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The Circle and the Cross: The Self-Destructive Nature of Evil in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*

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The Self-Destructive Nature of Evil in
Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*

Scott De Young
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Abstract

The theme of good and evil is at the forefront of Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*; can virtue survive and overcome vice? Because this theme is widely prevalent in *The Faerie Queene*, it is fittingly prevalent in the existing scholarship on *The Faerie Queene*. When commenting on the workings of evil in *The Faerie Queene*, most scholars tend to focus on either the historical or literary influences on Spenser’s evil characters, or they focus on the manner in which evil poses a threat to good. I am in no way arguing against these scholars. My contention, though, is to also express the manner in which evil poses a threat to itself. Before offering a close reading of books one and two regarding evil’s self-destructive tendency (and a brief overview of this theme in the subsequent books), I first establish the nature of evil by looking at the Book of Psalms (“He who is pregnant with evil / and conceives trouble gives birth to disillusionment. / He who digs a hole and scoops it out / falls into the pit he has made. / The trouble he causes recoils on himself; / his violence comes down on his own head.”), St. Augustine (“Just in the same way, what are called vices in the soul are nothing but privations of natural good.”), C.S. Lewis (“Evil requires the good on which it is parasitic in order to continue its parasitic existence.”), and Aristotle (“I do not mean, however, that [defect and excess] are combined in any one person: that would be impossible, because the evil destroys itself.”). After laying a philosophical base regarding the self-destructive nature of evil, the bulk of this essay shows the manner in which evil brings frustration and destruction to itself in *The Faerie Queene*. For instance, in 1.1, after Redcrosse beheads Errour, her evil offspring turn in on their mother and drink up her blood until their bellies burst and bowels gush forth. Spenser then comments in regards to Redcrosse: “Now needeth him no lenger labour spend, / His foes have slaine them selves w ith whom he should contend.” Another example can be found in 2.5. Even though Sir Guyon has just bound Occasion and Furor, Pyrochles rashly asks for their release. Once released, they violently turn on Pyrochles until he is covered in dirt and blood and burning brands. The Palmer comments on the natural course of evil, noting, “He that his sorrow sought through wilfulness, / And his foe fettred would release agayne, / Deserues to taste his follies fruit, repented payne.” In both of these examples, and in several more that can be found throughout *The Faerie Queene*, we begin to see Spenser’s portrayal of the self-destructive way of the wicked.
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Strange powers have our enemies, and strange weaknesses!
But it has long been said: of evil will shall evil mar.
—The Lord of the Rings J.R.R. Tolkien

He who is pregnant with evil and conceives trouble gives birth to disillusionment. He who digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit he has made. The trouble he causes recoils on himself; his violence comes down on his own head.
—Psalm 7:14-17

"Why this," cried Lucifer, smiting the ball again, "here is the only symbol, my boy. So fat. So satisfied. Not like that scraggy individual, stretching his arms in stark weariness." And he pointed up to the cross, his face dark with a grin.
—The Ball and the Cross G.K. Chesterton

Here we go round the prickly pear
Prickly pear prickly pear
Here we go round the prickly pear
At five o'clock in the morning.

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn
—“The Hollow Men” and “Ash-Wednesday” T.S. Eliot
An Introduction to Evil's Brood

That vertue therefore which is but a youngling in the contemplation of evil, and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank vertue, not a pure; her whiteness is but an excremental whiteness; Which was the reason why our sage and serious Poet Spencer, whom I dare be known to think a better teacher then Scotus and Aquinas, describing true temperance under the person of Guion, brings him in with his palmer through the cave of Mammon, and the bower of earthly blisse that he might see and know, and yet abstain.¹

This passage from John Milton's Areopagitica serves as a witness to Spenser’s power as a moralistic writer, elevating him above Scotus and Aquinas.² Milton testifies to Spenser’s ability to bring his characters into a fuller understanding of evil; and in doing so, he is able to move their hearts to a higher form of righteousness. When Milton comments on those things that “vice promises to her followers,” he seems to have in mind the alluring things of temptation. This can be seen in Mammon’s Cave, the Bower of Bliss, and in other literary forms such as John Bunyan’s “Vanity Fair” and the gospel account of Satan’s temptation of Christ in the desert (Mt. 4). When Spenser depicts evil, however, he expresses more than just the glorious virtue that comes from seeing and knowing, and yet abstaining. When Spenser illustrates those things that “vice promises to her followers,” he not only shows the alluring things of temptation but also the harvest of self-destruction.

² Milton’s tribute to the poet Spenser as a higher moral teacher than Scotus and Aquinas recalls a few lines from Sir Philip Sidney’s “Apology for Poetry”: For suppose it be granted... that the philosopher, in respect of his methodical proceedings, doth teach more perfectly than the poet, yet do I think that no man is so much philothesophos as to compare the philosopher, in moving, with the poet.... For, as Aristotle saith, it not gnosia but praxis must be the fruit. And how praxis cannot be, without being moved to practice, it is no hard matter to consider.”
It is my intention in this essay to explore the manner in which these promises of vice—these natural results of evil—express themselves in Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. My primary focus will be on the nature of evil, paying close attention to evil’s reflexively self-destructive tendency—whereby evil has the tendency to bring harm not only to good but also to itself. Though almost all Spenserian criticism attempts to wrestle with the overwhelming conflict between good and evil in *The Faerie Queene* to one extent or another, no one has yet, to my knowledge, directly worked out the theme of evil’s self-destructive nature. My contention that this theme was in the forefront of Spenser’s mind while developing *The Faerie Queene* is supported by the plethora of examples he gives of evil’s self-destructive nature throughout the work. I will briefly point out Spenser’s use of this theme in Books III-VI and Mutability. My main focus, however, will be on Books I and II because they lay a foundation for a moral reading of the entire poem: Book I offering a theological understanding of evil and Book II an Aristotelian understanding.

“It is generally agreed that Book I of Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* acts as a kind of prelude to the entire poem, raising issues that will be important in all the following books, while placing those issues in the explicitly religious context of the quest for holiness.”

In Book I we meet the Red Cross Knight, the patron of true holiness, who has been commissioned by Gloriana, the great and glorious queen of Fairy Land, to embark upon a great adventure to accompany Una and rescue her royal parents from the infernal dragon that has forwasted all of their land. Shortly after setting forth on their quest, the knight and his company are forced to seek shelter from a hideous storm of rain.

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3 In an attempt to crack my writer’s block, I copied this line, which was my first written line for this paper, from Benjamin Lockerd’s book, *The Sacred Marriage*. My first graduate course was on Edmund Spenser under Professor Lockerd, so too my thesis; in my beginning is my end—in my end is my beginning.
After errantly wandering to and fro through an unknown wood, they finally find a hollow cave amongst the thickest trees, Errour’s cave. Although Una warns Redcrosse against his rashness, asserting, “Oft fire is without smoke, / And peril without show: therefore your stroke / Sir knight with-hold, till further triall made,” Redcrosse foolishly asserts, “Vertue gives her selfe light, through darkenesse for to wade” (1.1.12).

When viewing this first passage of *The Faerie Queene*, we quickly see the allegorically dangerous imagery in the stormy rain, winding paths, dark woods, and errant cave. Yet, William Oram notes the very natural progression (or digression) in the actions of Redcrosse:

> What’s significant about Redcrosse’s encounter with Errour is how imperceptibly he finds himself at her doorstep. His desperate battle is simultaneously culpable, the product of pride, and unavoidable, resulting as it does from a series of comparatively innocent actions. The decision to enter the Wood of Errour comes from a commonplace desire to get out of the rain and, once inside, Redcrosse starts to wander, enjoying the birds’ harmony and failing to notice where he is going.... The gradual progression suggests how hard it is not to lose the right path: one’s “best” impulses insensibly betray one.⁴

As we watch Redcrosse at his knightly best—chivalrously leading his lady toward shelter from the storm, and bravely advancing upon the dangerous monster—we discover that there seems to be something about Redcrosse himself which quickens his own engagement with evil. Shortly after Redcrosse enters the cave, we see that his trust in his own power is erring as it leaves him endlessly fettered in a web of error. It is important to note that a close reading of the encounter between Redcrosse and Errour not only reveals the manner in which Redcrosse is bound but also discovers the manner in which Errour, in her effort to bind Redcrosse, also binds herself:

> Much daunted with that dint, her sence was dazd.

Yet kindling rage her selfe she gathered round,
And all attonce her beastly bodie raizd
With doubled forces high aboute the ground:
Tho wrapping vp her wrathed sterne arround,
Lept fierce vpon his shield, and her huge traîne
All suddenly about his body wound,
That hand or foot to stir he stroue in vaine:
God helpe the man so wrapt in Errours endlesse traîne.

A.C. Hamilton notes in the gloss to line five that “Tho” means “Then,” implying that
“She wraps her coiled tail around herself, ready to wrap it around the knight.” Here, in
the same subtle manner in which we saw that Redcrosse’s “impulses insensibly [betrayed
him,]” we see that Spenser very subtly expresses that Errour’s impulses insensibly betray
her as well; before she binds Redcrosse, she first binds herself.

For many scholars, the beheading of Errour completes the allegorical meaning of
the first canto; as Errour’s head falls, readers’ minds wander ahead to the introduction of
Archimago in stanza 29. However, once Errour’s head is severed, Spenser turns our
attention to Errour’s scattered brood, and in so doing, prepares us for one of The Faerie
Queene’s central themes. As we study Errour and her brood, we see that evil in some
sense does reproduce itself. However, Errour feeds her offspring only poison, and so the
line of Errour soon comes to its end:

Her scattred brood, soone as their Parent deare
They saw so rudely falling to the ground,
Groning full deadly, all with troublous feare,
Gathered themselves about her body round,
Weening their wonted entrance to have found
At her wide mouth: but being there withstood
They flocked all about her bleeding wound,
And sucked up their dying mothers blood,
Making her death their life, and eke her hurt their good.

That detestable sight him much amazed,
To see th’ unkindly Impes of heaven accurst.
Devoure their dam; on whom while so he gazd,
Having all satisfied their blody thurst,
Their bellies svolne he saw with fulnesse burst,
And bowels gushing forth: well worthy end
Of such as drunke her life, the which them nurst;
Now needeth him no lenger labour spend,
His foes have slaine themselves, with whom he should contend.

(1.1.25-26)

The few scholars who com ment on this passage too often attribute the destruction of 
Errour’s offspring to Redcrosse. Virgil Whitaker represents this camp well:

The “spawne of serpents small” is the lusts of the flesh that still hinder and 
must also be overcome; they derive their being and their nourishment from 
original sin, and in her death they die. But their inability to harm Red 
Cross, which is artistically ineffective and at first sight puzzles the reader, 
is in accord with the Protestant emphasis upon faith rather than works.5

Even if we allow for the hypothesis that Errour represents original sin, Whitaker’s 
conclusion that it is Redcrosse’s faith which brings about the end of the evil imps breaks 
down quickly. First, even in these few lines, we notice a contradiction in the proposal 
that the “lusts of the flesh” must also be “overcome.” yet “in her death they die.” Second, 
we are forced to ask the following question: “Then why does Redcrosse need a sword to 
destroy Errour?” If anything, it would be Redcrosse’s faith which destroys Errour, and 
his sword which destroys “the lusts of the flesh that still hinder.” It would be 
Redcrosse’s faith (and the actions of his “dying Lord”) which justifies him from the 
Errour of original sin, and it would be his sword (or works) which advances the process 
of sanctification whereby “the lusts of the flesh that still hinder” are destroyed. No, this 
narrow emphasis only on Redcrosse in this scene is simply inadequate.

