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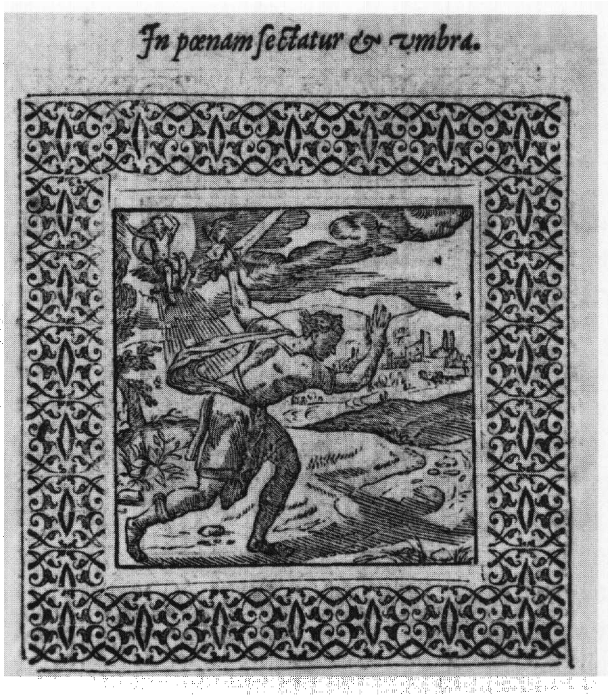
Spenser's Sense of Poetic Justice

JEFF DOLVEN

THE PHRASE "poetic justice" came into general use in the eighteenth century, and in its full modern sense—as a punishment poetically suited to, and arising naturally out of, the crime itself—somewhat later than that. It is not as old, therefore, as *The Faerie Queene* (which was first published in its six-book form in 1596); nonetheless, few poems seem as preoccupied with its concept as Edmund Spenser's allegorical epic. Not only is his work full of scenes of symbolic punishment, but it comments on an age when public justice was a much more flexible symbolic language, much more "poetic," than we may like to think it is today. The modern liberal state translates criminal transgressions into time, fitting the duration of imprisonment to the gravity of the offense. (If you were to enter the general population of an American prison there would be no way to tell the crime each inmate had committed except to ask.) Looking much further backward, the first recourse of Anglo-Saxon criminal justice was to resolve potential feuds by awarding financial compensation to the injured parties. Both are acts of translation without being tropes: the original nature of the crime is illegible in the remedy.

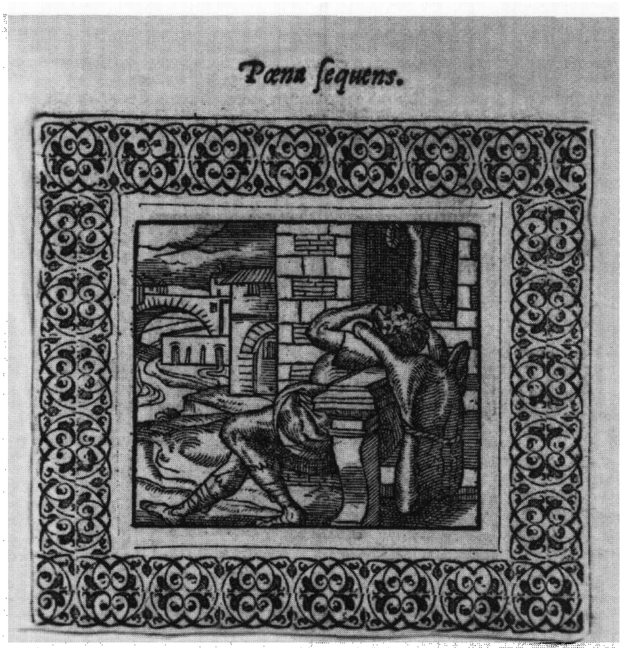
Somewhere in between, however, is the heyday of what Vico called "an entire poetics" of punishment. Complex figurative connections, conventional or seemingly ad hoc, were established between punishment and crime as a matter of course in early modern English sentencing. Spenser was an acute critic of the potential confusions about the criteria of guilt and of justice that this practice created. At the same time, one might say he owed it a great deal: the "continued allegory and darke conceit" of *The Faerie Queene* repeatedly explores its own proximity to punishment, and I want to suggest that among its deepest sources are scenes of symbolic discipline the young poet would have witnessed first in the streets and public squares of London. The poem's mode and its moment, then, are closely linked (in this way


In pœnam ſectatur & umbra.

