

Violent Justification: Man's Allotted Outlet

Society parallels the erotic with the damned. Sexual empowerment is negatively propagandized: its participants freaks, its terminology taboo. Our culture pervades such ideals though gender normatives, sex "education," and a general sense of what is *polite* to speak about in mixed company. However, as with any form of empowerment, the supreme members of society, political and religious leaders, fear the possibility of a population educated to revolt. Engaging their control over the socialization of the public, leaders change the view on empowering activities, warping the odds in their favor, even at the cost of humanity. In canto twelve of Spenser's epic poem, *The Faerie Queene*, we delve into the idea of sexual temptation, and how the powers at large alter masculinity's definition to ultimately gain control by offering violence as man's only release.

Humans are greedy. We are a selfish and materialistic race who strive for power, and can be ruthless in its pursuit. As tracked through the previous texts in class, violence and hubris litter our history of war, of ourselves. We are engulfed by our own abilities, possessed with our own selves, constantly attempting to prove our worth and power over one another through competition, warlike and otherwise. But just as greed pilots our decisions, so does eroticism; humans are sexual creatures. Likened in importance to the basic intake of nutrients and water, sex, and the joys it encompasses, is a vital part of human health. We are designed to find "ourselves" attractive in the sense that we are designed to experience sexual desire for members of our race. And the power with which sex drives our decisions can only parallel that of our extreme greed; it is no coincidence that Zeus is distracted by no other means but intercourse in *The Iliad*. Weaving its way through each stanza of Spenser's work is this idea of the naturally

sexual human. “Such creatures give a local habitation and a name to those vague feelings of longing and complicity that permeate accounts of a sensuous life that must be rejected and destroyed” (Greenblatt 184). The “beasts” encountered in Acrasia’s land represent this natural need. They seek an erotic life where their desires can be met without judgment, but with the approach of Sir Guyon and his party, they are deemed misled and sinful. A sexual life *must* be demeaned for with it comes empowerment, and ultimately, education, thus the power’s greatest fear.

For the idea of a government to control the greed, and selfish erotic desires humans possess, the rule must alter man’s own view of his doings. It is useless to attempt to change what is natural, but the connotation surrounding such activities is simple to alter. Humans may encompass greed and lust, but the trait of naïveté coupled with fear is not far from these central elements. We, as a race, are terrified of the unknown, constantly seeking answers to the questions of death and the events that follow it. It is on this fear that religion plays, and thus becomes the most effective form of control over such a tumultuous population. One is promised peace in their afterlife in exchange for a “moral” life on earth. In, *The Faerie Queene*, Sir Guyon represents the general public, Palmer its (mis)leading governmental guide, and his staff of reason the religion created to subdue the actions of men. “Then Palmer over them his staffe upheld, / His mighty staffe, that could all charms defeat: / Eftsoones their stubborne corages were queld, / And high advaunced crests downe meekely feld, / Instead of fraying, they themselves did feare” (Spenser 209). Using religion’s power, Palmer subdues the sexually aware “beasts” and succeeds in mastering the human race. His powers of reason, along with the fire and brimstone threatened by God, has convinced man that his natural desires are wrong, and it is their own selves that hinder their eventual ascension. He has succeeded in conditioning men to feel that eroticism is

wrong: “yet suffered no delight;” that the joys of sex are a sufferable act (Spenser 213). But, throughout their journey to, as well as their time within, Acrasia’s lair, Sir Guyon needs reminding of his temperate goals. “The secrete signes of kindled lust appeare...On which when gazing him the Palmer saw, / He must rebukt those wandering eyes of his” (Spenser 218). Whenever our trusted knight strays from the path of morality, Palmer is there to quickly lead him back to righteousness. He *must* keep his eyes from their humanistic drift, for too long of a focus easily shatters Palmer’s thin veil. The reason that the beasts and women with their lily paps tempt Sir Guyon is nothing more than his natural human instincts kicking in. However, with Palmer standing near, he need not fear, “the quicksand of Unthriftyhed” (Spenser 202). His trusted guide will see to it that Sir Guyon remain virtuous, restrained, *controlled*.

Thus, masculinity’s definition is swiftly altered. Temperance, patience, control: these are the words with which the powers wish men to relate, for if man no longer seeks materialistic items through violence, the government can control both market and war. “The Bower of Bliss must be destroyed not because its gratifications are unreal but because they threaten “civility” – civilization which for Spenser is achieved only through renunciation and the constant exercise of power” (Greenblatt 173). The sexual empowerment of humans is not doubted as a natural thread of humanity, but Palmer and the government he represents must degrade this idea in order to remain in charge. His rule is threatened by human desire and so he “guides” Sir Guyon to destroy the Bower, and thus his own internal power. This ultimately becomes the new ideal man, one whom gives up his humanistic qualities and desires for the furthering of the rule. But Sir Guyon still engages in destruction, casting goblets of wine aside in violent fury, and demolishing Acrasia’s palace. However, Palmer and the powers allot this violence, as it aids their own cause while allowing our knight his form of release necessary for survival. When one takes away a

basic aspect of humanity, it must be recreated in another sense. Palmer cannot destroy human nature, but he can alter its appearance; blurring the lines between what the government deems virtuous and what is critical for the survival of mankind. “When suddenly a grosse fog over spread” (Spenser 207). The minds of men have literally become clouded by propaganda; it is difficult to seek out corruption when a thick fog of religious cant threatens eternal damnation.