Spenser could have had Errour’s offspring do any number of fitting things once 
Errour was beheaded. They could have turned on Redcrosse all at once in a vengeful

5 Virgil K. Whitaker, “The Theological Structure of The Faerie Queene, Book I,” in Essential Articles for 
rage, either wearing him down to the point of defeat, or forcing him to destroy every single errant imp. They could have scattered from the cave into the world like a nest of cockroaches whose dark home has been overturned. (One can imagine the implication here: Even though the large heresy has been defeated, the small untruths from the original heresy continue to infect the world with their pernicious subtleties.) Yet Spenser has Errour’s scattered brood circle about her dead body as they “suck’d up their dying mothers blood, / Making her death their life, and eke her hurt their good.” Once the little imps, whose eyes are too big for their stomachs, get their fill of their mother’s entrails, their own bellies burst and bowels gush forth. And so, Redcrosse “needeth him no longer labour spend, / His foes have slaine themselves, with whom he should contend.” We can imagine Redcrosse filled with a conflicted mixture of fear and confidence after beheading Errour and then turning his attention to her hissing brood. His sword is in his hand; he is ready for a fight, one against many. And yet as he stands firm, come what may, “That detestable sight him much amazde.” The evil imps, the foes with whom Redcrosse should contend, have destroyed themselves. In this scene, Spenser draws our attention away from Redcrosse and directs it toward the action of evil. It is in this self-destructive scene, where the blood of evil bursts the stomach of evil and destroys its own livelihood, that we see one of the chief themes of *The Faerie Queene*—Evil’s reflexive destruction of itself.

**Spenserian Criticism on Evil**

One would have to have the skewed sight of Malbecco not to see a theme of good and evil in *The Faerie Queene*; fittingly, most of the scholarship on Spenser’s great work
takes up this theme to some extent. However, most of the criticism of *The Faerie Queene* that grapples with evil either traces Spenser’s literary or philosophical source, or it expresses the manner in which evil (or vice) must be overcome before it brings destruction to good (or virtue). Considering that Spenser is a master of allusions, and considering that he is fashioning a gentleman in “virtuous and gentle discipline,” the existing scholarship on evil is fitting to Spenser’s purpose. Yet as we take a closer look at the evil in *The Faerie Queene*, we note that Spenser is doing more than giving marvelously poetic and didactic pictures of the manner in which evil brings frustration to good; he is also revealing the manner in which evil recoils upon itself.

Numerous scholars work at teasing out the literary and philosophical allusions which Spenser makes use of, but I will refer to John E. Hankins and James Nohrmberg as two of the chief voices in this camp. Certainly, Hankins’s contribution to Spenserian scholarship is more expansive than source-hunting. However, even from the title of his article, “Spenser and the Revelation of St. John,” and his book, *Source and Meaning in Spenser’s Allegory*, one can see that Spenser’s allusions are at the forefront of Hankins’s mind. A selection from “Spenser and the Revelation of St. John” will convey the manner in which Hankins often points out Spenser’s allusions both to the Bible and to other theological works in order to express the manner in which Spenser’s layered images add theological weight to his characters. Here Hankins notes that not only can Duessa represent the Babylonian whore, but Lucifera is able to don that role as well. According to Hankins, the Babylonian harlot undergoes a transformation in Spenser’s procession of

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6 I will provide examples presently.
7 See Spenser’s Letter to Raleigh
8 Others include Virgil Whitaker and Carol V. Kaske (theology), Kathleen Williams (Venus and Diana myths), A.S.P. Woodhouse and Robert Hoopes (theological grace and Aristotelian philosophy)
the deadly sins, whereby Lucifera representing pride, plays the role of the harlot as she joins the other deadly sins:

Perhaps [Spenser] may also have recalled Dante’s transformation of the harlot’s beast in canto 32 of the *Purgatorio*, where the chariot which represents the church puts forth seven beastly heads, usually interpreted to mean the seven deadly sins. Forgetting Dante’s political allegory, we may note his remarkable transformation of the imagery of Rev. 17. The harlot is the same, but her beast is the monstrous perversion of a chariot. It is still a chariot, but from it grow the seven heads of the biblical beast, representing the seven deadly sins.9

Nohrnberg too does a great deal of tracing the allusions of evil in Spenser. I do not mean to imply that source-hunting is all that Nohrnberg does, for what doesn’t he do in that grand work, *The Analogy of The Faerie Queene*? However, much of the time when Nohrnberg discusses evil in *The Faerie Queene*, he is expressing Spenser’s inspiration for that particular manifestation of evil: Archimago “closely resembles” the “sophist in Plato’s dialogue.” 10 He also functions in the classical role of Proteus, “the patron of evasion through shape-changing.” 11 Lucifera’s name “comes from the doom-song in Isaiah over the king of Babylon.” 12 And, as Orgoglio is “reduced by Arthur to a ‘trunked stocke,’” we hear echoes of “the humiliation of the idol of the Philistine god Dagon in the presence of the ark: it was reduced to a ‘stump’ (I Sam. 5:4).” 13 Teasing out these literary and philosophical allusions in Spenser is at the forefront for Hankins and Nohrnberg in their scholarship on evil. We must give them thanks for laying this crucial foundation of the study of evil in *The Faerie Queene* which allows us to pursue the study of the subtler workings of evil.

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11 Nohrnberg, 110.
12 Nohrnberg, 205.
13 Nohrnberg, 207.
Evil's danger to good and good's need to overcome evil is often expressed in Spenserian criticism. Out of the many expressions of this position, I have selected two in order to give voice to this position. In his chapter entitled, "Constructing Evil," Darryl Gless states, "[Readers] will have found in the knight's and Una's sequence of opponents a frightening composite vision of the reprobate, almost terrifying 'Other' whose characteristics good subjects of the Queen will earnestly seek to purge from their own lives." For Gless, the relentless sequence of evil agents which oppose Red Cross and Una becomes a cultural lesson on the perils of evil to right living. In his article "The Struggle between Good and Evil in the First Book of 'The Faerie Queene,'" Lyle Glazier writes,

The first book of The Faerie Queene is an example of psychomachia, or the struggle between good and evil for possession of the soul.... Spenser is thus a Christian teacher, whose purpose it is to work upon us at the emotional level where we are most vulnerable, leaving us attracted toward Good and repelled from Evil, wherever they appear in his stanzas, and providing us with a protective armor to ward off the temptations of life.

For Glazier, the many representations of evil which oppose Red Cross and Una become moral lessons on the perils of evil to goodly living. Both Gless and Glazier recognize in evil only its attempt to frustrate good, and both find evil's defeat only in the choices and actions of good. This, of course, is a fine and natural reading of The Faerie Queene.

However, focusing only on evil's interactions with good does not offer a complete understanding of the power of evil.

14 I selected Gless because he is characteristic of the theological position, and I selected Glazier because he is characteristic of the moralistic position.
The archetypal critic Northrop Frye is one of the few Spenserian scholars who give evil some attention in its own right, and his focus on the structure and imagery of evil forms a stepping stone from Gless and Glazier to C.S. Lewis, who is to follow. Our first point of interest in Frye's essay, "The Structure of Imagery in The Faerie Queene," is his emphasis on evil's role in the structure of The Faerie Queene. Frye writes, "In [Spenser's] moral allegory there is already a good deal of inorganic repetition, especially in the symbols of evil (for example, the Occasion-Ate-Slauder sequence and the reduplicative foul monsters)." Even in this brief statement, Frye expands our view of evil in The Faerie Queene. Evil is no longer just the antagonist to good; it is an important component in its own right (though for Frye, an overused and flawed component) to the structure and meaning of The Faerie Queene. Beyond briefly pointing out evil's role in the structure of the poem, Frye exposes the nature of evil within that structure, noting that throughout The Faerie Queen evil functions as a symbolic or demonic parody:

Virtues are contrasted not only with their vicious opposites, but with vices that have similar names and appearances. Thus the golden mean of temperance is parodied by the golden means provided by Mammon; "That part of justice, which is equity" in Book V is parodied by the anarchistic equality preached by the giant in the second canto, and so on. As the main theme of Book I is really faith, or spiritual fidelity, the sharpest parody of this sort is between Fidelia, or true faith, and Duessa, who calls herself Fidessa. Fidelia holds a golden cup of wine and water...; Duessa holds the golden cup of the Whore of Babylon. Fidelia’s cup also contains a serpent (the redeeming brazen serpent of Moses typifying the Crucifixion); Duessa sits on the dragon of the Apocalypse who is metaphorically the same beast as the serpent of Eden. Fidelia’s power to raise the dead is stressed; Duessa raises Sansjoy from the dead by the power of Aesculapius, whose emblem is the serpent.17

18 Frye, 162-63.
With this understanding of evil's role in *The Faerie Queene*, Frye is able to tip his critical cap to both the critics who emphasize evil's antagonistic role with good and to the critics who focus on Spenser's use of allusions in developing his evil characters. Although Frye does not articulate a theological point of evil's workings, he does offer a new insight into the practice of evil in *The Faerie Queene*. Frye explains that evil often takes the form of a parody of real good. It is because of this that he notes that "No monster, however loathsome, can really be evil: for evil there must a perversion of intelligence." 19 We will further explore evil's perversions and privations in my subsequent chapter, "The Privation of Good."

The chief critic on evil in *The Faerie Queene* is C.S. Lewis. In his work *Spenser's Images of Life*, edited by Alastair Fowler, Lewis compares Spenser's evil with Marlowe's, Shakespeare's, and Milton's. In Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Milton, Lewis notes that "evil is portrayed as involving immense concentrations of will.... In all three poets evil appears as energy—lawless and rebellious energy, no doubt, but nevertheless energy, abounding and upsurging." 20 When we turn to the image of evil in Spenser, however, we note a difference; according to Lewis, "evil does not usually appear as energy." 21 Instead, evil takes five different forms.

First, and least important, are the various paynim knights who appear as momentary enemies.... Next, there are images of disease and defect.... Thirdly, evil may take the form of the disgusting.... A fourth and quite different class of images are those in which evil takes the form of a temptation to relax, or to fall asleep, or to die.... Fifthly and finally, there is the Waste House...

Surveying all five forms, we notice a distinction observed by Spenser that seems in part to have governed his choice of the form evil takes in any

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19 Frye, 162.
21 Lewis, 66.
particular instance. When figures representing evils speak to human characters—that is, tempt them—they may express either the sleep-wish (the lighter form) or the death wish (the heavier). But in the narrative parts of the poem, when we ourselves are looking at the evils from outside their world, they appear either as filth, defect, disease (the lighter form) or as life-in-death, a silent, empty imprisonment, ‘dust and old decay’ (the heavier). In no instance, however, is evil ever represented as upsurging energy.  

For Spenser, evil is not a menacing thing in-and-of itself, filled with upsurging energy and always engaged in an active affront against good. Instead, it is a sicker and quieter substance that reduces vitality and suffocates life. Evil, though a formidable opponent of good, is a weak opponent. Evil is a transitory adversary, filled with disease and defect, which takes on disgusting forms while residing in impotence and waste. Painted in this light (or darkness if you will), we see evil’s potential danger to good; it calls one from an abundant life to a futile death: we will presently look at Despair as the ultimate instance of this.

Both Frye and Lewis offer keen insights into the nature and danger of evil. Evil is a parody, a false imitation, which beguiles, perverts, and reduces the livelihood of good. Viewed from the shoulders of these giants, we can see even beyond evil’s potential danger to good; as we look at the ways and the workings of evil, we can see the danger that evil is to itself.