A murderer pursued by his own shadow: "In poenam sectatur et umbra," *from Geoffrey Whitney's* A Choice of Emblemes *(1586). By permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.*

and many others), if more or less equally unfamiliar to the modern reader who favors the realism of the legal procedural à la Turow or Grisham. For all these reasons it provides a usefully focused and estranged laboratory for questions of the figurative properties of punishment—its rhetoric and its aesthetics—that are never as far from us as we would like to think.

At the root of this durable idea of poetic justice is the fantasy that punishment is unnecessary: that the world is so constructed that all transgressions are revenged in the nature of things. The Elizabethan era's broad imaginative investment in such an order is attested in its emblem books, collections of engraved images, allegorical in composi-


Pœna ſequens.

A thief strangled by his sack of loot: "Poena sequens," *from Geoffrey Whitney's* A Choice of Emblemes *(1586). By permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.*

tion and braced by mottos, which offered readers occasions for meditation on ancient wisdom and their own culture's pieties. Two are reproduced here from Geoffrey Whitney's 1586 *Choice of Emblemes*, "*In poenam sectatur et umbra*" (in retribution even a shadow seems to pursue the guilty man) and "*Poena sequens*" (punishment following). In the first a murderer is startled to see the shadow of his own sword poised above his head; his attitude is mocked (or dictated, like a marionette's) by a light-giving figure in the upper left corner, perhaps the "angel standing in the sun" from the Book of Revelation. In the second a thief with a sack of stolen meat slung round his neck is strangled by his loot when he falls asleep outside a tavern. The sack itself has a peculiarly meaty look to it, like a big plucked chicken: the revenge of the flesh on fleshly desires. In both mottos the key verb is *sequor* (to follow) which adds the force of logical necessity ("it follows") to the implication of divine justice or of greed undoing itself. Their threat to the criminal is a comfort to the citizen: this is the way the world works. The first emblem, moreover, has the elegance of the *lex talionis*, an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth, the murderous sword threatening the murderer's neck. The second has the next best thing, a figurative relation. (The two are sometimes confused: but justice cuts off a thief's hand because he has stolen something, not because he has cut off someone else's hand.) Whitney's punishments *represent* the crimes that entail them, and this figuration strengthens the sense that they are implied in the order of things. Human agency, let alone state intervention, is unnecessary to bring about justice: the guilt of the criminal is transparent in the consequences of the crime. The medium of emblem itself fixes the blame, and accusation and punishment are condensed into a single symbolic tableau.

Such emblem-making lessons were not lost on criminal justice in England. The pamphleteer John Stubbs, whose name seems to have condemned him to a life of allegory, lost his writing hand for printing his views about the prospects for Elizabeth's French marriage in 1579. (Later the same year Spenser chose to publish his *Shepheardes Calender* with Stubbs's printer, Hugh Singleton, a decision that has been interpreted as a show of sympathy.) This is only the most notorious instance of a kind of butcher's synecdoche by which a pierced or severed body part might stand for a crime and mark the criminal. Shaming punishments, which were widely used, often dictated that a malefactor be led through the streets at the "cart's arse" with a sign around his or her neck proclaiming the nature of the crime. One London baker whose loaves were found to be underweight was set in the pillory with the bread tied around his neck, much like the thief in Whitney's image; his placard must have functioned like a motto explaining the emblem he had become. A still more striking instance of this figurative resourcefulness is to be found in the treatment of poisoners. Especially in the early century, they were condemned to be boiled alive, in water or in lead, as though anxiety about the inward operation of poison demanded an externalization of its influence. The punishment makes manifest the secret violence of the crime and visits it on the criminal. Elizabethans were in general allegorically literate, accustomed to the symbolic language of public pageants as well as emblem books and (for the most literate) fictions like *The Faerie Queene*: examples such as these suggest that their experience of the law's revenges would have been continuous with this allegorical culture. Public justice was often poetic justice.