But while Sir Guyon and the world’s herd of sheep believe themselves rid of sexual frustration and desire, in reality it has simply been reconstructed. Matter cannot be destroyed, only renamed. Eroticism cannot be eliminated, but violence can enfeeble it. The powers at large would much rather rule a race of destructive creatures than one of empowered. And so, playing on the gullible and greedy traits of humanity, Palmer and all he represents deems Sir Guyon to destroy the Bower of Bliss. Conditioned to believe promiscuous acts a sin, our knight reduces Acrasia’s lair to rubble, all in a means to find a release for the sexual desire he is attempting to destroy. “Power may, prohibit desire, but it is in its own way a version of then erotic: the violence directed against Acrasia's sensual paradise is both in itself an equivalent of erotic excess and a pledge of loving service to the royal mistress” (Greenblatt 173). Acrasia, deemed by Palmer a whore, is a master of disguise, recreating herself for the preference of each man’s sexual fantasy. Ironically, however, it is the government who plays the true masked role, shrouding its true intention beneath God’s commandments and civilization’s needs. “And all the margent round about was sett, / With shady Laurell trees, thence to defend / The sunny beames” (Spenser 216). The imagery in the poem fears encroaching sunlight, for light is truth, and truth power’s demise. Without the shadows of fear no threat drives Sir Guyon’s rage, and so it is crucial that Palmer keep him in the dark, where only *his* guiding words stir our knight’s actions. Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.

This idea of false pretence is reflected not only in the characters of Acrasia and Palmer, but in the entirety of the Bower as well. While seemingly a landscape likened to Eden, Acrasia's Bower of Bliss is depicted as a cross-pollination of nature and art:

“The Bower's art imitates nature, but is privileged to choose only those aspects of nature that correspond to man's ideal visions; its music is so perfectly melodious and ‘attempted’ that it blends with all of nature in one harmony, so that the whole world seems transformed into a musical ‘consort’; above all, the calculation and effort that lie behind the manifestation of such perfect beauty are entirely concealed” (Greenblatt 189).

It too masks the truth by eliminating imperfection. Every grape is succulent, some even gold. Every drop of water crystal clear and cool. It is within the attempt to destroy the Bower of Bliss that the unnatural is unearthed. Humanity without greed and sexual desire is “perfect,” however, it is not possible, and therefore cannot be real. Perfection cannot be real. Humans in their simplest essence are flawed. And in the end, a nonexistent place fails to be destroyed. You cannot bring to life, nor devastate, that which lacks existence.

Therefore, Sir Guyon ultimately fails. Yes, it is true that he destroys the Bower. The fountain topples, the wine has all been spilt, however, he can never be triumphant in destroying the idea beneath it, that of temptation. His quest has been in vain. It is crucial that Acrasia remain living at the conclusion of canto twelve, for with her lives on man's sexual desire. The false truths around her are all gone, and so, Acrasia is reduced to her simplest form: human temptation. “Her in chaines of adamant he tyde; / For nothing else might keepe her safe and sound” (Spenser 223). As any aspect of human nature is unable to be destroyed, Sir Guyon settles for the capture and subduing of Acrasia, therefore the mastering and subduing of human

sexual desire. But Acrasia's survival also plays a significant role in the governmental conditioning. As stated earlier, there is nothing more dangerous to a source of power than an educated people. It is Palmer's duty to retain Guyon's attention, loyalty, and good thoughts just as it is the government's responsibility to be sure its citizens are not looking to usurp it. By providing Sir Guyon with a quest of "utmost importance," Palmer can continue his conditioning in a way that poses no threat to his power. Keep the humans busy so that they have no time to think and question. At the conclusion of Spenser's second book, Acrasia is tied up and taken away. Her survival perpetuates Sir Guyon's quest, allowing for her "threat" to be defeated in the future should the government need to drum up a menace.

While Sir Guyon represents the population buying into power's propaganda, Spenser's poem also features those who see it for its truth. The characterization of Grylle and the hogs represents those humans who fail to follow Palmer's message. "They heard an hideous bellowing / Of many beasts, that roard outrageously, / As if that hungers point, or Venus sting / Had them enraged with fell surquedry" (Spenser 208). Written from the propagandized point, Spenser describes these beasts as howling and proud monsters who are to be feared. However, in reality they are simply men who have remained true to themselves and their natural humanistic needs. The characterization of them as "beasts" is therefore quite ironic, as they are among the *only* characters to remain human. "That now he chooseth, with vile difference, / To be a beast, and lacke intelligence" (Spenser 224). Palmer's description of Grylle at the canto's conclusion is poignant in that he makes him out to be unwise and uncultured. He is, however, only "uncivilized" in the eyes of Sir Guyon's propagandized views, and among the most intelligent for seeing through the shroud. Described as a menace and a danger, Grylle and the other hogs are the remaining members of society who are releasing their sexual energy as just that instead of

transforming into violence, making them the most peaceful and natural of all the characters in the poem.