The Way of the Wicked

The great number of Biblical references which Spenser utilizes in *The Faerie Queene* is made abundantly clear in any well-annotated edition. And it seems that in particular, the book of Psalms had for Spenser a special magnetism. Indeed, Carol V.

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22 Lewis, 64-73.
Kaske notes that “Spenser borrows from Psalms more than from any book other than Revelation.” Kaske continues to note that the frequency and range of Spenser’s use of the Psalms reflects the status of the Psalms in the period, stating that “The Book of Psalms was arguably the best-known book of the Bible. They were drummed into everyone’s consciousness in almost every church service.” In addition to being attracted to the poetry of the Psalms, as were many other Renaissance writers who were translating the Psalms (and often setting them to music), Spenser was certainly attracted to the teachings and the doctrine of the Psalms. It has often been noted that Spenser’s gleaning of the Psalms for imagery and phrasing can be seen throughout *The Faerie Queene*: some examples include the image of Archimago’s sharp tongue: “And well could file his tongue as smooth as glass” (1.1.35) from Psalm 140:3, “They make their tongues as sharp as a serpent’s”, and the royal description of the sky: “and to her selfe to have gained / The kingdome of the Night” (7.6.10) from Psalm 136:9, “The moon and stars to govern the night.” One thing that has not been so noted in Spenser, however, is the reflexive nature of evil which pervades both the Psalms and *The Faerie Queene*.

Psalm 1 begins the lengthy (and often complicated) discussion on retribution of good and evil that can be traced throughout the Psalms. Verse one states, “Blessed is the man / who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked / or stand in the way of sinners / or sit in the seat of mockers.” For the Psalmist here, there seems to be something built into the system whereby certain actions bring about blessings. Indeed, as the Psalm continues, the virtuous man will be “like a tree planted by streams of water, / which yields its fruit in the season / and whose leaf does not wither. / Whatever he does

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24 Kaske, 12.
25 N.I.V.
prospers.” Conversely, “Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.” Again, there seems to be particular natural consequences built into the actions themselves. This leads the Psalmist to his conclusion in the final verse: “For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, / but the way of the wicked will perish.” It is interesting to note the presence of the Lord with the righteous and the absence of the Lord from the wicked. Other than being unknown to the Lord (which is its own kind of hell), the wicked are not being punished by any higher power. And yet, the wicked have a certain way about them that brings about their own demise: “but the way of the wicked will perish.”

This theme of reflexivity pervades the Psalms and lays a foundation for our understanding of good and evil in The Faerie Queene. In order to ensure our understanding of the reflexivity of evil, I will list several examples from the Psalms in order to prepare us to see these similar actions in Spenser.

Declare them guilty, O God!
Let their intrigues be their downfall

(Ps. 5:10)

He who is pregnant with evil
and conceives trouble gives birth to disillusionment.
He who digs a hole and scoops it out
falls into the pit he has made.
The trouble he causes recoils on himself;
his violence comes down on his own head.

(Ps. 7:14-16)

The nations have fallen into the pit they have dug;
their feet are caught in the net they have hidden.
The Lord is known by his justice;
the wicked are ensnared by the work of their hands.

(Ps. 9:15-16)

Evil will slay the wicked;
the foes of the righteous will be condemned.
Since they hid their net for me without cause
and without cause dug a pit for me,
may ruin overtake them by surprise—
may the net they hid entangle them
may they fall into the pit, to their ruin.

Therefore pride is their necklace:
they clothe themselves with violence.

He loved to pronounce a curse—
may it come on him;
he found no pleasure in blessing—
may it be far from him.

Let the heads of those who surround me
be covered with the trouble their lips have caused.

Let the wicked fall into their own nets,
while I pass by in safety.

These passages from the Psalms are pleas and beliefs declaring that evil should and does reap what it sows. They begin to sketch pictures for the reader of the futile and self-destructive movement of evil. Though the Psalmist’s principal concern in these Psalms is probably the immediate consequences of good and evil actions in the physical life, these Psalms certainly teach to the spiritual world as well. This combination of earthly action and both earthly and spiritual consequence are fitting for Spenser’s allegory.

Saint Augustine was one of the first theologians to note and develop the doctrine of reflexivity in the Psalms, taking special note of the spiritual consequences to evil actions. In his *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, Augustine comments on Psalm 7:
“He hath opened a ditch, and digged it” (ver. 15). To open a ditch is, in earthly matters, that is, as it were in the earth, to prepare deceit, that another fall therein, whom the unrighteous man wishes to deceive. Now this ditch is opened when consent is given to the evil suggestion of earthly lusts; but it is digged when after consent we press on to actual work of deceit. But how can it be, that iniquity should rather hurt the righteous man against whom it proceeds, than the unrighteous heart whence it proceeds? Accordingly, the stealer of money, for instance, while he desires to inflict painful harm upon another, is himself maimed by the wound of avarice. Now who, even out of his right mind, sees not how great is the difference between these men, when one suffers the loss of money, the other of innocence? “He will fall” then “into the pit which he hath made.”

For Augustine, the gravity of the inherent consequences to evil are both great and obvious—“Now who, even out of his right mind, sees not how great is the difference between these men?” Not only are the consequences great and obvious, but the judgments are as well. And yet again, these seem to be natural and self-imposed judgments. Commenting on Psalm 9, Augustine writes,

“The Lord is known executing judgments” (ver. 16). These are God’s judgments. Not from that tranquility of His blessedness, nor from the secret places of wisdom, wherein blessed souls are received, is the sword, or fire, or wild beast, or any such thing brought forth, whereby sinners may be tormented: but how are they tormented, and how does the Lord do judgment? “In the works,” he says, “of his own hands hath the sinner been caught.”

These lines are reminiscent of Psalm 1 where the blessedness of the Lord is near the righteous, but the wicked perish by their own doing. For Augustine, there seems to be a natural law at work as the sinner’s action brings about its own dire consequence. The sinner, then, is not in the hands of an angry God, but instead, he is in his own angry hands.

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27 St. Augustine, 37.
The Privation of Good

One more level of groundwork must be laid before we return to *The Faerie Queene*. Evil is, of course, one of the great problems of Christianity, i.e., “Why would a good God create evil?” Saint Augustine addresses this problem when he defines evil as being a privation of good. Hints of this idea can be seen in Aristotle, and it is certainly carried on by Aquinas before entering the English Renaissance. In *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, Augustine writes,

> For what is that which we call evil but the absence of good? In the bodies of animals, disease and wounds mean nothing but the absence of health; for when a cure is effected, that does not mean that the evils which were present—namely the diseases and wounds—go away from the body and dwell elsewhere; they altogether cease to exist; for the wound or disease is not a substance—the flesh itself being a substance, and therefore is good, of which those evils—that is, privations of the good which we call health—are accidents. Just in the same way, what are called vices in the soul are nothing but privations of natural good. And when they are cured, they are not transferred elsewhere: when they cease to exist in the healthy soul, they cannot exist anywhere else.\(^{28}\)

By defining evil as a privation of good, Augustine not only allows for a God who creates only good, but he also highlights the immaterial nature of evil, and in doing so, he sets the stage for one of his principal tenets, the self-destructive reflexivity of evil. Augustine furthers this idea when he writes,

> Wherefore corruption can consume the good only by consuming the being. Every being, therefore, is a good; a great good, if it cannot be corrupted; a little good, if it can: but in any case, only the foolish or ignorant will deny that it is a good. And if it be wholly consumed by corruption, then the corruption itself must cease to exist, as there is no being left in which it can dwell.\(^{29}\)

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Because good is substantial and evil accidental, evil must work within the structure of
good. If evil completely succeeds in its corruption of good, it not only destroys the
structure of good, but also it destroys the only structure in which evil can exist.

C.S. Lewis is one of the key Spenserian critics on evil in *The Faerie Queene*.
And though Lewis is no doubt aware that his view derives from Augustine and scripture,
he does not identify these sources. We shall see, however, that Lewis is a solid bridge
between Augustine and the scriptures, and *The Faerie Queene*. In his book *Spenser's
Images of Life*, Lewis contrasts the images of good and evil as found in *The Faerie
Queene*:

Evil is solemn, good is gay. Evil means starvation, good glows with what
Blake calls 'the lineaments of gratified desire.' Evil imprisons, good sets free. Evil is tired, good is full of vigour. The one says, Let go, lie down,
sleep, die; the other, All aboard! kill the dragon, marry the girl, blow the
pipes and beat the drum, let the dance begin.30

Evil is solemn, starved, and tired because it is a privation of good; the good of the being
has been reduced, and its livelihood is the less.31 Verdant, the newest lover of Acrasia,
poses an excellent example of the manner in which evil reduces the good verdancy of
life. Once a knight enters the Bower of Bliss, Acrasia seduces him and then saps the
good from him:

And all that while, right over him she hong,
With her false eyes fast fixed in his sight,
As seeking medicine, whence she was stong,
Or greedily depasturing delight:
And oft inclining downe with kisses light,
For feare of waking him, his lips bedewd.

30 C.S. Lewis, *Spenser's Images*, 95.
31 Of the more contemporary scholarship on *The Faerie Queene*, William Oram is nearest to Lewis’s
reading. In “Spenserian Paralysis,” Oram notes: "The Spenserian desire for rest, an end to the misery of
worldly instability, is ubiquitous in *The Faerie Queene*, and this desire is intensified if, as Despaigne argues,
worldly effort is only intolerably prolonged and ultimately useless effort. Suicide seems an easy short cut" (54-55).
And through his humid eyes did sucke his spright,
Quite molten into lust and pleasure lewd:
Wherewith she sighed soft, as if his case she rewd.

(2.12.73)

After Acrasia has had her way with her lovers, enervating their good, they are reduced to
the bestial lusts of their own minds. They have become privations of the once good
knights which they had been:

These seeming beasts are men indeed,
Whom this Enchauntresse hath transformed thus,
Whylome her lovers, which her lusts did feed,
Now turned into figures hideous,
According to their mindes like monstrous.

(2.12.85)

Another literary example of the privation of good, and a helpful example for us
here, can be seen in Dante’s Inferno. In the depths of hell, we find Satan, not active and
lively like Milton’s Satan, but nearly devoid of life because he is nearly devoid of good.
Like the slow-moving molecules in the ice that imprisons him, Dante’s Satan is slow-
moving as well, able only to gnaw on the heads of the betrayers and slowly flap his bat-
like wings. The flapping of his wings seems to somehow emphasize his inability to take
action, and, ironically, it is the flapping of his wings which cools the ice that confines
him—thus Satan perpetuates his own captivity.

One notion of evil that is closely related to Augustine’s is the notion that evil is
simply spoiled goodness. In his more apologetic mode, C.S. Lewis gives voice to this
view:

If evil has the same kind of reality as good, the same autonomy and
completeness, our allegiance to good becomes arbitrarily chosen loyalty of
a partisan. A sound theory of value demands something different. It
demands that good should be original and evil a mere perversion; that
good should be the tree and evil the ivy; that good should be able to see all
round evil (as when sane men understand lunacy) while evil cannot
retaliate in kind; that good should be able to exist on its own while evil requires the good on which it is parasitic in order to continue its parasitic existence.\footnote{C.S. Lewis, \textit{God in the Dock}, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 23.}

Just as the sucked spirit of Verdant offers an example of Augustine’s privation of good, the arch images of Archimago express an archetype of the manner in which evil is a perversion of and a parasite on good. An early example can be seen in the first canto. After Archimago’s false Una failed in her seduction, Redcrosse is duped by the false image of the perverted Una in the lusty embrace of the squire. It is the perversion of Una, that is, it is the false-image of Una, that parasitically gnaws at Redcrosse and separates him from the truth.