Much has been written about the role of public torture in the period, how its spectacle mingles the functions of discovery, evidence, and retribution. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* remains the most influential account: as prelude to his story of Enlightenment penology, he describes how the exhibition of torture in the early modern period made the body of the accused "the herald of his own condemnation." The same logic applies to the symbolic punishments I have been rehearsing. Though the judges have already spoken, the fitness of the sentence extends the argument of the prosecution, asserting *justice* by its observation of *decorum*. The criminal who is made a symbol of his crime—and whom the spectator likely encounters first *as* a symbol—must have been guilty in the first place; the conventional choice of a penalty is naturalized in the manner of the spontaneous revenges in Whitney's emblems. Again, this is just the way the world works. Punishment that renders the criminal's body a sign of his crime also obscures the grounds of sympathy, clearing away alternative readings. In the perfect instance nothing is left over: the punishment becomes the full extent of the social meaning of the criminal.

It is in this sense, as a particularly emphatic act of social definition, that I want to consider punishment as a form of allegory-making. The most salient characteristic of allegory as a mode (particularly personification allegory) is what Angus Fletcher has called its daimonism. Allegorical agents act as if they are possessed; they are characterized by the singularity of their significance, what we might call, were they to wander accidentally into a novel, a kind of monomania. Fletcher is especially concerned with the fictional systems or *kosmoi* that such agents inhabit, with their relation to the total system of meaning within which they are recognizable and interpretable. But to be concerned with allegory as punishment is to ask not only how allegory is structured but how such daimonism gets instituted, what its history is. Gordon Teskey's recent book *Allegory and Violence* addresses itself fundamentally to that question. Beneath allegory's claim to be a condition of the world's intelligibility he finds the tenacious story of the violence by which it was first imposed. That "moment of capture," as he calls it, is analogous for my purposes to the moment of sentencing (or the application of the sentence), when the person definitively becomes the criminal, when whatever social meanings he or she may embody are contracted to the singular meaning of the crime. Allegorical punishment—allegory as punishment—makes the criminal a daimon, and unmakes the person; the crime as an historical event, the cause of an effect, is duly replaced by the crime as the tenor of a metaphor. The emblem is guilty of its meaning.

The fact of Elizabethan allegorical literacy helps make such a literary consideration of public punishment uncomfortably appropriate. Of course there is a poetic tradition of meditation on this problem too, which must have been at least as important to Spenser. The locus classicus is Dante's *Inferno*. (No one has ever conclusively shown that Spenser knew Dante; but many in his circle did, including Sidney and Gabriel Harvey, and this essay will stand I hope as another piece of circumstantial evidence.) Here is a not-quite-randomly selected band of *Inferno*'s sinners, from deep in the seventeenth canto, haled up for us in Charles Singleton's translation:

> So I went by myself still farther along the extreme margin of that seventh circle, where the woeful people were seated. . . . When I set my eyes on the faces of some of these on whom the grievous fire descends, I did not recognize any of them, but I perceived that from the neck of each hung a pouch, which had a certain color and a certain device, and thereon each seems to feast his eyes. And when I came among them, looking about, I saw, upon a yellow purse, azure that had the form and bearing of a lion. Then,

> gazing farther, I saw another, red as blood, display a goose whiter than butter.

These are the usurers. Scholars have reconstructed their identities from the heraldic clues that Dante the poet provides, but Dante the character crucially fails to recognize them. The punishment that marks their sin with purses hung (now familiarly) around the neck, and that traps them in daimonic study of these signs of their trade, effaces their names and histories. Once again, this is allegory *as* punishment: from our standpoint as readers and sinners, not the least of hell's horrors is the radical reduction of what its denizens mean. The mode itself is a penal instrument prior to any of its ingenious specificities.

The righteous decorum of particular emblems in hell is reinforced by the general sanction of the *Comedy*'s theology. The sinners wouldn't be there if they weren't guilty. No such unified account of punishment, however, prevails in another important analogue, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which anticipates some of the skepticism of Spenser's method. When Minerva transforms Arachne into a spider for daring to challenge her skills at weaving, she curses the upstart with the words, "Live on, indeed, wicked girl, but hang thou still; and let this same doom of punishment [*lexque eadem poenae*]. . . be declared upon thy race, even to remote posterity." Poetic justice again, for the new arachnid is condemned forever to spin out testimony to her sin: Minerva interweaves the crime and the sentence of death by hanging. (Justice and irony, here as elsewhere in this discussion, turn out to be companionable tropes.) And yet, this judgment seems tellingly off target. The spider works better as an emblem of Arachne's craft than of her hubris (and hanging, after all, must be among the spiderly pleasures). The punishment looks more like the petulant revenge of an upstaged artisan than an act of world-making redress. It is only one of many instances in which Ovid shows himself invested in the way in which the aesthetics of metamorphosis can usurp ethical considerations. And if we cannot prove that Spenser knew Dante, no reader of *The Faerie Queene* can escape the poem's obsession with the *Metamorphoses*.

