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The six year gap between publication in 1590 of the first three books of The Faerie Queene and the publication in 1596 of the second three books presented Spenser with an awkward problem. Book III had been brought to a conclusion in order to satisfy the reader and not leave her or him suspended in mid-episode. But when the fourth Book was released to the public Spenser revised the ending of Book III, dropping the final five original stanzas and inserting three new ones. Such a small alteration in such a vast work, but the importance and effect of this change I wish to emphasise.

The original ending of Book III presents an image of sexual union between Amoret and Scudamour -- a closure to the first instalment of The Faerie Queene which must have been pleasing to the reader -- an orgasmic melting of Amoret with Scudamour:

Lightly he clipt her twixt his armes twaine,
 And streightly did embrace her body bright,
 Her body, late the prison of sad paine,
 Now the sweet lodge of love and deare delight:
 But she fair Lady overcommen quight
 Of huge affection, did in pleasure melt,
 And in sweete ravishment pourd out her spright:
 No word they spake, nor earthly thing they felt,
 But like two senceles stocks in long embracement
 dwelt.

Had ye them seene, ye would have surely thought,
 That they had beene that faire Hermaphrodite,
 Which that rich Romane of white marble wrought,
 And in his costly Bath causd to bee site:
 So seemd those two, as growne together quite
 (III.xii.45-6, 1590 Edition)

This closure in the narrative is revised and the action opened out again with the altered ending of Scudamour having left the scene in despair before Britomart and Amoret arrive from the House of Busyrane. Scudamour and Amoret are not to find fulfilment of their desire in the Book of Chastity. Spenser is now able to dovetail Book IV into Book III by continuing the tale of Scudamour and Amoret. The image of the Hermaphrodite is carefully saved for later use. Having changed this Book III ending, Spenser emblemizes the unity of lovers in the hermaphroditic Venus of Canto Ten of Book IV.

Though the number of stories which Spenser accumulates in Book IV is impressive nevertheless some readers have sensed a shift away from Spenser's rigid control over the narrative thread. Just as strife, or discord, which we learn in i.20 "harder is to end than to begin", so Spenser seems to be constantly in danger in Book IV of being unable to master his own muse. Scudamour, in an echo of this, remarks in Canto x that his tale "harder may be ended, then begonne": a fitting description of

Spenser's own difficulties. In fact Spenser closes the Book with the watery wedding of the Thames and Medway and a return to the story of Marinell and Florimell -- a dissolution, or melting away of the legend, rather than a concrete closure.

In Book IV's opening Canto, before we meet the figure of "Ate, mother of debate" we witness Britomart's powers of reconciliation. Of course Britomart herself is a fascinating instance of Spenser's problematising of gender. The warrior mayd's revelation of her womanhood when she removes her helmet:

With that her glistring helmet she unlaced;
Which doft, her golden lockes, that were up bound
Still in a knot, unto her heeles downe traced,
And like a silken veile in compasse round
About her backe and all her bodie wound:
Like as the shining skie in summers night,
What time the dayes with scorching heat abound,
Is creasted all with lines of firie light,
That it prodigious seemes in common peoples sight.
(IV.i.13)

causes everyone who witnesses it to "grow in secret dout/ Of this and that." (14) Britomart's unveiling as a woman, not the man all assumed she was, throws open more to question it seems than matters of gender alone as "So diversely each one did sundrie doubts devise." (14) Britomart serves as an agent of concord here, and her method of achieving concord is to bemuse onlookers with a

seeming sexual transformation from man to woman. With this metamorphosis the unevenness of the social situation is remedied. Discord is dispelled arithmetically as things now add up harmoniously.¹

The discord Britomart temporarily dispels is that of Ate who Spenser soon introduces us to:

...Ate, mother of debate
 And all dissention which doth daily grow
 Amongst fraile men, that many a publike state
 And many a private oft doth overthrow
 (IV.i.19)

has a

...lying tongue in two parts divided,
 And both parts did speake, and both contended
 And as her tongue, so was her heart discided
 That never thought one thing but doubly stil was guided.