In \textit{The Faerie Queene}, Spenser expresses both of these views of evil: we see that evil is both the privation of good and the perversion of good. Because evil is not a thing in-and-of itself, but simply a privation of good, it needs good in order to survive. As evil enervates good, it functions as a parasite, and thus good functions as a (regrettable) host.

Cornelius Plantinga, in his book \textit{Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin}, gives voice to the manner in which evil is both a privation and parasite of good:

\begin{quote}
Sin is always a departure from the norm and is assessed accordingly. Sin is deviant and perverse, an \textit{injustice} or \textit{iniquity} or \textit{ingratitude}. Sin in the Exodus literature is \textit{disorder} and \textit{disobedience}. Sin is faithlessness, lawlessness, godlessness…. Sin is what culpably \textit{disturbs} shalom. Sinful human life is a caricature of proper human life…. [Sin carries no solid achievements] because sin is a parasite, an uninvited guest that keeps tapping its host for sustenance. Nothing about sin is its own; all its power, persistence, and plausibility are stolen goods. Sin is not really an entity but a spoiler of entities, not an organism but a leech on organisms. Sin does not build shalom; it vandalizes it.\footnote{Cornelius Plantinga, \textit{Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin} (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 88-89.} \end{quote}
Even though evil is simply spoiled goodness, it still has power: power to harm both good and evil itself. Evil’s power to harm itself is twofold. Because evil is a privation and parasite of good, it needs good for its survival. If good, the host, becomes holy and pure, if it becomes healthy and uncorrupted, by definition of holy and pure, the evil parasite ceases to exist. What’s more, even if the evil parasite fully consumes the good, it still ceases to exist by destroying its own host; even in evil’s triumph, it is destroyed. That is because evil is nothing but a privation of good, until at last a thing ceases altogether to be. Hence, evil, which is not a thing in-and-of itself, finds itself in a tough position. When evil is defeated by good, evil is destroyed. When evil triumphs over good, its own destruction recoils upon itself, and it is itself destroyed. So then, with the phrase “the triumph of evil,” one could paradoxically and simultaneously be referring to evil’s victory and evil’s defeat.

**Book One: The Circle and the Cross**

In his book *The Everlasting Man*, G.K. Chesterton juxtaposes the images of the circle and the cross. The following passage from Chesterton serves as an excellent introduction to the images and movements of good and evil in Book 1 of *The Faerie Queene*.

It will appear only a jest to say that all religious history has really been a pattern of noughts and crosses. But I do not by noughts mean nothings, but only things that are negative compared with the positive shape or pattern of the other. And though the symbol is of course only a coincidence, it is a coincidence that really does coincide. The mind of Asia can really be represented by a round O, if not in the sense of a cypher at least of a circle. The great Asiatic symbol of a serpent with its tail in its mouth is really a very perfect image of a certain idea of unity and recurrence that does indeed belong to the Eastern philosophies and religions. It really is a curve that in one sense includes everything, and in
another sense comes to nothing. In that sense it does confess, or rather boast, that all argument is an argument in a circle. And though the figure is but a symbol, we can see how sound is the symbolic sense that produces it, the parallel symbol of the Wheel of Buddha generally called the Swastika. The cross is a thing at right angles pointing boldly in opposite directions; but the Swastika is the same thing in the very act of returning to the recurrent curve. That crooked cross is in fact a cross turning into a wheel. Before we dismiss even these symbols as if they were arbitrary symbols, we must remember how intense was the imaginative instinct that produced them or selected them both in the east and the west. The cross has become something more than a historical memory; it does convey, almost as by a mathematical diagram, the truth about the real point at issue; the idea of a conflict stretching outwards into eternity. It is true, and even tautological, to say that the cross is the crux of the whole matter. In other words the cross, in fact as well as figure, does really stand for the idea of breaking out of a circle that is everything and nothing. It does escape from the circular argument by which everything begins and ends in the mind.... In a more popular allegory, we might say that when St. George thrust his spear into the monster’s jaws, he broke in upon the solitude of the self-devouring serpent and gave it something to bite besides its own tail.34

Chesterton’s comparison of eastern and western religion has little relevance for our current discussion (although Spenser does seem to capture something of the east in the Sarazin brothers of Book 1). In his juxtaposing of the circle and the cross, and the corresponding movements of each, however, Chesterton strikes at the heart of one of Spenser’s chief themes; Chesterton, indeed, even goes so far as to use the Saint George legend as an illustration. For Chesterton and for Spenser, the circle and the cross become powerful and antagonistic symbols that serve as testaments to the order of the world. And for Spenser, the circle and the cross serve as powerful and antagonistic symbols of the natural working of evil and good respectively. Evil, a privation and distortion of good, is in fact a cross that has turned in on itself, altering its shape from cross to swastika to circle. Because of its original shape, the circle has great potential, but the potential is never actualized because the movement of a circle, though somewhat grand.

is ultimately futile as the energy never extends outside of its own reach. Conversely, the
cross, the symbol of good, breaks out; it is fixed at one permanent point, and from there it
breaks out, down to the depths of the earth, up to the heights of the heavens, and side to
side through all times and places. The cross is of course the costly symbol of free grace
that allows one to extend beyond one’s own height and reach. In Book 1 of *The Faerie
Queene*, Spenser uses these two images, the circle and the cross, and particularly the
movements of each, the turning in of evil and the breaking out of good, as his
philosophical foundation for the adventures (and misadventures) of the Redcrosse
Knight.

After being duped by Archimago and separated from Una, doubt begins to turn in
the mind of Redcrosse and is projected out as his own enemy in the form of the first
Sarazin brother, Sans Foy, “who cared not for God or man a point” (1.2.12). In the
ensuing battle, the doubt in Redcrosse’s mind takes form as he and Sans Foy are locked
in a roundabout pattern as they “quyteth cuff with cuff: / Each others equall puissauce
envies, / And through their iron sides with cruell spies / Does seek to perce” (1.2.17). As
they turn on each other in battle, they both become self-destructive by limiting their own
advancement: “Astonled with the stroke of their owne hand, / Do backe rebut, and each
to other yeeldeth land” (1.2.15). It is only when the cross is remembered, given voice by
the Sarazin, that Redcrosse is able to break out of the circle of doubt in his mind that is
everything and nothing.

“Curse on that Crosse,” quoth then the Sarazin,
“That keepes thy body from the bitter fit;
Dead long ygoe I wote thou haddest bin,
Had not that charme from thee forwarned it.”

(1.2.18)
In his book *Spenser’s ‘Fierce Warres and Faithfull Loves,’* Michael Leslie notes that “In locating the source of the Knight’s strength in his armour, Sans foy becomes the first interpreter of martial symbolism in the poem: his curse brings the armour to the forefront of our attention by alluding to its non-physical attributes.”

It is more than simply the armor of Redcrosse that protects him; it is the insignia of the cross, the ultimate symbol of grace and holiness, which revives Redcrosse’s faith and allows him to break out of the circles of doubt in his own mind. Under the protection of the cross, and the faith that brings the dear remembrance of his dying Lord, Redcrosse is able to quickly cleave the head of the Sarazin.

Shortly after this scene between Redcrosse and Sans Foy, Spenser turns our attention back to forsaken truth, Una, who is “Still seeking him, that from her still did flie” (1.3.21). Una is beguiled by the false image of Archimago into believing that she is indeed reunited with Redcrosse himself. This bogus reunion between Una and her knight, and the following scene between Archimago and Sans Loy, offer further insight into the ways in which good breaks out and evil turns in. Though the reunion of Una and Redcrosse is here a sham, Una’s emotions are true. Spenser universalizes Una’s feelings by expressing the manner in which love breaks out from the circle of sin and regret and pain. Here Spenser elevates Una’s emotions by not only offering a picture of the power of grace, but also by offering a brief glimpse of the origin of grace:

One loving howre
For many yeares of sorrow can dispence:
A dram of sweet is worth a pound of sowre:
She has forgot, how many a wofull stowre
For him she late endured; she speaks no more
Of past: true is, that true love hath no power

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To looken backe; his eyes be fixt before.

The universal language of this passage elevates the meaning of it to extend beyond Una and Redcrosse. The elevated language of the opening line of this passage, “One loving howre / For many yeares of sowre can dispence,” moves the mind of the reader from the grace that Una is offering to Redcrosse to the grace that Christ offers from the cross to all peoples—where “one loving howre” dispenses the sorrows of many years of waywardness. It is grace from the cross that breaks out of the cyclical movement of sin and sorrow that ultimately leads to death; it is the loving sacrifice from the cross that causes God himself to see not what is behind, but what is before in Christ. This brilliant picture of freedom is juxtaposed with the entanglements of evil in the following stanzas. Where the cross breaks out, evil turns in on itself, frustrating its own plans.

When Sans Loy sees Archimago, in the false form of the Redcrosse Knight, he is filled with wrath and a desire to avenge the death of his brother, Sans Foy. Sans Loy’s spear pierces through the “vainely crossed shield” of Archimago and enters into his body, throwing Archimago from his horse and goring a wound from which a well of blood did gush. Sans Loy then proudly states, “Lo there the worthie meed / of him, that slew Sans Foy with bloudie knife... / Life from Sans foy thou tookst, Sans loy shall from thee take” (1.3.36). Here Sans Loy perpetuates an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, destructive and cyclical movement. It is a movement without grace that looks only behind and never ahead. It is a movement that leads only to destruction; it is a movement that leads only to blindness and mush. The lawlessness of Sans Loy frustrates not only good, but also evil. Without regard to a higher law, evil turns back in on itself as quickly as, if not more

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36 It is interesting to note the privation of good. The Sarazin brothers’ only identity is in their lack of good; i.e., they are named Sans Foy (without faith), Sans Loy (without law), and Sans Joy (without joy).
quickly, than it turns on good. And so Sans Loy leaves the bloody body of Archimago, whose own hypocrisy has been shown to backfire on him, in the field, but not before he acknowledges, though without regret, the innate outcome of his vengeful way:

Why Archimago, lucklesse syre,
What doe I see? what hard mishap is this.
That hath thee hither brought to taste mine yre?
Or thine the fault, or mine the error is,
In stead of foe to wound my friend amiss?

(1.3.39)

Evil's confusion of friend and foe, an idea reminiscent of Psalm 34, "Evil will slay the wicked," is reinforced in the House of Pride. As Redcrosse is guided by Duessa into the House of Pride, and the pageant of the seven deadly sins begins, it is helpful to recall Psalm 141:10, "Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while I pass by in safety."

In one of the chief allegorical moments of Book 1, the Redcrosse Knight is faced with the great opponents of holiness. Instead of a battle scene, however, Spenser turns the House of Pride into more of a parade. In *The Allegory of Love*, C.S. Lewis notes that "[Spenser's] evils are all dead or dying things. Each of his deadly sins has a mortal disease."37 As the reader and Redcrosse himself become observers of the pageant of evil, we also become educated on the destructive reflexivity of evil.

Lucifera, the embodiment of pride, rides in on her dreadful dragon as her vision is turned back in on herself and herself alone.

And in her hand she held a mirrhour bright,
Wherein her face she often vewed fayne,
And in her self-loved semblance tooke delight;
For she was wondrous faire, as any living wight.

