Vying with Vision: An Aspect of Envy in *The Faerie Queene**

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In 1916, in an article on Ben Jonson, W.D. Briggs remarked that envy

has in the last few generations ceased to occupy the important literary position that it formerly held. If we may judge by the frequency with which it is spoken of, and the amount of space devoted to an analysis of it and its various forms in the older literatures, whether of the Elizabethan or the classical period, whether in the literature of England or that of the continent, envy was considered to be one of the major passions of mankind, quite comparable in importance and interest with hate or love or ambition.¹

Renaissance writers treated envy with particular relish partly because, as they turned to the past, they discovered the importance attached to the vice by both Christian and classical authorities. The still-vital tradition of the Seven Deadly Sins subordinated envy, of course, only to pride. It constantly linked envy with detraction, an audible manifestation of the poison rankling within—the “develes Pater Noster,” as Chaucer called it.² “Slanderer,” of course, is the meaning of *diabolos*, and this, together with the assertion in Wisdom 2:24 that Satan’s envy brought death into the world, had provoked in medieval commentaries on the Bible much discussion of envy as a singularly demonic sin.³ From the Greeks, Renaissance writers could learn about the distinctions between envy and comparable emotions: emulation, especially, but also pity and indignation.⁴ Divine *phthonos*, “god-grudge,” as it is rendered in a recent translation of the *Oresteia*, was a phenomenon dramatized in Greek drama and discussed in ancient philosophy,⁵ although in the Renaissance it was more often Fortune than God who was envious. Finally, the iconography of envy stems both from Lucian’s description of the lost “Calumny of Apelles,” the influence of which in the Renaissance David Cast has recently documented, and from Ovid’s vivid prosopopeia of Envy in Book II of the *Metamorphoses*.⁶ The co-existence and sometimes the fusion of these vigorous traditions in the Renaissance made envy as a literary motif worthy of the attention Briggs sought to bring to it.

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Given the literary interest in envy during the Renaissance, it is probably unsurprising that in the "delightfull land of Faery" "so exceeding spacious and wyde" (VI, Proem, 1)⁷ Spenser presents Envy directly twice, first in the procession of sins in the House of Pride (I.iv. 30-32) and then at the end of Book V, when Artegall encounters Envy and Detraction as he returns from Irena's kingdom to the faery court (V.xii. 27-43). In both these instances, we have set-pieces, "speaking pictures" very much in the manner of Whitney's Ovidian emblem, "Invidiae descriptio."⁸ Spenser also sets forth envy indirectly in the characters of Ate, Sclaunder, and Corflambo in Book IV: these are all invidious opponents of Amity, as Rosemond Tuve has shown.⁹ But it is principally in Book VI, the Legend of Courtesy, that Spenser displays the spirit of detraction at work. The final book of the poem, which uses the Blatant Beast, object of Calidore's quest, as an iconographical referent for all that envy and detraction represent, is in several subtle ways Spenser's anatomy of envy. I concentrate on one aspect of Spenser's analysis of envy in this essay.

The wordplay of my title hints at a poetic strategy Spenser uses toward the end of *The Faerie Queene*. Simply by dramatizing in imaginative ways the literal meaning of *in-videre* ("to look maliciously against"), Spenser creates some telling poetic effects.¹⁰ Elsewhere in the poem he had depicted envy as a form of distorted perception. To the Envy that appears in the procession of sins wearing a robe "ypainted full of eyes," "death it was, when any good he saw" (I. iv. 30-31). Similarly, the Envy Artegall meets "With her dull eyes did seeme to looke askew" (V.xii. 29). At the Castle of Alma, moreover, Spenser includes "corrupt enuies" among the "monstrous rablement" that assault the "bulwarke of the Sight" (II.xi.8). By emphasizing the etymology of *invidia* in this way, Spenser approximates Bacon's understanding of envy as the *oculus malus*. Remarking that Scripture calls envy the "evil eye," Bacon says

that still there seemeth to be acknowledged in the act of envy, an ejaculation or irradiation of the eye. Nay, some have been so curious as to note that the times when the stroke or percussion of an envious eye doth most hurt are, when the party envied is beheld in glory or triumph; for that sets an edge upon envy; and besides at such times, the spirits of the person envied do come forth most into the outward parts, and so meet the blow.¹¹

Though indifferent to the biophysics of envy derived by Bacon from Plutarch, Spenser does attempt in Book VI to create an awareness that some observers are basilisks.