Als as she double spake, so heard she double,
 With matchless eares deformed and distort,
 Fild with false rumors and seditious trouble,
 Bred in assemblies of the vulgar sort,
 That still are led with every light report.
 And as her eares so eke her feet were odde,
 And much unlike, th'one long, the other short,
 And both misplast; that when th'one forward yode,
 The other backe retired, and contrarie trode.
 (IV.i.27-8)

Not perhaps a terribly complimentary image of womankind, but more than balanced in the tenth Canto by the figures of Concord, Womanhood and Venus. Before the memorable images of Ate's physical figure Spenser gives us a dense

description of Ate's abode in stanzas 20 to 26 of the opening stanza:

Hard by the gates of hell her dwelling is,
 There whereas all the plagues and harmes abound,
 Which punish wicked men, that walke amisse:
 It is a darksome delve farre under ground,
 With thornes and barren brakes enviroind round,
 That none the same may easily out win;
 Yet many waies to enter may be found,
 But none to issue forth when one is in:
 For discord harder is to end then to begin.
 (IV.i.20)

The dwelling's location and contents fix Ate in the reader's mind in a way which, by her nature, she is never fixed again. Her outer shape is unreliable, even a contradiction or cancellation, but her dwelling remains fixed and unspoilt, in a constant state of representing inconstancy and impermance, death and decay. Ate and her dwelling lodge in the mind as a paradox of change and constancy, decay over time and antiquity. She is a most ancient figure who relaunches Spenser's epic by taking centre stage in the first canto of the second instalment. Spenser is here drawing on antique writers and their antique gods. Hesiod, Homer and Virgil all mention Ate, and Spenser creates a conglomeration of their daughters of Night in the formidable figure of Ate, queen of discord.

We should not ignore the fact that Ate creates: she sows little seeds and they grow great. These are intangible seeds in themselves, though the fruit is real enough. 'The seeds of evill wordes, and factious deedes' (i.25) Her work seems rather easy. She has no need of tillage but hapily feeds on the 'living food' of others' lives. Her cannibalism is later echoed by Lust's consumption of his prey. But these little seeds are subtleties when it actually comes to the story. The stripped back image of Ate as double and divided, with squinty eyes and forked tongue, is well concealed when Ate enters the world of Faerie. She presents herself, or masquerades, as a principle of bonding. To some extent she could even be said to comply with chivalric modes of behaviour by presenting herself as a focus for masculine rivalry and thus she can be seen as a principle of masculine bonding. Knights, in brief, are supposed to have quarrels. They need combat to define themselves in relation to what or who they fight and what or who they fight for. Of course, in the end, the knights who fight for Ate, however dolled up she might be, are destined to batter themselves into her bread and butter. Ate, then, is necessary. Virtue must weed out Ate and her effects. The inference however is that she

cannot be destroyed, only contained or limited, or locally shut out.

Ate seems to be a threshold to transgression as she is beyond the pale of civilised behaviour. Her link to the Fates as an elderly woman establishes her however, as an ancient and enduring force in nature. Civilisation might ideally defeat Ate, though Spenser seems to accept the impossibility of this. Even Nature is perplexed and shifty when confronted by Mutability's claims to heavenly predominance. Ate and Mutability are doubtless sisters of discord. Spenser uses Ate to shift the focus, or widen the picture, at the outset of IV. We are presented with a new instalment of the principle of chaos. Chaos must enter the frame to enable the forces of concord to be activated. Chaos unsettles the numerological metred magnificence of Spenser's finely wrought poetic structure. Ate is a figure who takes the reader back into the very recesses of ancient myth and through her Spenser invites the reader to understand the modern. Ate serves as a shorthand (a three-letter signifier) for irreducible conflicts, many of which are spilling over from Book III to Book IV. Ate has, of course, been dwelling hard by the gates of hell since well before book one opened, but it is now that Spenser presents us with her. She becomes in IV the principle of

discord, the cause of all human woe and misery. But in IV Spenser uses this ancient figure to indicate that nothing much has changed in human affairs -- that all great empires will decay and fall. Discord will not go away. The presence, actions and achievements of Cambina, Belphebe, Arthur and Venus notwithstanding, the reader feels Ate, once let loose in Faerieland, will always be roaming.

