Book Reviews

Georgia Ronan Crampton. *The Condition of Creatures: Suffering and Action in Chaucer and Spenser*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974. Pp. x, 207. \$10.

Agere et pati: to do and to suffer. This topos, Professor Crampton suggests, was a stock theme in western thought from the time of Homer. She first traces its development in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Plato, and then shows that in the Latin Middle Ages and the Renaissance the topos flourished, offering a successful formula by which both arts and sciences could be comprehended. The rest of the book uses this philosophical structure to focus on the nature of the human predicament in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*.

The Knight's Tale, she argues, is an examination of man's power to understand the ingredients of his universe and to act in the face of them. It traces Theseus' confrontation with Fate, Chance, and Human Freedom, and reveals his growing awareness that even reason and power do not guarantee free choice in the face of gratuitous, darkly-perceived Chance (the earthquake). It is not Jupiter but Saturn, dark Chaos, who capriciously controls this world in which "the gods are a correlative for arbitrary accident" and the universe is potentially absurd. Thus Theseus' last speech concerning the universe's "Firste Moevere" is an expression only of hope, not of certainty.

The *Faerie Queene* is the story of the Christian pilgrim, now acting, now suffering, in the course of his salvation. Redcrosse acts against the monster, Error, suffers jealousy and separation at the sight of the False Una, is totally passive (matter without soul?) in Orgoglio's dungeon, and except for his decision to "try" the wiles of Despair remains so until his battle with the Dragon. With his return to the world he establishes the human pattern: "alternately vincible and victorious, alternately acting and suffering. That is how it is." Sir Guyon, however, is a study in the "doer." Except for his faint after the trials of Mammon he acts according to Cicero's definition of fortitude: he undertakes difficult tasks and endures hardships. Love in Books 3 and 4 varies from a private passion, destructive to humanity or at least obstructive to free choice (Britomart, Scudamour), to the basis of all ethical action (Arthur) which makes man agent.

The book concludes by suggesting that Spenser generally celebrates the power of human action, Chaucer the necessity of human suffering. Both poets permit man freedom of choice within "the small sphere of intimate life" where controlled action is to some extent possible (greater for Spenser, less for Chaucer); but beyond this limited context, in "a circle immeasurably larger, mysterious," both poets see man as condemned to suffer. Neither poet, however, solves the question of the relationship of free will and destiny, offering us a description only of what it is like on earth, not why it is so.

Professor Crampton gives us an instructive chapter on the history of a far-ranging topos, one well worth reading. Her analysis of *The Knight's Tale* seems to me essentially sound, although she undervalues its most important statement, one which she herself stresses: "We witen nat what thing we preyen heere." In fact all prayers but one are answered in the tale, and surely prayers are actions? To see all men (save Theseus) as only sufferers denies this recognition. Moreover, she fails to distinguish between the similes of the human condition used by Arcite and Palamon. It is true that Palamon's vision of men as cowering sheep to

be destroyed at the whims of the gods reduces man to sufferer; but to say that we are like drunken men unable to find our way home, as Arcite does, would seem to imply freedom of choice but ignorance of the consequences. It is only in their results that these two systems reduce man to the same ineffectual state.

One is always convinced that what is said about Spenser is right; the reading of Redcross quest, Guyon's voyage, the varied impulse of love, the "active" nature of the quest, all ring true. But much of it is somewhat superficial and obvious. There are at least two implications of the topos for the *Faerie Queene*: first, it is a study of ethical philosophy whose crowning virtue is magnificence, *magnum-facere*—the doing of great deeds. What is the continuing role of Arthur within this structure? Second, what is Spenser's theological position? A fundamental distinction between Calvinism and Anglicanism is that, in the former, grace is *imposed* on the elect—man "suffers" salvation. The Thirty-Nine Articles assert, however, that man *co-operates* with grace, "co-acting" in his salvation. The book considers neither of these problems, each of radical significance.

Perhaps the dissatisfaction one feels throughout is that, in fact, the topos Professor Crampton considers is just too common. Languages are built with verbs, active and passive. Wherever there are verbs we can find the *agere et pati* theme. One begins to wonder whether looking for action and suffering in literature is somewhat like looking for "up and down," "black and white," "good and evil." It is in the nature of Reality that these polarities exist.

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A. Bartlett Giamatti. *Play of Double Senses: Spenser's Faerie Queene*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975. Pp. xi, 140. \$2.95.

That Spenserian criticism has offered a rich harvest in recent decades becomes very clear when the initial reaction to a brief study as fine as *Play of Double Senses* can be "Here's another good book on *The Faerie Queene*." Although not all such are of equally high standard, there has been no dearth of worthwhile materials since (putting a personal limit on the word "recent") Hamilton, Nelson, Hough and Fowler broke trail for Cheney, Williams, Alpers, Hankin, Bayley, to name only some who have dealt with the whole epic in ways stimulating, substantial, or both. The plenitude gives rise occasionally to suspicions that little remains to be said about *The Faerie Queene* unless by those engaged in burrowing deeper into narrowing passages of the labyrinth; suspicions are partially confirmed by the growing number of studies devoted to one or two books. But in saner moments we know that there will always be something fresh to say of the interplay between an epic as rich as Spenser's and a receptive intelligent critic. When the voice is as pleasing as Professor Giamatti's, ready ears should be easy to find.

So, obviously, the editor and publishers of the "Landmarks in Literature" series have decided, in arranging for this work and issuing it from the start in paperback. It is directed to students, its author asserts, although he hopes not to have ignored the scholars. He serves the interests of both groups successfully.

In Part One, scholars who are also teachers of Spenser (and not all, thereby, automatically active Spenserians) will be happy to find for recommendation (and their own scarce prepar-