks simply to wreck the spectacle of the Bower, and it is arguable that Calidore too breaks into the dance of the Graces half-knowing that his transgression will dispel the vision. This is something like the evasion of the power of tragedy, or of theater more generally, that Cavell describes; for the impulse is destructive, a pulling down of the frame to protect oneself against an intolerable challenge. Indeed, Guyon’s rage begs consideration as a species of *antitheatricalism*, a stance that will come under a scrutiny at least as serious as that accorded the work’s changing representations of theater.

Guyon never fails to be tempted by the allurements of canto xii, and is always on the verge of crossing over from studious disdain to sensual abandon. This potential transgression is so important to Book II because it erodes the implicit boundary between audience and players that underwrites the analytic categories of temperance itself, insofar as the moral guideposts of excess and deficiency that structure the allegory require a measure of detachment to discern. Everything about the Bower works to blur our sense of such analytic distinctions: the works of art and nature cannot be told apart; the presiding figure is Acrasia, whose Greek etymology gives us “bad mixture”; Verdant’s fate, “O horrible enchantment, that him so did blend” (II.xii.80), identifies blending and blinding. It is a spectacle of the dissolution of the binary moral system of Book II. The tragic theater’s lesson of respect for the limits of individual agency is nowhere to be found when Guyon tears this spectacle down: he has forsaken the whole problem of involvement for the peremptory destruction of a landscape that once again threatens, now by the very efficacy of its temptations, his identity as a knight. His “rigour pittlesse” (II.xii.83) combines the violent excesses of moral panic with the folly of a spectator of life whose intermittent attempts at action betray an unpracticed, even infantile absolutism. And of course it is the theater of sirens that prompts this conspicuous overreaction, a seductive arena in which the distance between player and audience becomes part of the titillation, the spectator not only passive but savoring his passivity. This movement of Book II from pageant to the sirens suggests an historical argument about theatrical decadence, although the older forms come in for their share of skepti-

cism—it might be more accurate to say that *The Faerie Queene* shows an awareness that the tendency to deplore such degeneration, coupled with nostalgia, is a common prop of the antitheatrical temperament. At any rate it should be clear that Guyon's violence has a marked antitheatrical character, something like the luxurious satire of *Histriomastix* or its hysterical cousins, and accordingly that the antitheatrical impulse falls under the same suspicion as the tempest of the knight's wrathfulness.

If the strict didacticism of pageant risks teaching passivity, and the public theaters seduce, it is not clear what good Spenser thinks theater can do (at least as a social institution: as a system of tropes, a frame for moral argument, it is of great use to him). It will be important in turning to Book IV to keep in mind that such skepticism is not necessarily the same thing as the attitude I have been describing as antitheatrical. But there is still the question of tragedy itself, which does seem to hold out the promise of an antidote to Guyon's blind interventions, even if he refuses to recognize it. The Spenserian corpus includes works in the medieval *de casibus* tragic tradition, for example the *Tears of the Muses*, and Patrick Cheney argues that Spenser followed Chaucer "in relocating dramatic tragedy within the lyric genre of the complaint."²³ Spenser seems at any rate to have been skeptical about the claim of what Sidney calls "the high and excellent Tragedy"²⁴ to the exalted position in the hierarchy of genres accorded it by most theorists of the time. Cuddie's famous outburst in the *October* eclogue about rearing "the Muse on stately stage" to "teache her tread aloft in buskin fine"²⁵ is easily read as a parody of the tragic impulse. Still more directly critical of stage tragedy is the portrayal of Ease, who introduces the Masque of Cupid in Book III bearing a laurel branch and "Yclad in costly garments, fit for tragicke Stage" (III.xii.3):

Proceeding to the midst, he still did stand,
As if in mind he somewhat had to say,
And to the vulgar beckning with his hand,
In signe of silence, as to heare a play,
By liuely actions he gan bewray
Some argument of matter passioned (III.xii.4)

23. Patrick Cheney, "Compassing the Weighty Prize: The Rival Poetics of Spenser and Marlowe." MLA Convention, December 27, 1994. See also Cheney's discussion of the "October" eclogue in *Marlowe's Counterfeit Profession* (Toronto, 1997), pp. 61–64 and 134.