Doubt and Ate are clearly linked (as are Ate and other figures in IV such as Care, Lust and Slander). Doubt is linked through the lines:

His name was Doubt, that had a double face,
Th'one forward looking, th'other backward bent,
Therein resembling Janus auncient. (IV.x.12)

If we compare this to canto one's description of Ate it is easy to see the connection.

And as her eares so eke her feet were odde,
And much unlike, th'one long, the other short,
And both misplast; that when th'one forward yode.
The other backe retired, and contrarie trode.
(IV.i.28)

This formulation of divided discord, the one then the other as a direct contradiction or cancellation of the one, is continued in stanza 29:

Likewise unequall were her handes twaine,
That one did reach, the other pusht away,
That one did make, the other mard againe,

And sought to bring all things unto decay.
(IV.i.29)

What is often neglected about Ate is the first part of this formulation, that is, the positive part. Ate reaches, she makes, she goes forward. This is only part of the picture, but a crucial part.

Ate can even be compared with Venus in her duality. One is a discordant one a concordant unification of opposites. They both bring two extremes into a single habitation. Venus reconciles seeming opposites in a mysterious self-contained union which in itself seems static, though producing much activity from the likes of Scudamour. Ate brings together opposites though in an active figure. Ate leaves nothing in a state of rest, a state of stability and completion, of self-containment. Instead she enters that world as a potential creator or maker. In the end she destroys and irradicates.

Whereby great riches gathered manie a day,
She in short space did often bring to nought.
(IV.i.29)

In a peculiarly paradoxical portrait Ate preserves what she destroys. The relics of past orders and civilisations become the preserved monuments of Ate's den:

The moniments whereof there byding beene,
As plaine as at the first, when they were fresh and greene.

(IV.i.24)

So these monuments remain as fresh as they were in their first existence. Through this Spenser suggests the notion that the monuments of concordant stable societies may be merely the few surviving relics of antique civilisations which have been laid waste by the mother of debate, Ate.

The notion of necessary strife or discord as the motive power of the universe held in check by concord and amity was a Renaissance commonplace inherited from a number of late classical sources. Ate is the prime mover of discord, sower of enmity, but in the seventh Canto her representative is the figure of Lust, perhaps the grisliest portrait in the work, who "lives all on ravin and on rape." He feeds

...on fleshly gore,
The signe whereof yet stain'd his bloody lips afore.

His neather lip was not like man nor beast,
But like a wide deepe poke, downe hanging low,
In which he wont the relickes of his feast,
And cruell spoyle, which he had spard, to stow:
And over it his huge great nose did grow,
Full dreadfully empurpled all with bloud;
And downe both sides two wide long eares did glow,
And raught down to his waste, when up he stood,
More great then th'eaes of Elephants by Indus flood.

(IV.vii.5-6)

The phallic nose and testicular ears are both sinister and absurd. Lust quite literally has a visage which might be seen

as a gruesome combination of male and female genitalia. Unlike the mysteriously concealed fusion of genders in Venus, Lust openly displays his hermaphroditic features. The imagined space which is the cave of Lust (perhaps a mockery of the nurturing womb) is a site for horrific events which offer a deeply negative view of male/female relationships. The savage figure of Lust mercilessly seizes and imprisons his victims, eventually consuming them.

Amoret is totally overcome by Lust who is “nought feeling, ne nought fearing.” (vii.13) We learn that Aemylia has seen “seven women by hime slaine, and eaten clene” (vii.13) and she comments that “of us three to morrow he will sure eate one.” (vii.13) Aemylia then goes on to relate how she has ended up in Lust’s cave and we learn of her own impropriety. She was “daughter unto a Lord of high degree” (15) until:

With guilefull love did secretly agree,
 To overthrow my state and dignitie.
 It was my lot to love a gentle swaine,
 Yet was he but a Squire of low degree:
 Yet was he meet, unlesse mine eye did faine,
 By any Ladies side for Leman to have laine.
 (IV.vii.15)

Even though imprisoned in the Cave of Lust Aemylia still indulges in a recounting, albeit brief, of her erotic attraction to this Squire. Her lust threatens to disrupt the social order by

bringing forth elements of guile and secrecy. Aemylia has agreed to meet her squire in a “privy place” (vii.17) though she finds not him, but the “accursed Carle of hellish kind,/ The shame of men, and plague of womankind.” (vii.18) Lust is thus portrayed as something outside women, which might infect them, but within men, a demeaning presence.