The Proem to the Book underscores the difficulty of discerning true courtesy, an inner state of being, from the specious appearance of courtesy "Fashion'd to please the eies of them, that pas./Which see not perfect things but in a glas" (VI, Proem, 5). This optical imagery, the proleptic

functions of which Richard Mallette has recently studied,¹² creates a context for Spenser's iteration of a series of intrusions throughout the Book which cast the intruder as an envious voyeur. The first occurs in Canto ii, when an unnamed knight stumbles on Priscilla and Aladine who have retreated to "a couert glade/Within a wood" to pursue "ioyous iolliment/Of their franke loues, free from all gealous spyes" (VI.ii.16). But the sheltered retreat proves to be less secure than they think, for they are discovered by a knight who "inly gan her louer to enuy/And wish, that he part of his spoyle might share" (VI.ii.17). This episode yields meaning fairly readily. Priscilla and Aladine, seeking the serenity of *securitas animi* (which Cast identifies as a state of mind posed against envy and calumny by Alberti, for instance¹³), seek an unattainable ideal. They want the excellence reserved for the lovers of the Garden of Adonis, where "Franckly each paramour his leman knowes,/Each bird his mate, ne any does enuie/ Their goodly meriment, and gay felicitie" (III.vi.41). But this utopian freedom from envy, an aspect of erotic wish-fulfillment found also in the Bower of Bliss (II.xii.58) and the Temple of Venus (IV.x.28), is normally denied Spenser's lovers.¹⁴ In the *Amoretti*, the envious *lauzenjador* of troubadour poetry becomes a menacing presence in sonnets 85 and 86. In the *Hymm of Love*, "gnawing enuie" (259) and "false reports" (261) are among the troubles that threaten to make "a louers life a wretches hell" (265). Spenser sees that love, precisely because it is a supreme good, is particularly vulnerable to envy: the attraction of lovers draws the detraction of the loveless, unwittingly.

The second intrusion in the series occurs when Calidore, hunting the Beast, chances on Calepine and Serena indulging in delight in a place Calepine "thought from daunger free/And far from enuious eyes that mote him spight" (VI.iii.20). This is a peculiar moment in the poem: pursuing the Beast, envy incarnate, Calidore unwittingly becomes the envious spectator Calepine and Serena had thought to avoid. But the irony intensifies when Serena, left alone and "Without suspect of ill or daungers hidden dred" (VI.iii.23), is suddenly snatched from her carefree serenity by the Beast itself, while Calidore courteously discourses on his "default" to Calepine. Spenser suggests here, as he implicates Calidore himself in the events that lead to Serena's wounding, that envy is a furtive and inscrutable force, appearing when least expected and settling into the most unlikely hosts.

An extension of these episodes appears in Canto viii when Serena, now cured by the Hermit of the Beast's bite, falls asleep in a wild desert "Fearelesse of ought, that mote her peace molest" (VI.viii.34). But no sooner is she safe in "Morpheus bosome" than a salvage nation, cannibals all, fall by chance upon her. "Soone as they spide her, Lord what gladfull glee/They made amongst them selues . . ." (VI.viii.37). A debate ensues

over the dilemma whether they ought "her eate attonce; or many meales to make" (VI.viii.37). The rest of the episode dwells on the cannibals' eyes as, in a parody of the blazon, they speculate obscenely on the lady's several parts: "Some with their eyes the daintest morsels chose;/Some praise her paps, some praise her lips and nose" (VI.viii.39). As an image of privacy violated, the situating of Serena amongst the anthropophagi could hardly be more concentrated. In one way, it reveals the fundamental lack of courtesy inherent in "lust of the eyes." But since the vice of Book VI is the Blatant Beast, a composite of envy and detraction, the principal attributes of which are malevolent eyes and poison mouth respectively, one can also interpret the cannibals' scrutiny of Serena as a form of *invidia* and their mock-encomium of her as a form of *detractio*. Bernard Gilpin, in a sermon preached before Edward VI in 1552, notes that

Histories make mention of a people called Anthropophagi, eaters of men, which all mens hearts abhor to hear of; and yet, alas, by St. Paul's rule, England is full of such man-eaters. Every man envieth another, every man biteth and gnaweth upon another with venemous addres tongues, far more noisom than any teeth.¹⁵

Calepine rescues Serena before the savages make of her a common feast, but Spenser has already impressed upon us that they have cannibalized her with their eyes.