24. Sir Philip Sidney, *Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford, 1989), p. 230.

25. Edmund Spenser, *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. William Oram et al. (New Haven, 1989), pp. 175–76.

Ease promises to say something, but when he has beckoned the vulgar near he has nothing to offer save passionate actions: a detached observer such as Britomart or the reader will wonder if the problem is not the "vacant head"²⁶ that Cuddie praises. No thinking—no "representation of whatsoever is most worthy to be learned,"²⁷ as Sidney puts it—just the promise of the ease of sitting back to watch the show. Ease's claim to the laurels he bears only becomes more tenuous as his grotesque (and wordless) spectacle unfolds. Where does such skepticism about tragedy come from? The emphasis on appeal to the vulgar offers a clue. Tragedy is morally useful to Spenser for its power to confront us with our true helplessness and isolation, the denial of which we sustain only by willful blindness and thoughtless action. But there is nothing in this idea of tragedy that links it necessarily to the stage. Indeed, tragedy for Spenser is tainted by the circumstances of its performance, circumstances that clearly suggest public theaters: if Cheney is right that the poet recreates tragedy as a lyric form, this is precisely to protect it from the contaminations of the theater.

III

The Troubled Theaters

The movement from pageant to public theater that takes twelve cantos in Book II is collapsed into a single episode of Book IV, the tournament between Cambell and the brothers Pri-, Di- and Triamond for the hand of Canacee. The strict ceremonial order of the contest establishes its credentials as a pageant from the outset. Elizabethan tournament in general had an important theatrical dimension, conspicuous, for example, in Sidney's description of the Iberian tournament in *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, itself patterned on Elizabeth's highly literary Accession Day tilts.²⁸ In Spenser's tournament there is even a stage, although it is Canacee herself who sits upon it:

Fayre *Canacee* vpon a stately stage
 Was set, to see the fortune of that fray,
 And to be seene, as his most worthie wage,
 That could her purchase with his liues aduentur'd gage. (IV.iii.4)

26. *Yale Shorter Poems*, p. 175.

27. *Sir Philip Sidney*, p. 230.

28. Frances Yates draws the parallel in her essay "Elizabethan Chivalry: The Romance of the Accession Day Tilts," in *Astraea* (London, 1985), pp. 88–94.

Her position sorts well with the masque-like quality of the event: at such royal entertainments the Queen was more the center of attention than the show itself, and Canacee's is after all a *stately* stage. Stephen Orgel reminds us that "At these performances [*Gorboduc* and *The Arraignment of Paris*] what the rest of the spectators watched was not a play but the queen at a play, and their response would have been not simply to the drama, but to the relationship between the drama and its primary audience, the royal spectator."²⁹ The authority of this position may be undermined even as it is proclaimed, for Canacee is subject to the knights' "purchase"; but still she serves to organize the scene, to suggest an order and a proper end to what will ensue. The meaning of the tournament is anchored by the reassuring univocality that pageant implies.

The question of just what this ceremonial structure must restrain is extremely complicated, and takes us back to the origin of the story that Spenser is telling. The episode's major source is Chaucer's incomplete *Squire's Tale*, which *The Faerie Queene's* narrator promises to bring to its conclusion. The end of that tale, he claims, has been lost:

But wicked Time that all good thoughts doth waste,
And workes of noblest wits to nought out weare,
That famous monument hath quite defaste,
And robd the world of threasure endlesse deare. (IV.ii.33)

By contrast, many modern readers of the *Squire's Tale* have tended to see it as a deliberately unfinished parody of romance, digressive, self-absorbed, and potentially unending.³⁰ It breaks off just as the Squire is most exuberantly contemptuous of his promise to come quickly to the "knotte"³¹ of his tale: he forecasts a welter of new complications, including the famous shadow of an incest plot that seems to figure the turning inward of the narrative itself. The Franklin's polite response (assigned to the Merchant in the edition Spenser likely used³²) could be read as a deft

29. Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power* (Berkeley, 1975), p. 9.