Lust’s re-entrance,

...rudely rushing in,
 And spredding over all the flore alone,
 Gan dight him selfe unto his wonted sinne
 (IV.vii.20)

is strongly suggestive of masturbation and highlights his essential self-centredness, his voyeurism, his disinterest in his prey as anything other than food for his “bloudy banket” (vii.20) Lust’s hunger will never be sated. He will go on seizing and consuming women until his throat is triumphantly pierced. This figure of discord is slain by the chaste huntress Belphebe, identified by Spenser as an allegory of Elizabeth (see letter to Raleigh). She rather dangerously pursues Lust right to the entrance of his cave and literally splits him in two with an arrow through his greedy throat. Most interesting here is the way Spenser has Belphebe linger over the body:

Yet over him she there long gazing stood,
 And oft admir’d his monstrous shape, and oft

His mighty limbs, whilest all with filthy bloud
 The place there overflowne, seemd like a sodaine
 flood.

(IV.vii.32)

Remembering Spenser's appeal to Cupid in Book IV's Proem to:

Sprinkle her (Elizabeth's) heart...
 ...with drops of melting love,
 Deawd with ambrosiall kisses...
 ...and haughtie courage soften,
 That she may hearke to love, and reade this lesson often.

(IV.Proem.5)

we might be somewhat shocked at the extent to which the poet seems ready to indulge in erotic discourse with his Queen. We might further be tempted to draw a parallel between Timias' womanhandling of Amoret and Belphebe's admiration of the 'mighty limbs' of Lust.

Belphebe destroys Lust and demands faith of her squire Timias, arguably an allegory of Raleigh, who she emasculates with the four words:

Is this the faith, she said, and said no more,
 But turned her face, and fled away forevermore.

(IV.vii.36)

There is an erotic sensuality in his attitude towards the swooning Amoret:

From her faire eyes wiping the deawy wet,
 Which softly stild, and kissing them atweene,
 And handling soft the hurts, which she did get.
 For of that Carle she sorely bruz'd had beene,
 Als of his owne rash hand one wound was to be seene.

(IV.vii.35)

This is, to the penetrating dread eye of the beholding Belphebe, sufficient evidence to justify his fall from favour. For the reader it is not so much his soft handling of the hurt Amoret but the wound of his 'rash hand' upon her body that signifies the lustful flaw in his constitution.

How far can we see the Fourth Book as a lengthy, complicated, yet sustained plea for the Virgin Queen, Elizabeth, to take a partner and bring forth England's heir? If so it was an unsuccessful attempt, and even within itself admits of the strengths of virginal chastity in the figure of Belphebe. The opening Proem might have been blatant enough in communicating Spenser's philosophy of fruitful heterosexual coupling as the human realisation of its part in life's natural cycle. However, in the tenth Canto Scudamour's rebuttal of Womanhood's "blame" and "sharp rebuke" for his "being over bold" can be read as a further direct address by the brazen poet to his Queen:

...nay, but it fitteth best,
 For Cupids man with Venus mayd to hold,
 For ill your goddesse services are drest
 By virgins, and her sacrifices let to rest.