The climax of the series of intrusions in Book VI is, of course, Calidore's disruption of Colin's vision of the Graces. This much-discussed moment serves simultaneously as an epiphany of grace, the inner source of courtesy, and as a revelation of envy, the principal source of discourtesy. Before commenting on this scene, I think it appropriate to discuss briefly Calidore as knight of courtesy.

If Calidore is sometimes deficient in the courtesy Spenser postulates as a queller of *invidia*, the reason is that "Of Court it seemes, men Courtesie doe call" (VI.i.1.). The comment is a compliment to Gloriana, whose court, as the final line of the Proem states, excels in courtesy. But courtesy only "seems" to emanate from the court, for Spenser cannot suppress his awareness of the court as the nursery of envy, slander, fawning, and backbiting, themselves the seeds of uncivil conversation. The portrait of the "brave courtier" in *Mother Hubberds Tale* (717-729), the passage on "Courtiers schoolery" in *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* (688-730), the allegories of "Februarie" and *Muiopotmos*, as I have elsewhere argued, corroborate C.S. Lewis' point that Spenser, as poet, "is not at home in the artificialities of the court."¹⁶ Though he worked as a government official, though he sought Elizabeth's favour, though he longed, like Sidney and Raleigh, the men he most admired, to get a place, hoping by praise to be upraised, there was for him no room at the top.¹⁷ A courtier

manqué, Spenser nevertheless disapproved of much that he saw in court life. Hence the encomiastic pretence, the fiction of praise, begins to disintegrate in the 1590's under the pressure of Spenser's disenchantment with the very world he had courted. His voice becomes ever more querulous, as complaints compete with encomia for the public's attention. Spenser ends his career, one must remind those who see in it only a duplication of the Virgilian paradigm, with publicly concerned prose but essentially private poetry, for which a motto might be *Epithalamion's* "So I vnto my selfe alone will sing."¹⁸

Courtesy becomes particularly problematic in Canto ix of the final book when Calidore moves from court to country. Put simply, Calidore smuggles envy across this border. Before the knight arrives, Meliboe's world is one of unmitigated contentment: "Therefore I doe not any one enuy,/Nor am enuyde of any one therefore" (VI.ix.21). But paradoxically it is just this contentment that provokes Calidore into saying "That certes I your happinesse enuie/And wish my lot were plast in such felicitie" (VI.ix.19). Gazing constantly on Pastorella, Meliboe's ward, Calidore intrudes into a domain in which he is a misfit. Pastorella, a little like Serena among the savages, becomes the "obiect of his vew/On which his hungry eye was alwayes bent" (VI.ix.26). As Calidore becomes her suitor, thereby realizing another meaning of courtier, the parvenu elicits the envy of Coridon, the craven cowherd Spenser uses as foil to the urbane shepherd. The retreat generates, then, the Beast seemingly left behind. Thus, Calidore's bucolic withdrawal is a version, writ large, of lovers' futile attempts earlier in the book to escape *invidia* in covert groves.

During Calidore's pastoral truancy, Colin, the Spenserian persona first assumed in 1579, enters the poem. In the stanza that expresses Pastorella's preference for shepherd over knight, artist over courtier, Spenser announces immediately the incompatibility of Colin and Calidore. The stanza dismisses peremptorily the mores of the court, as Pastorella rejects Calidore's "courteous guize" absolutely:

But she that neuer had acquainted beene
With such quaint vsage, fit for Queenes and Kings,
Ne euer had such knightly seruice seene,
But being bred vnder base shepheards wings,
Had euer learn'd to loue the lowly things,
Did litle whit regard his courteous guize,
But cared more for Colins carolings
Then all that he could doe, or euer deuize:
His layes, his loues, his lookes she did them all despize. (VI.ix.35)

Though Pastorella later succumbs a little to Calidore's Blandina-like blandishments, preferring him to Coridon, there is never any suggestion that he usurps Colin's place in her esteem.