30. Patrick Cheney offers a brief summary of such responses in his article, "Spenser's Completion of *The Squire's Tale*: Love, Magic, and Heroic Action in the Legend of Cambell and Triamond," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 15:2 (1985), 139–40.

31. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson et al. (Boston, 1987), p. 174 (l. 401). Subsequent citations to this edition will be given by line number in parentheses in the text.

32. A. Kent Hicatt argues that Spenser's Chaucer was one of the editions published by William Thynne, most likely that of 1561; see his *Chaucer, Spenser, Milton: Mythopoetic Continuities and Transformations* (Montreal, 1975), pp. 19–25. Thynne's 1561 edition includes a note following *The Squire's Tale* that might have set Spenser thinking: "There can be founde no more of this foresaid tale, whiche hath ben sought in divers places." *The Workes of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1561), fol. 27v.

intervention to spare the other pilgrims what Spenser perhaps wryly calls a “treasure *endlesse* deare” [italics mine]. Whatever the narrator’s protests, *The Faerie Queene* seems to take seriously the idea that the *Squire’s Tale* is pointedly incomplete—that its abrupt ending signals a critique of its own directionlessness. Spenser himself is a master of suggestive ellipses and dropped threads, and as Jonathan Goldberg³³ and others have argued, it is only reasonable to expect him to respond to such a strategy in his English Vergil.

The narrator promises a resolution to this romance dilation through a turn to epic, the original “warlike numbers and Heroicke stound” (IV.ii.32) that have been lost only by historical accident. The pageant of the tournament is a way of restoring a clear structure to materials that so conspicuously lack it, pointing toward the closure of a victory at arms in full view of a ratifying audience. But it is not the dilation of the *Squire’s Tale* alone that is subject to this discipline. Spenser’s version of the story begins with a nearly verbatim echo of another Canterbury tale, the Knight’s: “Whylome as antique stories tellen vs” (IV.ii.32).³⁴ The combat that follows in fact owes more to the pointless struggle of diminishing differences between Palamon and Arcite than to anything in the *Squire’s Tale*. Hence Spenser implicitly takes on the challenge of resolving the *Knight’s Tale* as well, a narrative whose dark and half-rationalized conclusion is as unsatisfactory in its own way as the Squire’s sudden silencing. To recognize this is to see that tragedy too is at stake in this retelling, freighting the theater of the tournament as gravely, if not as obviously, as the pageant of Amavia’s suffering.

Ceremonial order is no sooner established, of course, than it disintegrates. The combat between Cambell and the brothers is the longest and most grotesquely resourceful of the poem, full of torn weasand pipes and headless trunks. The stanzas move from epic simile to epic simile as though the battle were refreshed by a periodic dipping into the bloody well of the *Iliad*, just as the brothers are renewed by the transfusion of souls or Cambell by his magic ring. Canacee is quickly out of focus altogether: from the figure on the stately stage she becomes, in a remarkable simile, the “beasts fresh spoyle” (IV.iii.16) contested by two raging and indistinguishable tigers. “Smart daunts not mighty harts, but makes them more to swell” (IV.iii.8), observes the narrator: pain itself becomes an incentive, and the economy of injury is entirely self-sustaining. Com-

33. Jonathan Goldberg, *Endlesse Worke* (Baltimore, 1981), pp. 31–72.

34. Chaucer’s line is “Whilom, as olde stories tellen us”: *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 37 (l. 859).

parison to “the tide that comes from th’Ocean mayne” (IV.iii.27) lends the force of natural cycle to the endless strife. In its exhausting pointlessness, in fact, the tournament—now just a bloody back-and-forth—becomes another version of the aimless dilation of the *Squire’s Tale*. It is fully self-sufficient, closed off to the rest of the world, its original purpose or value entirely forgotten. If the point of Spenser’s rewriting was to resolve this tendency in the Squire’s romance by translating it into the decisive generic language of epic, the strategy seems to fail badly. Nothing about the battle suggests that we will ever come to the “knotte.”