(IV.x.54)

Scudamour defiles the Temple of Venus, silences Womanhood and seizes the protesting Amoret. But does Scudamour defile or define the Temple of Venus? His act of Cupidean grasping, rapturously, passionately, and not a little lustfully mastering his paramour makes the Temple a site of suspended rape. His seeming success in securing his leman has already unravelled for the reader who has earlier read of the abduction of Amoret on the wedding day. Scudamour's tale, coming toward the close of the legend of friendship, cannot simply be read as an episode asserting the male principle of penetration, on-going, moving forward, as Scudamour's quest fails at the last. After all his efforts, recounted not without a certain bragging pride, he has no lady by his side to verify his exploits. The moment at which Scudamour is reunited with Amoret, coming as it did at the close of the 1590 edition of the first three books, is lost in the 1596 version. The revised stanzas portray a Scudamour lacking in sufficient faith to overcome a mistaken despair:

But he sad man, when he had long in drede
 Awaiting there for Britomarts returne,
 Yet saw her not nor signe of her good speed,
 His expectation to despaire did turne,
 Misdeeming sure that her those flames did burne;
 And therefore gan advize with her old Squire,
 Who her deare nourslings losse no lesse did mourne,

Thence to depart for further aide t'enquire:
 Where let them wend at will, whilst here I doe respire.
 (III.xii.45: 1596 edition)

The love story of Amoret and Scudamour is not concluded but now weaves through the fourth book as it does the third. The lovers are mentioned at the outset:

Of lovers sad calamities of old,
 Full many piteous stories doe remaine
 But none more piteous ever was ytold,
 Then that of Amorets hart-binding chaine
 (IV.i.1)

Spenser here rapidly establishes the sacrifice and suffering of love. The tangled web of IV is concerned with attempts to recover lost loves and to deal with the sad loneliness of those losses. The process is an arduous one and Spenser makes clear the sense of inadequate rewards for those who would make the effort to love, as when Scudamour bemoans that "though sweet love to conquer glorious bee/ Yet is the paine thereof much greater than the fee" (IV.x.3) It is a notion that Spenser has returned to again and again in his poetry and we think back to its memorable expression in the words of the aged Thenot as he addresses the youthful Cuddie in February of The Shepheardes Calender: "Thou art a fon, of thy love to boste,/ All that is lent to love, wyll be lost."

Spenser does not present us with an image of knightly virtue in the Temple of Venus, but of lustful dominance, an assertion of a claim rather than a befriending. As Heatt has it: “he has overstepped the bounds of love in asserting a passionate mastery incompatible with what he really wants, which is happy marriage.”² And yet, and yet...Venus laughs at him, she seems to grant his prayer. Venus will not interfere for she knows that Scudamour exhibits the urge to procreate which she stirs in all creatures, male and female, from the raging bulls rebelling through the wood to the smallest fry of the sea:

So all things else, that nourish vitall blood,
Soone as with fury thou doest them inspire,
In generation seeke to quenche their inward fire.
(IV.x.46)

Venus therefore favours Scudamour’s “pretence” which causes him to be “emboldened with more confidence.” (x.56) Of course it is quite possible that Venus laughs at the hapless Scudamour because she knows in her divinity that this hope of securing his lover Amoret is a vain one. It has been suggested that in her smiling seeming blessing of Scudamour’s suit Venus “ceases to be an idol. She now symbolises the living presence of lovers to each other in their mutual embrace and responsiveness.”³

Another view might be that she is indirectly indulging, as is her

customary want, her son Cupid, for Scudamour, as Heiatt observes:

...is at one with that Cupid who rejoices in having conquered all the other gods; he is following a master who is strikingly similar to the villainess in the Mutability Cantos: Cupid and she desire unique rule over the other powers, not harmonious interplay.⁴

Venus herself is the locus of unity in the Book, the unity of different genders. Indeed Spenser has used her hermaphroditically elsewhere, as in the lines "For Venus selfe doth soly couples seeme/ Both male and female, through commixture joynd."⁵ But Spenser refuses to demystify the androgynous Venus. The concentrated image, or allegory of sexual union, the Hermaphrodite, representative of true marriage in a visual emblem, with man and woman becoming one flesh, has been removed from the end of Book III and is now presented in the divine hybrid of Venus in Book IV Canto x. She is a veiled figure presiding over worshipping lovers. She laughs at Scudamour's penetration of Womanhood's circle, his forceful mastery of Amoret, but this conclusion to the Canto has left some readers unsatisfied. Is Scudamour over-bold as Womanhood claims, divorcing Amoret from all the treasured traits of femininity: Shamefastness, Courtesy, Cheerfulness,

Modesty, Silence and Obedience? Or is this boldness sanctioned and exonerated by Venus' "amiable grace"?