When Calidore comes upon Colin atop Acidale—the vatic poet and his vision—he instinctively recognizes that to enter the scene would be to break the spell: “He durst not enter into th’open greene,/For dread of them vnwares to be descryde/For breaking of their daunce, if he were seene” (VI.x.11). He recognizes that this, the genesis of courteous and poetic secrecy, “the sacred nursery/Of vertue,” as the Proem calls it, must remain inviolate, must “Hidden ly/From view of men, and wicked worlds disdaine” (VI. Proem. 3). But he cannot contain himself: all eyes, he is so beguiled “That euen he him selfe his eyes enuyde” (VI.x.11). Affirming the resemblance of this scene to the envious intrusions already discussed, this remarkable line presents the idea that envy feeds upon itself. As Thomas Bastard writes in his epigram “In Invidum,”

One eye did enuie at the other eye,
Because the other enuide more then he.
His hand did fight for the first iniurie,
So enuie enui'de, enuied to be.¹⁹

The feigning knight, here cloaked as shepherd, like Phrygian Paris,²⁰ cannot be initiated into the mystery of true courtesy among the Graces who “naked are, that without guile/Or false dissemblance all them plaine may see” (VI.x.24). He cannot even appreciate the profundity of Colin’s dismay that the vision had disappeared when interrupted by his intrusion. Even though Colin had broken his pipe “for fell despight/Of that displeasure” (VI.x.18), Calidore greets him with the blithe, insensitive words, “Haile, iolly shepheard, which thy ioyous dayes/Here ledest in this goodly merry make” (VI.x.19). Since Colin is Spenser’s poetic persona and the vision he evokes is the most fully articulated version of courtesy in the poem, Calidore’s abject failure to fathom what unfolds before him betrays Spenser’s uneasiness with the basic motive of Book VI.

In the “detached retrospective commentary on the poem,”²¹ known as the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, Spenser reverts to some of the motifs I have been discussing, but transposes them from a social to a cosmic plane. The Cantos are, among other things, Spenser’s aetiology of envy. The aspirations of *Mutabilitie* spring from *invidia* and her desire to supplant the radiant Cynthia who reigns in such everlasting glory, *semper eadem*,

That when the hardy Titanesse beheld
The goodly building of her Palace bright
Made of the heauens substance, and vpheld
With thousand Crystall pillors of huge hight,
She gan to burne in her ambitious spright
And t’enuie her that in such glorie reigned (VII.vi.10).

Later *Mutabilitie* bursts in on the assembly of the gods “To see that mortall

eyes haue neuer seen" (VII.vi.32). Forging the link between Mutabilitie's *invidia* and its analogues in Book VI is the Faunus story. In a parody of the Actaeon and Diana myth, Spenser's acutely significant "digression" has Faunus spy on the naked Diana after Molanna places him "where he close might view/That neuer any saw, saue onely one" (VII.vi.45). Faunus, the peeping Tom, is eventually revealed as a "Mome," (VII.vi.49) a word that, as Nohrnberg proposes, is suitable for Mutabilitie as well.²² For Momus, a stock character in descriptions of *invidia*, was, according to Cooper's *Thesaurus*, the "carpynge god of reprehension, sonne of Nox and Somnus, whose propertie it is (as poetes feygne) neuer to doe or make any thyng hymselfe, but with curious eyes to beholde the doynge of other."²³ As Burton pointed out, he is to the gods as Zoilus is to Homer, or Thersites to Agamemnon.²⁴ The Faunus and Mutabilitie narratives illuminate each other, then, since each entails an intrusion upon and therefore a detraction from what is customarily private and hidden.

Mutabilitie thinks she understands the natural processes to which she lays claim because she is content with ocular proof. Her plea is that we see decay and renewal daily, that we behold change everywhere, that we constantly observe the vicissitudes of life. She calls on Nature to render "a verdict of thine eye" (VII.vii.27) and tells the gods, "the things/Which we see not how they are mou'd and swayd,/Ye may attribute to your selues as Kings,/And say they by your secret powre are made:/But what we see not, who shall vs perswade?" (VII.vii.49). Mutabilitie fails in her attempt to supplant the gods, however, because her invidious misperception of the natural order—her persistent effort to save the appearances rather than yield to insight—is vision gone askew. When the verdict is delivered, Mutabilitie learns that in fact she sees through a glass darkly:

But time shall come that all shall changed bee,
And from thenceforth, none no more change shall see.
So was the Titaness put downe and whist,
And Ioue confirm'd in his imperiall see (VII.vii.59).

With this startling equivocal on "see," the most envious intruder in the poem is dismissed. The threat of the Blatant Beast is finally exorcised and Spenser withdraws inward to pray for the "Sabaoths sight" that for him will correct the astigmatism and misprisions of the fallen world.