Moreover, the audience descends to the level of this degenerating spectacle. An early reminder that we should continue to regard the fight as a kind of theater comes when the narrator tells us that the exchange of blows “fild the lookers on attonce with ruth and wonder” (IV.iii.15). “Ruth and wonder” seems to be another Spenserian version of the Aristotelian tragic formula “pity and fear,” translated variously in the Renaissance (Sidney’s version in the *Defense* is “admiration and commiseration”³⁵). But here neither of the models of spectatorship described earlier seems to apply: there is no allegorical lesson to abstract, and no evidence of any tragic confrontation with the limits of our capacity for intervention. Nor does it seem that a cathartic purgation is taking place.³⁶ The onlookers are “amaz’d” by the “piteous spectacle” (IV.iii.21) or “filled . . . with ruffull tine” (IV.iii.37), but never moved to respond in anything like a critical way: they are simply passive connoisseurs of the escalating violence. This is made all the more ridiculous by the fact that everyone present knows the power of Cambell’s magic ring. The whole exercise is empty, its end already fixed: stripped of any decisive power, the combat is pointless and self-contained, a kind of violent idyll.³⁷ Some of the desperate will to wrestle with fate that Agape shows in her underworld journey

35. *Sir Philip Sidney*, p. 230. In his entry on “tragedy” in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, Donald Stump notes Spenser’s “frequent use and reformulation of Aristotle’s phrase ‘pity and fear’ for the emotions aroused by the genre”: *Spenser Encyclopedia*, p. 697.

36. The idea of catharsis as a kind of self-purging through vicarious experience of dangerous emotions—a dubious reading of the *Poetics*, but a common one—was familiar among Italian theorists, but evidence for its reception in England is scantier. Certainly many of the theater’s staunchest defenders, like Thomas Heywood in his *Apology for Actors* (1612), never avail themselves of the doctrine’s resources. See Stephen Orgel, “Shakespeare and the Kinds of Drama,” *Critical Inquiry* 6:1 (1979), 107–23.

37. It might be argued that the victory of Cambell would provide some kind of closure to the episode, but if we understand the purpose of the tournament to be the marriage of Canacee, then this would be a non-ending haunted again by the specter of the inward turn of incest. John Fyler writes interestingly about the association between incest and romance in “Domesticating the Exotic in ‘The Squire’s Tale,’” *ELH* 55.1 (1988), 1–26.

persists in the quixotic determination of her sons, but the narrator himself seems to be entirely resigned. "O why doe wretched men so much desire, / To draw their dayes vnto the vtmost date" (IV.iii.1), he asks rhetorically at the beginning of the canto, and sure enough, attrition brings the weary combatants to the same sense of meaninglessness: "So wearie both of fighting had their fill, / That life it selfe seemd loathsome, and long safetie ill" (IV.iii.36).