(1.4.10)

Pride, the greatest evil and greatest threat to holiness, always circles back on itself. This is shown directly in Lucifera’s narrow vision of her own reflected face. It is also shown as Lucifera and the other pride-filled creatures of her court look about at each other’s pride, and “each others greater pride does spight” (1.4.14). Not only is pride destructive to itself because it is distracting, but also because it allows for no allies or superiors. Ultimately, ultimate pride leaves one all alone, and as we shall see, alone in a “dunghill of dead carkases” (1.5.53).

Lucifera and the assembly of the other deadly sins are led by Idleness, the perfect embodiment of the futile circle of evil.

Scarse could [Idleness] once uphold his heavie hed,  
To looken, whether it were night or day:  
May seeme the wayne was very evil led,  
When such an one had guiding of the way,  
That knew not, whether right he went, or else astray.  
(1.4.19)

How often must this crew have turned in circles with its front man, Idleness, too lazy to lift his head (even in his posture there is something circular instead of upright), and the chief, Lucifera, in back, distracted by her own face.

Next is Gluttony, who can offer no direction. Not only is his belly “up-blowne with luxury,” but also with “fatnesse swollen were his eyes” (1.4.21). As his crew moves in futile circles, so Gluttony, himself, does as well. Continuously and fruitlessly, he “swallowd up excessive feast” and “spued up his gorge” (1.4.21). Instead of digesting food that is then turned into constructive energy, he vainly vomits it back out from the orifice from which it came. Like other forms of evil, Gluttony is destructive not only to himself—“Full of diseases was his caracas blew”—but also to evil itself—“Whose mind in meat and drinke was drowned so, / That from his friend he seldome knew his foe”
With this confusion of friend and foe, we recall the interactions between Sans Loy and Archimago, and we look ahead to the self-imposed frustration in the Castle of Medina.

Next rides in lustful Lechery on his bearded goat. He is an inconstant man, running from woman to woman, stuck in the cycle of distorted desire: he “loved all he saw, / And lusted after all, that he did love” (1.4.26). This cyclical movement of loving... lusting... and loving brings destruction to him and all those caught in his circle: “Which lewdnesse fild him with reproachfull paine / Of that fowle evill, which all men reprove, / That rots the marrow, and consumes the braine” (1.4.26). Sexual sins have always seemed to carry extra weight in Christendom. And yet here Spenser, as he does with all of the deadly sins, does not bring in an outside punishment from God alone, but expresses the manner in which Lechery’s own action brings about his punishment; instead of receiving the burn of hell (though that may be coming), he receives the burn of syphilis.

Avarice, who is next in the assembly, is caught in a circular pattern of his own. The more he has, the more he wants; and the more he wants, the more he gets. This selfish movement leads not only to a wretched life, but also to the destruction of his line. Avarice is so wrapped up in the hoarding of his own wealth that his line of greed ends with his own death:

Yet chylde ne kinsman living had he none  
To leave them to; but thorough daily care  
To get, and nightly feare to lose his owne,  
He led a wretched life unto him selfe unknowne.  

(1.4.28)
These lines recall Shakespeare’s first sonnet which warns of the dangers and self-destruction which comes when one is only concerned for oneself: “But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes, / Feed’st thy light’s flame with self-substantial fuel / Making a famine where abundance lies, / Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel.” Though certainly the receiver of Shakespeare’s sonnet is much fairer a person and spirit than Avarice, his self-love and thus his self-destruction is the same. Where good creates; evil is sterile.

After Avarice comes Envie, in whose “bosome secretly there lay / An hatefull Snake, the which his taile upyties in many folds” (1.4.31). As Envie’s stomach and tail turn in knots (much like Errour), his eyes turn from all around him and then back to himself with an envious and cynical glare. As this cycle continues, the evil of envy eats away at itself: “That all poison ran about his chaw; / But inwardly he chawed his owne maw / At neighbours wealth, that made him ever sad; / For death it was, when any good he saw” (1.4.30). Plantinga notes that “Envy is pure evil, as toxic and sickening to the envier as to everybody else. For, as Edmund Spenser says in nine of the most famous lines in the English language on this topic, what eats away at the envier is his own sin…. Envy poisons the envier, introducing gangrene into his own soul.”

Finally comes Wrath, who is covered in blood, insignia of his rash ways, as he waves his sword above his head. Wrath too is caught in the reflexivity of evil. However, he is a bit different from the others who came before.

Through unadvised rashnesse woxen wood,
For of his hands he had no government,
Ne cared for bloud in his avengement:
But when the furious fit was overpast,
His cruell facts he often would repent;

Plantinga, 170.
Yet wilfull man he never would forecast,  
How many mischieves should ensue his heedlesse hast. 

(1.4.34)

Wrath is caught in the circle of rash cruelty followed by guilt and then repentance. Though the introduction of repentance here seems profitable, it becomes simply a distortion of good. The only whips that Wrath receives are from the hand of Satan: “And after all, upon the wagon beame / Rode Sathan, with a smarting whip in hand, / With which he forward lasht the lasie teme” (1.4.36). Here, Satan is not spurring Wrath on to Repentance but to more wrath. Compared to the “yron whip” (1.10.27) that Redcrosse receives from Penance—a discipline that brings about true remorse and repentance—the smart whip of Satan functions as a beguiling justification for Wrath. It spurs him on to go round and round—feeling good through his (feigned) repentance while continuing to do evil to others and, by extension, to himself.

In the House of Pride, Spenser offers a picture of the reflexive nature of the seven deadly sins; it is here that he offers a glimpse into the natural order of evil. This is simply an educational allegory; Redcrosse does not actually engage with any of the vices in the House of Pride, though he has been subject to a few of them already. In fact, soon after the pageant, he is able to make a humble escape. However, because the front door is locked, he is not able to turn back and escape out through it; he must go down and out to be free. Even though we do not see Redcrosse interact with the vices at the House of Pride, we are prepared to meet them as they come back time and time again throughout *The Faerie Queene*, often in more intense and combative forms. It is in the House of Pride that Spenser introduces us to the seven deadly sins and prepares us to notice their destructive reflexivity when next we meet them.
Soon after his escape from the House of Pride, Redcrosse finds himself bound by a more combative representation of pride, Orgoglio. Unable to rescue himself, Redcrosse’s freedom needs to be achieved by the dwarf, Una, Arthur, and his squire.

Rosemary Freeman notes that "Lucifera’s pride was decorative in itself and its method was the method of seduction. The pride of Orgoglio captures and destroys by brute force." In a similar vein, C.S. Lewis notes that "Pride and Orgoglio are both pride, but the one is pride within us, the other pride attacking us from without, whether in the form of persecution, oppression, or ridicule. The one seduces us, the other browbeats us." What neither Freeman nor Lewis notes is that Orgoglio’s prideful brute force is perilous not only to Redcrosse (and Arthur), but it is also perilous to Orgoglio himself. In their first encounter, we see that it is the giant’s great force that ultimately leads to his own disarming:

Ne shame he thought to shunne so hideous might:
The idel stroke, enforcing furious way,
Missing the marke of his misaimed sight
Did fall to ground, and with his heavie sway
So deeply dinted in the driven clay,
That three yards deepe a furrow up did throw:
The sad earth wounded with so sore assay,
Did grone lull grievous underneath the blow.
And trembling with strange feare, did like an earthquake show.

His boystrous club, so buried in the ground,
He could not reaen up again so light,
But that the knight him at avantage found,
And whiles he strove his combred clubbe to quight
Out of the earth, with blade all burning bright
He smote off his left arme, which like a blocke
Did fall to ground, deprived of native might;
Large streams of bloud out of the truncked stocke
Forth gushed, like fresh water streame from riven rocke.

(1.8.8,10)

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The great monster, Orgoglio, is puffed up and grand, yet it is his own strength and weight that makes him vulnerable to attack and hastens his own demise. In this and the subsequent round of battle between Orgoglio and Arthur, one can hear the echoes of Psalm 7:14-16:

He who is pregnant with evil
   and conceives trouble gives birth to disillusionment.
He who digs a hole and scoops it out
   falls into the pit he has made.
The trouble he causes recoils on himself;
   his violence comes down on his own head.

As the battle continues, Arthur is knocked down by the giant’s great stroke, but gains the upper hand again when his shield is unveiled by the stroke of Orgoglio. While Orgoglio is stunned by Arthur’s shield, Arthur is able to hew the monster’s leg off before finally beheading the monster, but not before Spenser points out one more time Orgoglio’s culpability in his own demise. After comparing the giant’s fall to a great tree, Spenser compares it to a high castle:

Or as a Castle reared high and round,
   By subtile engines and malitious slight
Is undermined from the lowest ground,
   And her foundation forst, and feebled quight,
At last downe falles, and with her heaped hight
   Her hastie mine does more heavie make,
And yields it selfe unto the victours might;
   Such was this Gyaunts fall, that seemed to shake
The stedfast globe or earth, as it for feare did quake.

Arthur’s beheading of Orgoglio is not a complete enough picture of the battle between good and evil for Spenser. He must first make clear that it is the giant’s own stature that brings about his destruction and yields himself to his own defeat. Orgoglio and an old
castle alike fall harder because of their own size and weight: "... and with her heaped hight / Her hastie ruine does more heavie make." James Nohrnberg notes that

All giants are subject to this critique of size, since their bulk makes them naturally liable to a reduction or mortification or fall. It is this potential for diminution that draws them into a hubris myth in the first place. Orgoglio's overweeningness cannot be dissociated from his vulnerability: pride, in the sense of loftiness or hauteur (Latin, altus), always goes before the fall.⁴¹

And so, it is Orgoglio's own puffed up pride—represented by his grand stature—which hastens his fall. Also, it seems fitting to note that his puffed up stature is fake. Orgoglio looks big, but he is empty and filled only with air—a deprivation of good. And when his prideful body is pricked for the final time, Orgoglio's emptiness is exposed:

But soone as breath out of his brest did pas,
That huge great body, which the Gyaunt bore,
Was vanisht quite, and of that monstrous mas
Was nothing left, but like an emptie blader was.

(1.8.24)

Soon after the defeat of Orgoglio, Redcrosse finds himself in more danger—danger of his own hand in the name of Despair. Despair is, of course, inside the mind of Redcrosse—that is why he knows all that Redcrosse has been through. And so, while Redcrosse is in despair, he is locked within his own thoughts; instead of looking out, he looks only within, mulling on his own failures. The sweet, beguiling words of Despair entrap the mind of Redcrosse in despondency as his thoughts turn from transgression to judgment.

The lenger life, I wote the greater sin,
The greater sin, the greater punishment:
All those great battles, which thou boasts to win,
Through strife, and blood-shed, and auengement,
Now praysd, hereafter deare thou shalt repent:
For life must life, and blood must blood repay.

⁴¹ Nohrnberg, 264.
Is not enough thy euill life forespent?
For he, that once hath missed the right way,
The further he doth goe, the further he doth stray.

(1.9.43)

Is not he just, that all this doth behold
From highest heuen, and beares an equall eie?
Shall he thy sins vp in his knowledge fold,
And guilty be of thine impietie?
Is not his lawe. Let euery sinner die:
Die shall all flesh? what then must needs be donne,
Is it not better to doe willinglie,
Then linger, till the glass be all out ronne?
Death is the end of woes: die soone, O faries sonne.

(1.9.47)

The circular reasoning of Despair in the mind of Redcrosse is the voice of the circle,
ignorant of the cross on his chest and shield, the ‘deare remembrance of his dying Lord.’
Despair’s voice is convincing because it is true, or at least, it is a portion and a distortion
of the truth. By ending his reading of the law with “Let euery sinner die,” Despair
truncates Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life
in Christ Jesus our Lord.” By omitting grace, Despair leaves Redcrosse only with the
option of turning on himself in destruction.