Arachne-as-spider might be described as a failed allegory, or failed at least from the standpoint of its maker Minerva. It means more than she meant it to. Such failures are the preoccupation of Spenser, staged by his poem partly as a meditation on its own fate in the reading. But before turning at last to his own great experiment in poetic justice, Book 5, it is worth slowing somewhat the momentum of an argument that might simply equate allegory and punishment. One could say, after all, that allegory is about *thinking*—that it is no more violent or punitive than extended analogy. The *Divine Comedy* may begin with allegories of punishment, but paradisal allegory looks very different from its infernal counterpart. And isn't allegory about communication, or *instruction*, whether in the putatively transparent mode of emblem or through a glass darkly? This is all true—indeed, crucially true for Spenser, who takes the real interest to lie in the shifting balance of these apparently opposed functions. The idiom "to teach someone a lesson" was as current in the Renaissance as it is today: punishment too is a pedagogical mode. The lesson of a punishment may be directed at the criminal himself, a self-consuming emblem, like Dante's usurers endlessly staring into their own purses. (One might also think of the poetic justice of revenge tragedy, a perverse scene of instruction in which the revenger's triumph depends on bringing the criminal to perfect knowledge of his crime.) But typically the force of allegory is such that the sufferer's knowledge is not at stake; the possibility of learning is part of what has been taken away. The lesson is instead for the spectators. The idea that the spectacle might be instructive (especially in some doctrinal or propagandistic sense) helps displace other modes of response, sympathy and protest among them. Dante knows that the structure of his situation is such that it is wrong for him to weep for the sinners he sees. And there can be analogous political effects. Allegory heightens the sense that we are being presented with an example, a bounded instance, outside an ethic of care. Whether the decorum of the punishment suggests a natural law at work, or even a work of art, we are less inclined to question or to intervene. In this way the structure of the lesson is prior to, and justifies, the punishment itself.

Arthegal, the Knight of Justice, rides into the middle of these questions at the beginning of Book 5. Each of the poem's hero-knights —there is one (and in one case, two) for each of *The Faerie Queene*'s six books—is embarked on a quest that promises to unfold the virtue for which he (and in one case, she) stands. Arthegal's quest is ultimately directed toward the defeat of foreign powers, the Catholic tyrant Grantorto, but his adventures begin with domestic affairs: he wanders through the opening cantos like a combination of knight-errant and justice of the peace. He is accompanied by his iron companion Talus, whose name evokes the *lex talionis*; between them they divide the functions of the courts and the police. The proem to the book informs us that Arthegal inherits his role from his foster mother Astrea, the goddess of justice, who has retreated to the heavens in despair at the world's growing lawlessness. This miniature of the withdrawal of the gods hints at a bad state of affairs in the allegory generally, a fracture in the order of its *kosmos*. And indeed, at this point in the poem the endless, pitched battle between allegory and romance narrative (well described by Teskey) seems to be tipping in favor of the latter. Narrative may serve allegory, unfolding its elements, but insofar as it is driven by variation and difference rather than cyclical repetition it is a threat to the cogency of a cosmic system. Book 4 is the least self-contained of the poem's books, the most hostage to romance contingency. Imposing justice at the beginning of Book 5 therefore becomes a project deeply connected to the literary mode of the whole. Arthegal as a bringer of justice is an allegory-maker.