This is a situation that can only be broken by a force from outside, which is exactly what happens with the unexpected arrival of Cambina's chariot. This sudden tableau—the ornate chariot drawn by two lions, Cambina with rod in her right hand, cup in her left—sweeps in from the world of high allegory. Thomas Roche accompanies his reading of the episode in *The Kindly Flame* with reproductions of a few emblems that illuminate some of its iconographic and mythographic origins.³⁸ Many of the most persuasive modern interpretations of the episode follow this cue, isolating and identifying aspects of its composition according to a strict allegorical scheme, with an eye toward understanding its bearing on Book IV's cardinal virtue. James Nohrnberg sees an allegory of the formation of friendship, and the "death of self-attachment that is represented by the prolonged combat."³⁹ David Pichaske describes a double allegory in which the "love of kin" represented by the story of the brothers is transcended by the arrival of the chariot and the synthesis of fraternal and romantic love.⁴⁰ Patrick Cheney offers the most sophisticated account in this line, arguing that Spenser finds in the *Squire's Tale* "a conventional *mythos* featuring three modes of action central to the genre of romance: love, magic and chivalric heroism" by which he can create "a powerful Neoplatonic allegory in which love becomes the true magical form of action in the universe."⁴¹ The elements of agape, magic and violence would seem to demand no less sweeping an explanation, and I do not intend here to try to improve upon or to challenge these accounts. But I do want to bear in mind that Spenser's meaning—we might say his teaching—is larger than his allegory, at least when we consider allegory in the narrower, generic sense implicit in the readings I have just sketched.⁴²

38. Thomas Roche, *The Kindly Flame* (Princeton, 1964), pp. 24–25.

39. James Nohrnberg, *The Analogy of "The Faerie Queene"* (Princeton, 1976), p. 623.

40. David R. Pichaske, "The Faerie Queene IV.ii and iii: Spenser on the Genesis of Friendship," *Studies in English Literature* 17.1 (1977), 81–93.

41. Cheney, "Spenser's Completion," pp. 137, 138.

42. Maureen Quilligan opposes her generic understanding of allegory to Angus Fletcher's expansive account in her book *The Language of Allegory* (Ithaca, 1979), p. 14. Fletcher's modal approach will find allegory at work throughout *Paradise Lost*; a generic account would emphasize the passages featuring the characters Sin and Death. Both of course are useful for different purposes.

Alongside these allegories of friendship the poem develops a critical frame for understanding how they are received, whether understood, misunderstood, or ignored. The reader of the allegory narrowly construed becomes himself a subject of concern, and I want to argue that in this instance the ongoing theatrical metaphor is Spenser's principal instrument for bringing the interpreter under the scrutiny of the work. The weight and ultimate meaning of the episode as allegory will depend on a reckoning with these considerations.

So we come finally to the "troubled Theaters" themselves:

All suddenly they heard a troublous noyes,
That seemd some perilous tumult to desine,
Confusd with womens cries, and shouts of boyes,
Such as the troubled Theaters oftimes annoyes. (IV.iii.37)

As I have already suggested, these must be the public theaters of London that Spenser has in mind: noise, tumult, the presence of morally vulnerable spectators (especially women and youths) were common features of the age's complaint against the new form.⁴³ Spenser's own familiar contempt for the masses makes itself felt when he surveys their reaction to the violent onrush of the chariot: "thorough rude confusion of the rout, / Some fearing shriekt, some being harmed hould, / Some laught for sport, some did for wonder shout" (IV.iii.41).⁴⁴ Chaucer's Squire gives us a literary source for some of this scorn when he describes the commoners who gather to marvel at the magic gifts:

Of sondry doutes thus they jangle and trete,
As lewed peple demeth comunly
Of thynges that been maad moore subtilly
Than they kan in hir lewednesse comprehende (220–23)

43. Instances of similar rhetoric are easy enough to find in the period. In his collection of references to playgoing in *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, Andrew Gurr quotes these lines from Spenser alongside such slights as this from John Davies: "For as we see at all the play house dores, / When ended is the play, the daunce, and song, / A thousand townesmen, gentlemen, and whores, / Porters and serving-men together throng, / So thoughts of drinking, thriving, wenching, war, / And borrowing money, raging in his minde." *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* (Cambridge, Eng., 1987), p. 209.