Leaving this question hanging in the air, I'd like to say a little more about the androgynous Venus, who, through her resolution of sexual differences into a unified whole stands as an emblem of concord out of discord, of unity out of duality, celebrated in Book IV of The Faerie Queene:

The cause why she was covered with a vele,
 Was hard to know, for that her Priests the same
 From peoples knowledge labour'd to concele.
 But sooth it was not sure for womanish shame,
 Nor any blemish, which the worke mote blame;
 But for they say, she hath both kinds in one,
 Both male and female, both under one name:
 She syre and mother is her selfe alone,
 Begets and eke conceives, ne needeth other none.
 (IV.x.41)

Cheney's comments are helpful in understanding how Spenser employs the image of the hermaphrodite here:

...the body of literary and philosophical treatment of the Hermaphrodite, in antiquity as in the Renaissance, hovers between two attitudes: on the one hand an emphasis on the perfection, the union of contraries, represented either statically in the single figure or dynamically in the coupling of the wedded pair; and on the other hand, an awareness that such union occurs in a watery context of dissolution where rational and moral distinctions are no longer operative.⁶

In Book IV the static figure of Venus unites in a single being the dynamism of coupling (and uncoupling) male and female

characters. The comparison with the later figure of Dame

Nature in the Mutabilitie Cantos is only too tempting:

Then forth issewed--great goddesse--great Dame Nature
 With goodly port and gracious Majesty,
 Being far greater and more tall of stature
 Then any of the gods or powers on hie.
 Yet certes by her face and phynomy,
 Whether she man or woman inly were,
 That could not any creature well descry;
 For with a veile that wimpled everywhere,
 Her head and face was hid, that mote to none appeare.

That, some doe say, was so by skill devized
 To hide the terror of her uncouth hew
 From mortall eyes, that should be sore agrized,
 For that her face did like a lion shew,
 That eye of wight could not indure to view.
 But others tell that it so beautious was,
 And round about tuch beams of splendor threw,
 That it the sunne a thousand times did pass,
 Ne could be seene but like an image in a glass.

That well may seemen true. For well I weene
 That this same day, when she on Arlo sat,
 Her garment was so bright and wondrous sheene
 That my fraile wit cannot devize to what
 It to compare, nor finde like stufte to that.
 As those three sacred saints, though else most wise,
 Yet on mount Thabor quite their wits forgat
 When they their glorious Lord in strange disguise
 Transfigur'd sawe; his garments so did daze their eyes.

(VII.vii.5-7)

Of great interest here is the reference to the transfiguration. In the seventh stanza of the seventh Canto of the seventh Book we suddenly have the female-gendered Dame Nature, and by association the Venus of Book IV who serves as an emblem of

the reproductive urge in nature, identified with the Christ of the transfiguration.

The success of Spenser's syncretism you must judge for yourselves. The earth-mother Dame Nature, brought to judge Mutabilitie's quarrel with Jove, promises a time "when no more Change shall be" (VII.viii.2). In her hermaphroditism she herself, and Venus before her, emblemizes the possibility of a time when we won't all be desperately in generation seeking to quench our inward fire, but will "rest eternally...with him that is the God of Sabaoth hight." (VII. viii.2)

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¹ In Canto Three Spenser provides a further and more blatant equation of concordant human relationships through the interlocking pattern of the harmonious friendship of Cambell, Cambina, Triamond and Canacee.

² A. Kent Hieatt, 'Scudamour's Practixe of Maistrye upon Amoret', PMLA 77 (1962), p.520.

³ Albert Charles Hamilton (ed.), The Spenser Encyclopedia (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), p. 279.

⁴ Hieatt, p. 520.

⁵ 'Colin Clouts Come Home Again', lines 801-2.

⁶ Donald Cheney, 'Spenser's Hermaphrodite and the 1590 Faerie Queene', PMLA 87 (1972), p.195.