Richard Mallette notes that not only does Despair distort scripture but also he
distorts the structure of the Reformation sermon:

The Reformation sermon had two functions of equal importance: on the
one hand to preach repentance, on the other to teach the forgiveness of
sins. One sermon manual stresses the parity of the two functions by
noting that the congregation must be convinced not only of their
wickedness but also that God will pardon and forgive their sins and that he
will withdraw his anger and punishment.42

Despair certainly convinces Redcrosse of his wickedness; however, by failing to offer
God’s pardoning grace, Despair leaves Redcrosse unable to break out of his dire plight.

42 Richard Mallette, “The Protestant Art of Preaching in Book One of The Faerie Queene,” Spenser Studies
Beyond truncating the truth, Despair beguilingly imitates the truth, or, in Northrop Frye’s language, he sets forth a demonic parody: “For life must life, and blood must blood repay.” Here Despair sets the stage, whereby sin in the flesh and blood requires atonement of flesh and blood. However, this circular voice of Despair—life for life, blood for blood—is blind to the power of the cross which breaks out of the circle of Despair. For it is on the cross that the law of the circle is fulfilled—the life and blood of Christ is sacrificed so that even though Redcrosse has missed the right way, he can again return to the path of holiness. This scene recalls a stanza from Spenser’s “Heavenly Love”:

In flesh at first the guilt committed was,
Therefore in flesh it must be satisfyde:
Nor spirit, nor Angell, though they man surpass,
Could make amends to God for mans misguide.
But onely man himselfe, who selfe did slyde.
So taking flesh of sacred virgins wombe,
For mans deare sake [Christ] did a man become.  

Again, the wages of sin are death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus. Life calls for life, and blood for blood; however, Despair distorts the marvelous movement of grace, where it is Christ’s life and blood on the cross which fulfill the law, into cold circles of self-slaughter, where Redcrosse’s own life and blood are given for no purpose beyond his own end. Accenting the reflexive nature of this evil, Despair simply provides Redcrosse with the means to his own end:

Then gan the villain him to ouercraw.
And brought vnto him swords, ropes, poison, fire.
And all that might him to perdition draw;
And bad him choose, what death he would desire.

(1.9.50)

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The chiding truth of Una, however, reminds Redcrosse of the grace which sets him free from the reflexive dangers of the despairing mind. Una, here, crosses Redcrosse, stating,

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Come, come away, fraile, feeble, fleshly wight,
Ne let vaine words bewitch thy manly hart,
Ne diuefulish thoughts dismay thy constant spright.
In heauenly mercies hast thou not a part?
Why shouldst thou then despeire, that chosen art?
Where justice growes, there grows eke greter grace,
The which doth quench the brond of hellish smart,
And that accurst hand-writing doth deface.
Arise, Sir knight arise, and leaue this cursed place.
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(1.9.53)

Redcrosse must arise and break out of the circles of Despair by the power of grace, the heavenly mercies that grow greater than the justice required for his past sins. As Redcrosse and Una quickly and safely depart from Despair, Spenser draws our attention to the futility of evil as Despair turns on himself.

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He chose an halter from among the rest,
And with it hong him selfe, vnbid vnblest.
But death he could not worke himselfe thereby;
For thousand times he so him selfe had drest,
Yet nathelesse it could not doe him die
Till he should die his last, that is eternally.
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(1.9.54)

In The Analogy of The Faerie Queene, James Nohrnberg notes that

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There is a special appropriateness in Despair's choosing to hang himself in a "cursed place," among "old stockes and stubs of trees" (Lix.52,34). The "accurst hand-writing" includes the "curse of the Law" that Christ in his death assumes; in the Law it is written, "Cursed is euery one that hangeth on tre" (Gal. 3:13). In other words, Despair is cursed in the very form of the death through which the sinner is redeemed.44
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44 Nohrnberg, Analogy, 155.
Though he is too impotent to succeed in his own demise, Despair’s natural impulse is indeed actualized. For although Despair cannot kill himself on the tree, it is by the tree, the cross of Christ, that despair finds its death, and grace and joy abound.  

Moving beyond Despair, Redcrosse is brought by Una to the House of Holiness where he is taught repentance and the way to heavenly bliss. It has been noted that many aspects of the House of Holiness oppose their counterparts in the House of Pride. It is my intention to juxtapose a few elements of each in order to show the manner in which evil turns in and good breaks out. In comparison to the “broad high way” (1.4.2) which leads to the House of Pride, when entering the House of Holiness, Redcrosse must “passe in stouping low; / For straight and narrow was the way” (1.10.5). Spenser notes that those few who enter here do not turn their steps, but instead walk the straight and narrow path which leads unto life. Conversely, those who follow the broad highway of evil, those who circle back and turn astray—those who join in their own evil plight—become partakers of evil; evil that leads only to self-destruction.

Strange thing it is an errant knight to see  
Here in this place, or any other wight,  
That hither turns his steps. So few there bee,  
That chose the narrow path, or seeke the right:  
All keep the broad high way, and take delight  
With many rather for to go astray.  
And be partakers of their evil plight,  
Then with a few to walke the rightest way;  
O foolish men, why haste ye to your owne decay?  

(1.10.10)

45 For an interesting read on the Despair episode, see Andrew Escobedo, “Despair and the Proportion of Self,” and Beth Quitslund, “Despair and the Composition of the Self,” Spenser Studies XVII (2003): 75-106. Escobedo focuses on the influence of Protestant literature on Spenser’s Despair episode, and Quitslund focuses on the overlap of medical and devotional discourse. Escobedo’s piece is somewhat helpful to the understanding of our topic as he describes Kierkegaard’s idea of excessive finitude—whereby we identify ourselves only with the material things around us; thus, despair manifests itself in a reduction of self to world.
In the foreground of the House of Holiness, Spenser notes that no errant knight who wanders and turns his steps will find his way to the House of Holiness. The circling movement of those who follow the broad high way is juxtaposed with the movement of those who chose the narrow path, those who “seek the right” and “walk the rightest way.” Here, Spenser plays on the word, “right,” meaning both “correct” and “straight,” as in a right angle. Before fully entering the House of Holiness and offering a fuller depiction of the movement of good, Spenser pauses to remind us of the self-destructive reflexivity of evil in his rhetorical question, “O foolish men, why haste ye to your owne decay?”

In addition to the paths of each house which illumine the natures of good and evil, the allegorical figures of each house express the manner in which evil turns in while good breaks out. In the House of Pride, Lucifera, who, “in her hand she held a mirrhour bright, / Wherein her face she often vewed fayne,” turns her attention and her vision back in on herself only. In the House of Holiness, Fidelia’s countenance embodies the breaking out of good: “Like sunny beames threw from her Christall face, / That could have dazed the rash beholders sight, / And round about her head did shine like heavens light” (1.10.12). As the light from Fidelia’s face extends, we see that she is putting her faith not in her own strength but instead in God’s strength. Unlike Lucifera who turns her own face back in on itself, Fidelia’s “Christall face” (expressed through the wonderful word play of Spenser) prisms the light of Christ’s face through her own crystal face for the entire world to see.

In the House of Pride, Idlenesse and Gluttony express the wayward futility and the self danger of the reflexivity of evil. Too lazy to hold up his own head, Idleness “knew not, whether right he went, or else astray.” Because Gluttony’s eyes were so filled
with fat, “from his friend he seldom knew his foe.” In the House of Holiness, we meet
the direct eyes of Speranza.

Upon her arme a sliver anchor lay,
Whereon she leaned ever, as befell:
And ever up to heaven, as she did pray,
Her steadfast eyes were bent, ne swarved other way.

While Idlenesse and Gluttony harm themselves as their wayward eyes turn back in
circles, Speranza’s vision, anchored in truth and spurred on by her hope, breaks out—
further up and further into the heavens.

In the House of Pride, Lechery and Avarice turn in self-destructive circles. Filled
with lust, Lechery begets only syphilis which “rots the marrow, and consumes the brain.”
Filled with greed, Avarice begets nothing at all: “Yet chylde ne kinsman living had he
none.” In the House of Holiness, we are privileged to see the love of Charissa and the
fruit that she bears: “For she of late is lightned of her wombe, /And hath encreast the
world with one sonne more... / But thankt be God, that her encrease so evermore”
(1.10.16). In Charissa, we see agape love, a fertile love that ever extends out without
ever turning back on oneself. Charissa expands her love infinitely forward through the
creation of her sons and daughters. Charissa’s agape love is seen beyond the begetting as
“Her necke and breasts were ever open bare, / That ay thereof her babes might sucke their
fill” (1.10.30). The love of Charissa continues to extend as she gives of herself in order
to nourish her beloved ones.

A comparison of Charissa and Errour and their respective offspring offers further
insights into the natures of good and evil. The breaking out of good is seen not only in
Charissa’s giving to her children, but also in her children’s extension from Charissa.
A multitude of babes about her hong,
Playing their sports, that joy’d her to behold,
Whom still she fed, whiles they were weake and young,
But thrust them forth still, as they wexed old.

Instructed in the ways of love and brought up in the House of Holiness, the offspring of Charissa learn to extend beyond their mother’s teat; they are weaned and transition from one who only takes to one who can learn to give. This idea recalls a passage in the Letter to the Hebrews:

In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil (Heb. 5:12-14).

The offspring of Charissa moves beyond milk into solid food, and we can imagine them breaking out from their mother trained to distinguish good and evil, and filled with the righteous virtues of faith, hope, and love.

Errour’s brood, conversely, takes the form of the spiritually immature who are unable to extend beyond their mother. Instead, they are only able to turn in on her. Spenser’s word play with “weening” (thinking/being weaned) expresses the brood’s confusion and impotence with the loss of their mother. The following passage also serves as an example of a demonic parody of the crucifixion: instead of a sacrifice that brings life, this sacrifice brings poison and death:

Weening their wonted entrance to have found At her wide mouth: but being there withstood They flocked all about her bleeding wound, And sucked up their dying mothers blood, Making her death their life, and eke her hurt their good.

(1.10.31)
As the good of Charissa's offspring extends beyond their mother, the evil of Errour's brood turns back on their mother with a self-destructive reflexivity as their bellies burst and bowels gush forth.

Hankins notes that

In observing the pattern of Spenser's knightly quest, we may notice that each temple of Virtue is preceded by one or more houses of non-Virtue or anti-Virtue... After the most severe of these he goes to his place of perfecting, or temple of Virtue, for strength and instruction. He then goes on to the most severe and fundamental test of all, in which victory completes the task of perfecting his virtue.46

The Redcrosse Knight, donning the virtue of holiness, is tested in the cave of Errour, the House of Lucifera, the House of Orgoglio, and the cave of Despair. He then is led by Una into the House of Caelia for his perfecting before his final test in his battle with the Dragon. In each of the places of early testing and in the place of perfecting, Spenser has highlighted the natures of good and evil in order to express the manner in which holiness can be achieved. It is important to note the level of involvement that Redcrosse plays in his own path to holiness. There are instances in which Redcrosse takes an active role in the expurgation of evil. For example, he "raft [Errour's] hatefull head without remorse." Often, however, he plays a much more passive role in this endeavor, either because he is rescued or led in a new direction by Arthur, Una, or the grace of God, or because the evil in him and around him falls prey to its own destructive nature. In his final place of testing, the Battle with the Dragon, Redcrosse must indeed play an active role in the slaying, for it is his quest to do so. However, through the places of testing and perfecting that have come before, Spenser prepares us to see the active energy of evil and its self-destructive tendencies.