44. Compare in Spenser the crowd assembled around the giant in Book V or the rout at Alma's castle in Book II. But see also the striking mixture of scorn and tenderness in his description of the crowds that gather around the fallen dragon in I.xii. Another interesting comparison is with the Arcadian rebels whose contradictory reactions earn Sidney's contempt in *The Old Arcadia*. When he revises the work, he introduces the tragic actor Clinias (mentioned in fn. 1 above) as a spokesman for the group. See *The Old Arcadia*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford, 1985), pp. 115–16, and *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, p. 387.

Spenser's rout is equally uncomprehending, but his account takes on the distinctive coloring of antitheatricalism, which so readily turns its animus from stage to audience. The scene has been transformed from the masque-like beginning of the tournament, with its didactic promise and clear forms of order, to an "vnruly preace" (IV.iii.41) of people who know no better than to throng about the chariot, just as they gawked at the spectacle of the combat. They mistake the end of the spectacle for its culmination.⁴⁵ The surprising, even shocking violence of Cambina's arrival—her chariot "Great heapes of them, like sheepe in narrow fold, / For hast did ouer-runne, in dust enrould" (IV.iii.41)—can be folded into the allegory: Peter Hawkins suggests that it "draws our attention to the wildness of nature that can never be tamed, and perhaps also to the violence that is built into civilization itself."⁴⁶ But its jarring force and mercilessness toward spectators who have been watching, after all, only what we as readers have seen, suggest that this abrupt and violent change of mode is meant to administer a stiff rebuke to anyone who has been absorbed in the combat's pointless bloodshed. Cambina makes us conscious that the theater we have watched with such "ruth and wonder" is a narcotic for our moral and analytic faculties. Our reading has been no different from the basest playgoing. The substitute she offers is high allegory itself: one gets the sense that for a dazed spectator to step back, reflect, and produce an account of the total meaning like those offered by Roche, Pichaske, Nohrnberg, or Cheney would be exactly the remedy she recommends.

Cambina's iconography is drawn substantially from representations of Cybele, the *magna mater* whose role in the *Aeneid* and the subsequent mythographic tradition links her to Rome and to the foundations of civic order generally. In his study of the goddess Peter Hawkins writes that "it is easy to see Cybele within Cambina, serving as an allegorical counterforce to all that Ate represents throughout Book IV: 'Great cities ransackt, and strong castles rast' (IV.i.21)."⁴⁷ Within *The Faerie Queene* it is in turn easy enough to associate her with Gloriana and the poem's complex of doubles for Elizabeth.⁴⁸ In this light, the intervention of the chariot,

45. There is point even to this apparent folly: the dramatic pitch and pictorial vividness of much antitheatrical rhetoric could amount to a kind of theatricalism, and this instance—complete with a chariot straight out of *Tamburlaine*—seems particularly stageworthy.

46. Peter S. Hawkins, "From Mythography to Myth-making: Spenser and the Magna Mater Cybele," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 12.3 (1981), 61.

47. Hawkins, p. 60.

48. "Cybele, the *Magna Mater* of imperial Rome, is one of *The Faerie Queene's* most ubiquitous

breaking up the troubled theaters, carries the charge of royal efforts to assert greater control over the London stage. Although in reality Elizabeth concerned herself very little with such matters, and the Privy Council often protected the theaters from the London magistrates and clergy, Cambina is very much the queen that Stephen Gosson wants to believe in: "God hath now blessed England with a Queene, in vertue excellent, in power mighty, in glory renowned, in government politike, in possession rich, breaking her foes with the bent of her browe, ruling her subjects with shaking her hand. . . . How often hath her Majestie, with the grave advice of her whole Council, set downe the limits of apparel to every degree, and how soone againe hath the pride of our harts overflowen the chanel? How many times hath accesse to theaters beene restrained, and howe boldly again have we reentered?"⁴⁹ Cambina shares many characteristics with Canacee, whom I have already discussed as a royal double: Canacee, for example, is "the learnedst Ladie in her dayes" (IV.ii.35), and Cambina "learned was in Magicke leare" (IV.iii.40). Because they double one another—Book IV consistently has a difficult time distinguishing true friendship from true resemblance—Cambina's restoration of order to the meaningless drift of the fighting also restores the ceremonial precedence of Canacee. Cambina's force of allegory and the "stately stage" on which Canacee is seated are united against the degeneracy of the troubled theaters, a development that Gosson would surely have found gratifying.