The knight's first challenge presents itself in the form of a headless lady, beside whom stands a weeping squire. The squire is the obvious suspect, but he explains that the lady was slain by a passing knight —her own knight, in fact, who cast her off in favor of the squire's beloved and has ridden away with his new prize. Arthegal assembles all the parts and parties and puts on a brief exhibition of Solomonic justice, proving the guilt of the marauder (whose name is Sanglier) by exposing his willingness to cut the surviving lady in half. We then enter the penalty phase. Talionic justice would cost the knight his own head, but Arthegal has something different in mind. Talus has already reduced the offender to "a sencelesse blocke," as though clearing the ground for the imposition of a new meaning; next Arthegal reads the sentence:

> And you, Sir Knight, that loue so light esteeme,
> As that ye would for little leaue the same,
> Take here your owne, that doth you best beseeme,
> And with it beare the burden of defame;
> Your owne dead Ladies head, to tell abrode your shame.

Sanglier is condemned to wear his lady's severed head around his neck for a year's time. Allegory protects us from the full grotesquerie of this prospect: the head is a token (not, say, the all-too-organic matter that nourishes Isabella's basil in Keats's poem). Nor do we worry about the contraction of history or subjectivity that haunts the reader in Dante: Spenser never tempts us with the idea that Sanglier was a real person. Still, if the knight has lived by allegory, so he is punished by it. The head is like one of the symbolic body parts to be found in the language of heraldry: it embodies allegory's analytic powers. Sanglier is no longer the bloody knight, a title of which one might conceivably be proud, but the lady slayer, and that will be what he means wherever he goes—telling abroad his shame. The justice of the punishment is *obvious*, as it is with the baker pilloried with his skimpy loaves around his neck.

This seems like a perfectly successful piece of poetic justice. The resulting emblem "fits" the crime, juridically and aesthetically. It is typical of *The Faerie Queene*, however, that the next episode unsettles this sense that justice and allegory-making can so readily collaborate. This time the issue is taxes: a cruel Sarazin who exacts a toll from all travelers who cross his bridge. I will not pause over the combat here, except to say that Arthegal wins and that he impales the tax man's "blasphemous head" on a pole "Where many years it afterwards remayned,/To be a mirrour to all mighty men." The hard case is the encounter that follows with the Sarazin's daughter, Munera. It is she who profits from her father's extortions; her "golden hands and siluer feet" make graft of the "gift" promised by her name. Arthegal finds her, appropriately enough, hiding under a heap of gold in her father's house, and he hands her over to Talus:

> Yet for no pitty would he change the course
> Of Iustice, which in *Talus* hand did lye;
> Who rudely hayld her forth without remorse,
> Still holding vp her suppliant hands on hye,
> And kneeling at his feete submissiuely.
> But he her suppliant hands, those hands of gold,
> And eke her feete, those feete of siluer trye,
> Which sought vnrighteousness, and iustice sold,
> Chopt off, and nayld on high, that all might them behold.
>
> Her selfe then tooke he by the sclendar wast,
> In vaine loud crying, and into the flood
> Ouer the Castle wall adowne her cast,
> And there her drowned in the durty mud:
> But the streame washt away her guilty blood.
> Thereafter all that mucky pelfe he tooke,
> The spoile of peoples euill gotten good,
> The which her sire had scrap't by hooke and crooke,
> And burning all to ashes, powr'd it downe the brooke.
>
> And lastly all that Castle quite he raced,
> Euen from the sole of his foundation,
> And all the hewen stones thereof defaced,
> That there mote be no hope of reparation,
> Nor memory thereof to any nation.
> All which when Talus throughly had perfourmed,
> Sir *Arthegal* vndid the euill fashion,
> And wicked customes of that Bridge refourmed.
> Which done, vnto his former iourney he retourned.

On the face of it, this punishment too has the poetic fitness we expect. Like all the "mucky pelfe" of her father's trade, Munera is consigned to the mud of the river, mud from which all those riches were presumably once dug. But on closer inspection this solution seems a little contrived: its aesthetic satisfactions don't stand up to much thinking. The spoils are burned "all to ashes," the narrator assures us, though gold and silver do not burn. Why a river, rather than, say, a mine? And then there is the "sclendar wast." As readers we had not had to think of what connected those golden hands and silver feet, but now we know that she has this unallegorical middle, a surprising and touching detail, almost felt in the crook of an arm before she is gone from the poem for good. The phrase might be folded back into the parable of greed—a hoarder, she wastes little—but such a move seems weak against the phrase's visceral impression. (Spenser remains interested in the trouble caused by touch: when Talus shoulders his next victim off a cliff, they stand for a strange moment "cheeke by cheeke," like the song says.) The allegory cannot quite contain this brief, humane rupture in its prosecutorial rigor. The rude mercy of the stream, which seems to be rinsing her clean rather than flushing her away, conspires in this reproach.