R. E. Neil Dodge summarizes well the general sphere of interpretation in which analysis of Redcrosse’s battle with the Dragon occurs:

The general significance of the combat between the Redcross Knight and the Dragon has never needed discussion, because it is unmistakable. After his various minor spiritual contests, now success and now failures, in the company first with Heavenly Truth and then with Falsehood, and after the spiritual regimen of the House of Holiness, the champion of Holiness, the human soul in quest of salvation, must fight the crowning fight with the enemy of mankind, the Devil.47

And yet, even this generalization has not held its course over time. Some critics have argued that Spenser’s Dragon is not representative of the Devil at all, but simply is what it is, a dragon, and Spenser is merely following the form of any traditional Romance.48 Others have argued that the Dragon represents sin or original sin. Carol Kaske, though her argument is more comprehensive than just this one point, is of this camp as she focuses primarily on the Dragon’s spark—noting that “The whole incident of the spark seems to be a development of the universal metaphor of sin as fire.”49 Still others have argued that Spenser’s Dragon represents death. Linwood Orange writes,

The details of Book I distinctly indicate that the dragon is Death, an identification which, I further believe, is more acceptable from the standpoint of structure than that of either Sin or Satan. Since throughout the book the Red Cross Knight constantly confronts various forms of sin, including the seven deadly ones, and since he is shown to be thoroughly cleansed in the House of Holiness, it seems superfluous and anticlimactic to match him against Sin again at the end. That battle has already been

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48 For this perspective and a refutation of it, see Whitney Wells, “Spenser’s Dragon,” Modern Language Notes XLII no. 3 (1926): 143-157.
49 Carol Kaske, “The Dragon’s Spark and Sting and the Structure of Red Cross’s Dragon-Fight,” in Essential Articles for the Study of Edmund Spenser, ed. A.C. Hamilton (Hamden: Archon Books, 1972), 352. For an interesting rebuttal to Kaske, see John W. Crawford, “The Fire from Spenser’s Dragon: The Faerie Queene, I.xi,” The South Central Bulletin 30, no. 4 (1970): 176-178. Crawford argues against Kaske by noting the two types of fire, condemning fire and purifying fire. Crawford writes, “Red Cross must experience cleansing—purging—along the way, and there is a strong indication that this is exactly what happens to him when the Dragon issues his ‘spark.’” Crawford makes many intriguing arguments, but never addresses the fact that it is an evil dragon that issues the spark, not a holy God. Had the Dragon’s spark been found in the House of Holiness, Crawford’s case would hold more heat.
won. As for Satan, he actually appears in canto 4; stanza 36, sitting on a wagon and lashing his team of deadly sins with a whip. It seems unlikely, despite Revelation 20:2 and Milton, that Spenser would have been so inconsistent as to present Satan later in the form of a dragon without offering some explanation. A more plausible explication is that the monster is what he appears to be, Death.  

My intention here is not to quarrel with any of these critics about the interpretation of this climatic battle scene but simply to point out something that none of them has. If the dragon is an evil monster of Romance, then he is an evil monster who quickens his own end, much like Orgoglio. If the dragon is an emblem of sin, then he is sin of the self-destructive sort, much like the seven deadly sins in the House of Pride. If the dragon is a symbol of death, then he is a death that seeks his own death, much like Despair. And if the Dragon is the Devil in dangerous flesh, then it is indeed the same Devil that so hastily put Christ on the cross, and in so doing, quickened his own eternal defeat.

When Redcrosse first encounters the Dragon, we are reminded of Redcrosse’s lowly beginning; we hear echoes of his original pride in his own power—"Vertue gives her selfe light, through darkenesse for to wade."—as he hastily, and unsuccessfully, charges at the Dragon:

\[
\begin{align*}
  &\text{The knight gan fairely couch his steadie speare,} \\
  &\text{And fiercely ran at him with rigorous might:} \\
  &\text{The pointed steele arriving rudely theare,} \\
  &\text{His harder hide would neither perce, nor bight,} \\
  &\text{But glauncing forth passed forward right.}
\end{align*}
\]

(1.11.16)

In this first failed attempt, Spenser emphasizes that victory will not be achieved by the knight’s active puissance alone. As the battle between Redcrosse and the Dragon

\[50 \text{Linwood E. Orange, "Spenser's Old Dragon," Modern Language Notes 74, no. 8 (1959): 680.} \\
\[51 \text{For another literary example of death bringing about the death of death, see John Donne's "Holy Sonnet 10": "And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die."} \]
continues, we see that it is often the dragon's activity, not Redcrosse's, which brings about the Dragon's defeat.

In addition to Redcrosse's action, the description of the Dragon recalls the Errour episode. In the same manner as Errour, the Dragon's tail is first described as wrapped around the dragon himself, before it ever is wrapped around Redcrosse: “His huge long tayle wownd vp in hundred foldes, / Does owerspred his long bras-scaly back” (1.11.11). The Dragon, however, is certainly a more formidable opponent than Errour; Redcrosse will not be able to “raft [his] hatefull heade” (1.1.24) with one mighty whack—his sealy armor is too tough:

And over, all with brazen scales was armd,
Like plated cote of steele, so couched neare,
That nought mote perce, ne might his corse bee harmd
With dint of swerd, nor push of pointed spearc.

(1.11.9)

Yet, Spenser does tip the shrewd reader off to the Dragon’s weakness in the early part of canto 11:

But his most hideous head my tongue to tell,
Does tremble: for his deepe deuouring iawes
Wyde gaped, like the grisly mouth of hell,
Through which into his darke abysse all rauin fell.

(1.11.12)

Because Spenser juxtaposes the Dragon’s impenetrable body with his gaping hellish mouth, the reader who has noticed evil’s self-destructive tendencies is not surprised when Spenser flips this meaning on its head at the end of the canto—The Dragon’s gaping hellish mouth does not bring destruction to Redcrosse; instead, it opens itself up to the Dragon’s own end.
Even before the Dragon’s death though, Spenser takes great care to express the Dragon’s culpability in his own demise—noting that whenever Redcrosse is on the attack, the Dragon is safe, but whenever the Dragon is on the attack, the Dragon is the one who bears the pains of his own actions. After the earlier mentioned interaction between Redcrosse and the Dragon in stanza 11, Redcrosse again takes a run at the Dragon:

But glancing by foorth passed forward right;
Yet sore amoued with so puissaunt push,
The wrathfull beast about him turned light,
And him so rudely passing by, did brush
With his long tayle, that horse and man to ground did rush.

(1.11.16)

Though the expression might seem a bit flippant for the seriousness of the battle, one can imagine the Dragon yelling out, “O-le,” as Redcrosse passes by and then tumbles to the ground at the Dragon’s nudge, much like when a matador side steps a bull. (Although here, Redcrosse is the bull and the Dragon is the relatively safe matador.) Quickly dusting himself off, Redcrosse turns and attacks again, “But th’ydle Stroke yet backe recoyld in vaine” (1.11.17). It is only when the Dragon begins to expend his own energy that he begins to spend himself; the Dragon “Himself vp high he lifted from the ground,” grabbing Redcrosse and his horse. However, it is this action which fatigues the Dragon, and he is forced to return Redcrosse to the ground—the Dragon more tired because of it: “His wearie pounces all in vaine doth spend, / To trusse thepray too heauy for his flight” (1.11.19). It is only because the Dragon frittered away his own strength that Redcrosse is able to run his spear into the Dragon’s side in stanza 20. And yet, in his footnote, Hamilton notes that “it is evident from 36.8-9 that the dragon’s body is not wounded.” He is not hurt, but he is storming mad:
He cryde, as raging seas are wont to rore,
When wintry storme his wrathful wreck does threat,
The rolling billowes beat the ragged shore,
As they the earth would shoulder from her seat.

(1.11.21)

Hamilton, again in his footnote, points out that "wreck" or "ruin" adds "the comic (and apocalyptic note) that the raging seas bring their own ruin." This is played out in a literal sense in stanza 23:

His hideous tayle then hurled he about,
And therewith all enwrapt the nimble thyes
Of his froth-fomy steed, whose courage stout
Striving to loose the knott, that fast him tyes.
Himself in straighter bandes too rash implyes,
That to the ground he is perforce constraynd
To throw his ryder: who can quickly ryse
From off the earth, with durty blood distaynd,
For that reprochfull fall right fowly he disdaynd.

(1.11.23)

It is unclear whether the ambiguous pronoun "Himself" refers to the horse or the Dragon. Thus, as Hamilton points out in the footnote, "too rash" could mean, "all too quickly"; or "too hasty, referring to the horse." Either way, the Dragon cooperates in his own fall. This allows Redcrosse another opportunity to strike at the Dragon; again however, Redcrosse’s attempt is in vain: "But baecke againe the sparcling steele recoyld, / And left not any marke, where it did light" (1.11.25).

This attack from Redcrosse gets the Dragon flaming mad, and he issues forth a spark:

Then full of grief and anguish vehement,
He lowdly brayd, that like was neuer heard,
And from his wide devouring owen sent
A flake of fire, that flashing in his beard,
Him all amazd, and almost made afeard:
The scorching flame sore swunged all his face,
And through his armour all his body seard,
That he could not endure so cruel apace,
But thought his armes to leave, and helmet to unlace.

(1.11.26)

It is important to note that this pernicious flame comes from the Dragon’s wide and devouring oven—the same gaping hellish mouth that Spenser introduced us to earlier in contrast to the Dragon’s impenetrable scales. Here, what appears to be a strong move on the Dragon’s part turns out to be an action which gives Redcrosse more strength than ever before. The flame of the Dragon burned Redcrosse with such an intensity “That neuer man such mischieves did torment” (1.11.28). This forces Redcrosse to strip off his armor—an action which makes him not only more vulnerable to the violence of the Dragon but also more exposed to the grace which follows. Stripped of his armor and badly burned, Redcrosse desires death, and the Dragon is eager to oblige:

Death better were, death did he oft desire,
But death will neuer come, when needs require.
Whom so dismayd when that his foe beheld,
He cast to suffer him no more respire,
But gan his sturdy sterne about to weld,
And him so strongly stroke, that to the ground him feld.

(1.11.28)

The strong stroke of the Dragon, however, turns out to be the first strike against himself as Redcrosse is driven down into the well of life. Beyond the fortuitousness of this as expressed in stanza 29, Spenser emphasizes the Dragon’s active role in the renewing of Redcrosse in the Dragon’s prideful victory dance:

When that infernall Monster, hauing kest
His weareie foe into that liuing well,
Can high aduaunce his broad discoloured brest,
Aboue his wonted pitch, with countenance fell,
And clapt his yron wings, as victor he did dwell.

(1.11.31)
This same action, and thus strike two, is seen in the subsequent encounter between Redcrosse and the Dragon, as the Dragon’s own energy and his open and hellish mouth perpetuates his own demise. Again, the Dragon sends out scorching fire from his “hellish entrails,” this time causing Redcrosse to recoil into the tree of life (1.11.45-48).