This event would seem to be the true completion of the *Squire's Tale*. The drift from the theater of allegory to seductive spectacle that we saw first in Book II and then in the displacement of the stately stage is sharply reversed, the pointless and bloody dilation of chivalric combat cut short by a modal shift from something like realism to the interpretive severities of emblem. To the extent that romance is identified with spectatorial hedonism, both suffer a common rebuke. As so often in Spenser, however, the violence of the correction remains troubling after the stanzas of celebration have ended. If the theater of the masses has disclosed a taste for spectacular and meaningless suffering, the restraining hand of allegory has exhibited a cruelty of its own. The critic Gordon Teskey considers violence to be an inextricable element of allegory itself: "The more powerful the allegory the more openly violent are the moments in which

figures for the presiding patroness of 'Troynovaunt' and hence for Elizabeth, the poem's allegorically shadowed queen." Patricia Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies* (London, 1987), p. 59.

49. Stephen Gosson, *The School of Abuse* (London: Shakespeare Society, 1841), pp. 28–29.

the materials of narrative are shown being actively subdued for the purpose of raising a structure of meaning.⁵⁰ The triumph of Cambina is as clear an instance as one could wish of this claim, the order of pageant and emblem erected on the “heapes . . . in dust enrould” (IV.iii.41) who are so far from understanding this higher plane of meaning that they virtually throw themselves beneath its wheels. As I have argued, high allegory functions here as the instrument of the antitheatrical impulse. To read Jonas Barish’s account of that mind-set is to see why they might make comfortable bedfellows: “[the antitheatrical prejudice] belongs . . . to a conservative ethical emphasis in which the key terms are those of order, stability, constancy, and integrity, as against a more existentialist emphasis that prizes growth, process, exploration, flexibility, variety and versatility of response.”⁵¹

The notorious excesses of the antitheatrical reaction in England are given a highly critical representation in the unexpected savagery of Cambina’s arrival. As in the Bower of Bliss or Book V generally, authority’s excesses accumulate to constitute a critique of its methods and motives. Although Spenser is sympathetic to the idea that the common tastes of public theaters run to degenerate spectacle, he is suspicious of the response as well, a rage that in its peremptory violence never stops to question its own mixed motives. As in the destruction of the Bower, the most compelling questions seem simply to have been swept aside in a rush to action. It is often said that Spenser’s plan of representing twelve “private morall vertues” and twelve “polliticke vertues”⁵² defines the relation between the first and second installments of the existing six-book poem. Book II runs the gamut of theatrical forms, but the emphasis is still on the individual, confronting the spectacle alone. The failed encounter with tragedy prepares the way for a failed encounter with temptation; in each case what is at stake is primarily Guyon’s self-knowledge and the book’s achievement as an exercise in *Bildung*. Book IV as the first of the “polliticke” books turns its attention to crowds, to a decadent audience capable of taking a spectacle pregnant with tragedy for sport. The threshold between audience and action that caused Guyon such anguish has become merely the enabling condition of a passive spectatorship. Perhaps Spenser is no longer entertaining the idea of a didactic theater; but when Cambina sweeps down to crush the rout, there is an educational failure

50. Gordon Teskey, “Allegory, Materialism, Violence,” in *The Production of English Renaissance Culture*, ed. David Lee Miller, Shannon O’Dair, and Harold Weber (Ithaca, 1995), p. 307.

51. Barish, p. 117.

52. Letter to Raleigh (*The Faerie Queene*, ed. Roche, pp. 15–16).

all the same. The Gossons and Rainolds and Prynnes packed into that chariot foreclose by their sudden violence any lessons that this theater has to teach them, especially about themselves.