All this might be said to be the punish*ing*; when the punishment is complete, the body is gone, and nothing is left but those hands and feet "Chopt off, and nayld on high." Munera had originally held them up "on hye" in prayer, another challenge to the prosecution, but the monument makes an unsentimental emblem. The troubling middle is excised: now the members are held together not by inference or agency, but by nails. One might imagine this strange construction as a kind of parody crucifixion, each severed part with its own stigmatum; perhaps such an association feeds the undercurrent of mercy, or perhaps it's just a gaudy precis of a Catholic crucifix. Whatever it is, it stands solitary on the razed plain the justicers leave behind them, or rather with only the Sarazin's head to keep it company. It makes for an extension of the notion of poetic justice developing here in two ways. First, it finally displaces the body, or renders it solely as its iconographic parts. There is no slender waist left to excite the sympathy of the onlooker. Second, it moves beyond the questions of decorum in punishment to a kind of perfectly authoritarian unintelligibility. Without memory of the events the poem records (and the narrator insists there is none), Munera herself, the tax, the Sarazin, the *crime*—nothing could be deduced. Only the monument's brute status as emblem is clear. It transcends questions of the justice of Munera's punishment and becomes a pure testament to someone's power to dissect. It is an allegory which does not need to explain itself, and its inscrutability is the perfection of its threat.

To continue to see such a construction as an allegory is to allow the mode to be defined by family resemblance—its traffic in what we might have thought to be accidental attributes, like the severed body parts—rather than a referential essence. Perhaps, therefore, it is better to see it as a parody of allegory after all. Then again, resistance to interpretation has always been one of allegory's prized qualities. It is a discriminator, excluding those whom Spenser's teacher Richard Mulcaster called the "rude wits" in order to protect its truths from desecration or its protests from political reprisal. If epiphany is its upper limit, a transparency practically noumenal, then its lower limit is pure resistance, utter darkness, meaning as a broken promise. The emblem made out of Munera therefore need not be a programmatic challenge to the possibility of reference. It is rather a study in how that promise may be both staged and emptied out for political purposes—obviously a record of punishment, but punishment for what? It takes a step beyond poetic justice to an act of violence that no longer needs to tell its history or to imply a particular law or even a natural order according to which it was performed. By setting the episode after the punishment of Sanglier, Spenser suggests that the road to such authoritarian icons runs through the logic of poetic justice—the idea of allegory as something one might *do* to someone, rightly or wrongly. On the far side of its claim for justice is a deliberately obscure triumphalism that conspicuously withholds justification.

The sources of Spenser's allegory are various: popular pageant, Italian romance, long histories of interpreting the Bible and the classical epics. One purpose of this essay is to propose that criminal justice as it was practiced in his time should be added to this list, as a source (or perhaps influence) and, in typically Spenserian fashion, also as a subject of scrutiny and criticism. A larger purpose is to point out how close to the conceptual root of personification allegory the idea of punishment lies. Punishment differs from violence in that it is performed as retribution, by authority and according to some implicit or explicit law. (It is, in a sense, colonial rather than originary: the extension and expression of an already existing order.) Punishment therefore necessarily raises the question of justice, which simple violence need not do. In its nature as other-speaking, allegory suggests, in the fit between itself and its referent, its own criteria—aesthetic criteria, rhetorical criteria—for that justice. The *rightness* of boiling poisoners in general is in tempting proximity to the *rightness* of punishing a particular person in a particular way for a particular crime, and the difference may be accidentally or deliberately obscured. The English practice of allegorical punishment that I have sketched here, especially as a state function, was on the wane by the time that the phrase "poetic justice" came into use, by the time it found its name. The eighteenth century began to enjoy the luxury of believing that such dangerous satisfactions had been expelled from the polis and exiled to the imagination. We certainly prefer to think that way today. But even in our new century the power of punishment as a figurative language is tenacious. We should be wary of assuming that these ways of thinking are safe in a poetic exile. Spenser is among the poets who know better.