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Notes

- 1 "Source Material for Jonson's Plays," *MLN*, 31 (1916), 325.
- 2 "The Parson's Tale," X, 507 in *The Works*, ed. F.N. Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961).
- 3 Guilelmus Peraldus, *Summa Aurea de Virtutibus et Vitiis* (Venice, 1497), sig. R3^v – R5^v is a typical and influential discussion of envy; Peraldus' work was known to both Chaucer and Dante. Satan's association with envy, in literature and in rabbinical and patristic commentaries, is discussed extensively in J.M. Evans, *Paradise Lost and the Genesis Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).
- 4 On emulation (*zelos*), see Aristotle, *Rhetorica* II. xi. 1388 a 30, or Hesiod, *Poems and Fragments*, tr. A.W. Mair (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), pp. 1-2. On envy, pity and indignation, see Aristotle, *Rhetorica* II. ix. 1386 b 10, a passage paraphrased in two formal orations on envy delivered by members of the Academie du Palais in 1576: see Edouard Fremy, *L'Academie des derniers Valois* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, n.d.), pp. 321-349.
- 5 See Peter Walcot, *Envy and the Greeks* (Warminster: Aris and Philips, 1978).
- 6 David Cast, *The Calumny of Apelles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981). On Ovid's *Invidia*, see M.W. Dickie, "Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 2: 760-64," *AJP*, 96 (1975), 378-390.
- 7 All quotations from Spenser refer to *Spenser: Poetical Works*, ed. J.C. Smith and E. De Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).
- 8 *A Choice of Emblems* (1586; facs. rpt. Menston: Scolar Press, 1969).
- 9 *Allegorical Imagery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 129.
- 10 The most comprehensive treatments of sight in the poem ignore *invidia*. See J.B. Dallett, "Ideas of Sight in The Faerie Queene," *ELH*, 27 (1960), 87-121, and Kathleen Williams, "Spenser and the Metaphor of Sight," *Rice University Studies*, 60 (1974), 153-169.
- 11 *The Essays*, ed. S.H. Reynolds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1890), p. 56.
- 12 "Poet and Hero in Book VI of 'The Faerie Queene,'" *MLR*, 72 (1977), 256-267.
- 13 Cast, pp. 35 and 38.
- 14 M.Y. Hughes writes that "freedom from envy is a main character of all Spenser's Utopias"; see "Burton on Spenser," *PMLA*, 41 (1926), 564.
- 15 Quoted in William Gilpin, *The Life of Bernard Gilpin* (London, 1752), p. 45.
- 16 *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 328; Ronald B. Bond, "Invidia and The Allegory of Spenser's 'Muiopotmos,'" *ESC*, 2 (1976), 144-155, and "Supplantation in the Elizabethan Court: The Theme Of Spenser's February Eclogue," in *Spenser Studies II*, ed. Patrick Cullen and Thomas P. Roche, Jr. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981), pp. 55-65.
- 17 See Muriel Bradbrook, "No Room at the Top: Spenser's Pursuit of Fame," in *Elizabethan Poetry*, ed. J.R. Brown and B. Harris, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 2 (London: E. Arnold, 1960), pp. 91-109.
- 18 On Spenser's misgivings about the effectiveness of epic and public poetry, see A. Leigh de Neef, "'Who now does follow the foule Blatant Beast': Spenser's Self-Effacing Fictions," *Renaissance Papers 1978*, ed. A.L. de Neef and M.T. Hester (Durham, N.C.: Southeastern Renaissance Conference, 1979), pp. 11-21 and David R. Shore, "Spenser's *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*: The Problem of Poetry," *ESC*, 8 (1982), 262-281.
- 19 *Chrestoleros: Seven Books of Epigrammes*, The Spenser Society 47 (1888; rpt. Burt Franklin, 1967), p. 38.
- 20 The fullest treatment of the implications of this allusion (VI.ix.36) is in Louis Adrian Montrose, "Gifts and Reasons: The Contexts of Peele's *Araygnement of Paris*," *ELH*, 47 (1980), 433-459.
- 21 William Blissett, "Spenser's Mutabilitie," in *Essays in English Literature Presented to A.S.P. Woodhouse*, ed. Millar MacLure and F.W. Watt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), p. 26.

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- 22 James Nohrnberg, *The Analogy of 'The Faerie Queene'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 749-753.
- 23 Cooper, s.v. *Momus*, *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britanniae* (1565; facs. rpt. Menston: Scholar Press, 1969).
- 24 Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Floyd Dell and Paul Jordan-Smith (London: Routledge and Sons, 1931), p. 290.