Indeed, the conclusion of the episode turns out to be more about forgetting than learning. Cambina rolls on to intervene in the bloody combat that has dominated the action of the preceding stanzas, but the destruction in her wake encourages questions about the concord she ultimately achieves. She cannot separate Cambell and Triamond by persuasion, or by casting herself “downe on the bloody plaine” (IV.iii.47) in tears (as though the supplications that drive the narrative of the *Knight's Tale* were being tried and found wanting). Only the divine drink Nepenthe finally avails:

Nepenthe is a drinck of souerayne grace,
 Deuized by the Gods, for to asswage
 Harts grief, and bitter gall away to chace,
 Which stirs vp anguish and contentious rage:
 In stead thereof sweet peace and quiet age
 It doth establish in the troubled mynd.

. . . .
 Such famous men . . .
 Are wont, before they may to heauen flie,
 To drinke hereof, whereby all cares forepast
 Are washt away quite from their memorie. (IV.iii.43–44)

The chief virtue of Nepenthe as these lines describe it is a Lethe-like power to erase suffering, indeed to erase memory generally. Concord is achieved by oblivion: the knights who drink from Cambina's cup are lifted out of the context of their violent strife, out of their own history altogether. The fourfold concord they achieve when Triamond marries Canacee and Cambell Cambina gives us the emblematic, even geometric order first encountered when they are introduced in the previous canto “linckt in louely bond” (IV.ii.31). The suffering of the combat and the loss of the two brothers are pushed into the background, and the *Knight's Tale's* questions about divine justice, like Amavia's, are never acknowledged. If, as Roche claims, the episode as a whole allegorizes the “emergence of order from chaos and of friendship from enmity,”⁵³ it only achieves reconciliation by means of forgetting.

53. Roche, p. 17.

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With Cambina as a figure of concord by denial, or coerced oblivion, her antitheatricalism comes to seem less the civilizing of a rogue medium than an act of peremptory, even desperate repression. Her actions suggest that the violent impulse to pull down the theaters and punish their crowds conceals passions as unruly as any on the stage—in particular, recalling Guyon, the punisher's complicated attraction to what he pretends to despise. Antitheatrical zeal threatens to foreclose the understanding of a form that holds an important key to the complexity and ambivalence of our moral lives, to our own self-knowledge. Spenser had plenty of reservations about the theater: characteristically Protestant doubts about its mode of representation fill his work, and he came to begrudge tragedy, or at least stage tragedy, its exalted place in the literary hierarchy (witness the vain pretensions of the buskined Ease). But he also saw the bad faith of the violent reaction against it. In Book II this strong ambivalence surfaces particularly in Guyon's lashing out in the Bower, and we have just seen the havoc Cambina wreaks on the crowds at the troubled theater of the tournament. In both instances there is a progression from a disciplined pageant-like form, to decadent spectacle (of sensuality in Book II, violence in Book IV), ending in a savage rebuke. I have remarked that this progression roughly describes the history of the stage during the sixteenth century. The high allegory of Cambina's chariot emphasizes a curious feature of that history: theater and allegory shifted over time from the strong affinity apparent in morality play, public pageant and court entertainment (persisting up to the Revolution in the masque tradition) to an opposition strong enough that they make a bloody mess when they collide in Spenser's poem. The Shakespearean stage lurched toward realism with a force from which English literature was never fully to recover. Under these new conditions, allegory became a convenient instrument for the prosecution of the antitheatrical prejudice, and as we have seen, Spenser used it that way. Its order disciplines an audience drifting toward libertinism. Still, *The Faerie Queene* is the least complacent of poems, constantly holding its own method and assumptions to a new and harder light. Acknowledging the violent onslaught of Concord in Book IV, we may learn to take the measure of Spenser's skepticism toward the antitheatrical prejudice from his skepticism toward the allegory that is the skeleton of his great poem.