Spenser's other enlightened character(s) is that of Acrasia, and in more general terms, his female "temptresses." The government controlled religious doctrine preached by Palmer, holds women to blame for the sexual desire felt by men. Women are prone to trickery and responsible for the original sin that darkens mankind through the ages. Acrasia is said to be, "the witch of the world," a characterization related to sorcery and therefore forced actions (Greenblatt 189). Men are not to be responsible for their ways, as a woman has led them on, and *tricked* them into sinful acts of sex. "Where many Mermayds haunt, making false melodies" (Spenser 202). Palmer is adamant to not only guide Sir Guyon from the wily merfolk, but to preach to him of women's ways as well. "Faire Sir, be not displeasd if disobayd: / For ill it were to harken to her cry; / For she is inly nothing ill apayd, / But onely womanish fine forgery, / Your stubborne hart t'affect with fraile infirmity" (Spenser 205). He also makes a point to describe the female sex as emotional, and manipulative. When they encounter the sea monsters, Palmer states, "and all that dreadful Armie fast gan flye / Into great Tethys bosome, where they hidden lye" (Spenser 205). This relates back to the tale of Adam and Eve in that the root of evil, in this case the threatening creatures, originate from a woman. However, throughout canto twelve, the women are far from evil in their actions and ways. Acrasia herself is seen in no other act then one of a sexual nature, hardly harmful in the basic sense. The mermaids sing from rocks and call for Sir Guyon, but upon Palmer's refusal they do not pursue their ship; it is simply an offer not taken and nothing more. The women with the lily paps are playing innocently, for it is only through our own conditioned eyes that we perceive the naked form as something more than natural. And so, any

and all female characters represented are also enlightened and prove themselves more intelligent than Sir Guyon and Palmer's congregation.

The hogs and the women lack an aggressive nature for they have accepted their natural human need for sexual release. Without the organic outlet, mankind must find an alternative: violence. The constant withholding of sexual desire directly causes the violent nature of mankind.

In the Bower of Bliss that process is depicted as involving a painful sexual renunciation: in Guyon's destructive act we are invited to experience the ontogeny of our culture's violent resistance to a sensuous release for which it never the less yearns with a new intensity (Greenblatt 175). “

Society and “civilization” are threatened by human nature. We have been conditioned to be terrified, terrified that if we condone the idea of sexual empowerment there will be nudists teaching our toddlers and ringing up our groceries. But we cannot separate ourselves from our natural desires, and so we look for alternative forms of release. And somehow, the most acceptable became a violent nature. “Then th’one her selfe low ducked into the flood, / Abasht, that her a straunger did avise: / But thother rather higher did arise” (Spenser 217). The women in the fountain do not play naked for voyeuristic or autagonistophilistic purposes. Upon catching Sir Guyon's glare one quickly dives below the water nervous at his presence, while the other stands up boldly. But why are we ashamed of our own skin? Why dive below, and why be judged for standing tall? Our sexual needs are nothing to be discomfited by, they are empowering when owned, and healthy when released. It is our government that tells us who to be, and how to act, and what is acceptable and what is crude. But when did nature become

crude? When did sex transform into only a reproductive measure? “Societies attempt to avert ‘tragic results, that is, results which imply the rejection of values which are proclaimed to be fundamental’” (Greenblatt 178). We, the general population, should decide our value system, not those in power with an agenda to promote and a product to sell.

Sir Guyon’s governmentally sponsored quest is just another form of shrouded control. The power warns us of the wiles of women and the dangers of sexual joy. How it is immoral and uncivilized to be a human on the most basic of human levels? And how is sexual release is unnecessary and precarious, but somehow violence is not only condoned, but also encouraged?

“And if excess is virtually invented by this power, so too, paradoxically, power is invented by excess: this is why Acrasia cannot be destroyed, why she and what she is made to represent must continue to exist, for ever the object of the destructive quest. For were she not to exist as a constant threat, the power Guyon embodies would also cease to exist. After all, we can assume that the number of people who actually suffer in any period from melt-down as a result of sexual excess is quite small, small enough to raise questions about the motives behind the elaborate moral weaponry designed to combat the supposed danger (Greenblatt 177).

We are conditioned not to ask questions. We are conditioned to be yes men. We are conditioned to be soldiers; fighting for a government we were conditioned to vote for. We are taught that violence is a necessary release. That war is beneficial and love is crude. And we are given the weapons and the propaganda to fight, and destroy, any who may speak against our “beliefs.” “Worse is the danger hidden, then descried” (Spenser 207). Lust and folly are publically condemned. But worse are the powers condemning them. Worse are the people ending them. Sex

is not bad, violence is not the answer, and the truth needs to be told without consequence from now on.

We are scared of ourselves, and scared of our desires. What we should fear is the army our government has made us into. We fight for the ideals they have taught us to recite. We fight for their paychecks, and their ability to laugh freely at the end of the day. We are the beasts. Mindless and trained, frightful and deadly to any whom may stray from the pack.

Works Cited

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