In the final scene between Redcrosse and the Dragon, and thus the Dragon’s third strike against himself, the Dragon is defeated by the spear of Redcrosse. Here Redcrosse does indeed take a more active role in the slaying of evil. However, the action of good’s triumph over evil is not so one-sided as it might first appear. The weapon of Redcrosse does indeed run “deepe emperst [the Dragon’s] darksome hollow maw” (1.11.53). Yet, instead of rushing forth in the same mighty attack that we see in the opening of this canto, Redcrosse is simply standing firm, come what may. It is really the Dragon’s pride and power which undoes him:

And in his first encounter, gaping wide,
He thought atonce him to have swallowed quight,
And rusht upon him with outrageous pride;
Who him r’encountring fierce, as hauke in flight,
Perforce rebutted backe. The weapon bright
Taking advantage of his open jaw,
Ran through his mouth with so importune might,
That deepe emperst his darksome hollow maw,
And back retyrde, his bloud forth with alldid draw.

(1.11.53)

Spenser highlights the Dragon’s culpability in his own demise with the allusion to the wise and foolish builders: “So downe he fell, as an huge rockie clift, / Whose false foundation waves have washt away” (1.11.54). These lines recall Jesus’ parable about the foolish man in Matthew 7, who “built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against the house, and it fell with a great crash.” Where the way of this wise man prospers, the way of the fool perishes. So too
the way of the wicked. It is the Dragon’s own pride and quick action which completes
his own destruction. The Dragon, blinkered by his own pride and ire, rushes upon
Redcrosse with his violent, pernicious mouth open and raging about. And as he swallows
Redcrosse’s spear we see evil finally fall at the feet of holiness.

It is noteworthy that the action of this great allegorical scene between good and
evil covers the span of three days. Certainly, in the three-day battle between the Dragon
and Redcrosse, who falls but rises on the third day to defeat the evil force that has
plagued the land, Spenser is alluding to the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. In this
allusion, Spenser gives the theological precedent for the reflexive and self-destructive
nature of evil. It is at the cross where Satan, blinkered by his own pride and ire, believes
in the triumph of evil—that is, the triumph of evil over good. However, in the words of
the Psalmist, the trouble that he causes recoils on himself; his violence comes down on
his own head. It is difficult not to read Psalm 69 through the light of the cross: “They put
gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst. May the table set before them become
a snare; may it become retribution and a trap” (Ps. 69:21-22). Putting Christ on the cross
is ultimately a self-destructive move that becomes its own trap and retribution. At the
death of Christ on the cross, we can imagine Satan exalting in his victory much like the
Dragon after the fall of Redcrosse:

When that internall Monster, having kest
His wareie foe into that living well,
Can high advaunce his broad discoloured brest,
Above his wonted pitch, with countenance fell,
And clapt his yron wings, as victor he did dwell.

(1.11.31)

However, in the holiness of Christ, in his standing firm on the cross, in the breaking out
and extending of his grace, we see the triumph of evil—that is, the triumph of good over
evil. By putting Christ on the cross, Satan hastens his own end and brings about the fate which was promised him in Genesis 3:15, “He will crush your head, and you will strike his heal.” It is in the death and resurrection of Christ that we see the reflexive nature of evil become the conduit which allows grace to break out of the circle of sin and death, enabling holiness to reign supreme.

**Book Two: Having One’s Own Hoggish Minde**

The appearance of the Red Crosse Knight in the first canto provides one of the few character links between Books I and II. Yet as we follow Sir Guyon in his practice of temperance, we discover that Spenser’s theme of evil’s reflexivity is again prevalent. Showing a counter example to the circles of evil in book one, the temperate Guyon is unable to fight against his fellow virtuous traveler, Redcrosse. Even though he is spurred on to attack Redcrosse by the great deceiver, Archimago, Guyon restrains his beguiled emotions, refusing to turn against the cross. “The sacred badge of [his] Redeemers death” (2.1.27). This scene recalls the violent exchange between Archimago and Sans Loy, where Archimago, dressed as Redcrosse, is unhorsed and injured by the enraged Saracen (1.3). There is a certain confusion in evil that brings about its own frustration. Conversely, good, in its very nature, properly aligns its loves and hates, so that it instinctively knows what to cling to and what to attack.

Spenser reinforces good’s inability to betray itself in the later scene between Arthur and Pyrochles. Here too Archimago is stirring up trouble; he is attempting to assist Pyrochles in his fight with Arthur. Archimago is in possession of Arthur’s magic
sword, yet he knows that the sword will never betray Arthur. Archimago, speaking to Pyrocles, notes that, “this weapons power I well haue kend, / To be contrary to the worke, which ye intend” (2.8.19). This is because Arthur’s sword “Ne euer may be vsed by his fone, / Ne forst his rightful owner to offend” (2.8.21). Insensible of this, Pyrochles takes Arthur’s sword into battle against him:

Assembling all his force and vtmost might,
With his [Arthur’s] owne swerd he fierce at him did flye,
And stroke, and foynd, and lasht outrageously,
Withouten reason or regard.

(2.8.47)

Connecting Pyrochles’s temperament with his battle prowess, Nohrnberg notes that “Pyrochles cannot control the sword, because he cannot control himself.”52 While Pyrochles angrily flays around in fight “as when a windy tempest bloweth hye,” Arthur stands firm as he “suffred rash Pyrochles waste his ydle might” (2.8.48). Having spent himself, and realizing the impotence of Arthur’s weapon in his hand, Pyrochles tosses aside Arthur’s sword before he is overthrown. Arthur then offers Pyrochles mercy if he will forgo his evil ways. Pyrochles, however, rashly blows his own top and refuses Arthur’s grace, leaving Arthur no choice but to cleave Pyrochles’ head:

Wroth was the Prince, and sory yet withal,
That he so willfully refused grace;
Yet sith his fate so cruelly did fall,
His shining Helmet he gan soone vnlace,
And left his headlesse body bleeding all the place.

(2.8.52)

Though good refuses to betray itself, expressed both through the temperance of Sir Guyon and the magic of Arthur’s sword, the mind of evil, pricked by pride, insists on its

52 Nohrnberg, 302.
own way; and as we have seen and will continue to see, the way of the wicked will perish.

After Spenser expresses the temperance of good in the scene between Sir Guyon and Redcrosse, he expresses the intemperate mind of evil and the reflexive frustration that it brings. When Sir Guyon and the Palmer arrive, now on foot, at the Castle of Medina, they meet the three sisters of the house: Medina, Elissa, and Perissa. In this allegorical episode, Spenser is expressing Aristotle’s theory of virtue, the golden mean. Medina, representing the golden mean, is to hold her two evil stepsisters, the defective Elissa and the excessive Perissa, in check. Elissa stymies the faculty of joy in her own life by insisting on her wayward asceticism:

Elissa (so the eldes hight) did deeme
Such entertainment base, ne ought would eat,
Ne ought would speake, but euermore did seeme
As discontent for want of mirth or meat;
No solace could her Paramour intreat
Her once to show, ne court, nor dalliaunce,
But with bent lowering browes, as she would threat.
She scould, and frownd with forward counternaunce,
Unworthly of faire Ladies comely gouernaunce.

(2.2.35)

Just as Elissa’s deficiency wrecks herself, so Perissa’s excessiveness exhausts herself. Perissa’s extravagance seems much more beneficent than the actions of her cheerless sister as it produces a certain gaiety in Perissa; that excessive gaiety, however, comes at an excessive cost to herself:

But young Perissa was of other mynd,
Full of disport, still laughing, loosely light,
And quite contrary to her sisters kind;
No measure in her mood, no rule of right.
But poured out in pleasure and delight;
In wine and meats she flowd aboue the banck,
And in excesse exceeded her owne might:
In sumptuous tire she ioyd her selfe to pranck.
But of her loue too lauish (little haue she thanck.)

(2.2.36)

James Carscallen notes that “[Perissa’s] looseness represents one of the two aspects of
discourtesy: it bespeaks a character that has no firmness, no frame; one that will not
husband its strength or dignity, but squanders itself recklessly in pleasures and favours.”

Not only do these two sisters bring frustration to themselves as individuals but also they
bring frustration on their own family:

But stryfull mind, and diuerse qualitee
Drew them in partes, and each made others foe:
Still did they striue, and daily disagree;
The eldest did against the youngest goe,
And both against the middest meant to worken woe.

(2.2.13)

This internal frustration is emphasized when we meet Huddibras and Sans Loy, the lovers
of Elissa and Perissa:

These two gay knights, vowed to so diuerse loues,
Each other does enuy with deadly hate.
And daily warre against his foeman moues,
In hope to win more fauour with his mate,
And th’others pleasing seruie to abate.

(2.2.19)

In fact, even at the arrival of Sir Guyon, whom Huddibras and Sans Loy take to be a
common threat and enemy, they are barely able to seek out an attack on Sir Guyon
without killing each other first:

But ere they could proceede vnto the place,
Where he abode, themselues at discord fell,
And cruell combat ioynd in middle space:
With horrible assault, and fury fell.

They heapt huge strokes, the scorned life to quell.

(2.2.20)

In both the interactions among the three sisters and the interactions between Huddibras and Sans Loy, Spenser shows the reflexive nature of evil. Because the intemperance of evil refuses to submit to some mean or law, evil cannot even be in concord with itself. This discord is further expressed as Huddibras jealously watches the boldness of Sans Loy as he takes his place next to his lover, Perissa. As Huddibras compares the audacity of Sans Loy with his own “folle-hardize” in fighting (2.2.17), we witness not only the dissension which gnaws away the “comradeship” of Huddibras and Sans Loy, but also the gnawing of Huddibras’s own intestines as his insidious thoughts toward Huddibras burn his own core: “Hardly could [Huddibras] endure [Sans Loy’s] hardiment, / Yett still he satt, and inly did him selfe torment” (2.2.37).

Carscallen astutely compares the evil natures of Huddibras and Pyrochles, noting their relation to other self-destructive characters such as Envy:

Huddibras is one of Spenser’s morbidly grave characters. He is always at war, but even if he were to attack as unremittingly and violently as Pyrochles, it would be as true of him as Guyon knows it to be of Pyrochles (v,16) that outer war is only a shadow of inner war. The froward man is really a figure of weakness, devoured by a resentment and suspicion that explode outward because they have first drawn defensively inward: for like Malbecco, the froward man always locks his doors. Such characters in Spenser have a high suicide rate, and those who remain alive do so by feeding on their own vitals, like Envy in Book V.  

Carscallen calls our attention to how dangerous Pyrochles is to himself when he is attacking “unremittingly and violently.” However, it seems noteworthy to also express the self-destructive nature of Pyrochles even in his non-militant moments.

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54 Carscallen, 353.
I have already mentioned the manner in which Pyrochles’ angry choice brings about his own demise. In Pyrochles, however, Spenser expresses additional ways in which the mind of evil brings about its own frustration. In canto five, Sir Guyon, who has bound Occasion and Furor, warns Pyrochles to be wise and, for Pyrochles’ own sake, not to undo the good that has been done:

Loose is no shame, nor to bee lesse then foe,
But to bee lesser, then himselfe, doth marre
Both loosers lott, and victours prayse aisoe.
Vaine others ouerthrowes, who selfe doth ouerthrow.

(2.5.15)

With these words Sir Guyon warns Pyrochles to be wise in the ways of temperance: rashly undoing the binds on Occasion and Furor not only undoes the good work of Sir Guyon, but also it will undo Pyrochles himself. In their essay, “The Iconography of Spenser’s Occasion,” Alastair Fowler and John Manning contrast Spenser’s Occasion with the traditional Occasion. In so doing, they note that

The bald occiput of Spenser’s Occasion becomes... a symbol either of the remorse that follows succumbing to an evil occasion, an inducement to wrath, or else the frustration of not grasping the opportunity (in which case the wrathful passions turn back upon the self).

The heart of Fowler and Manning’s argument lies in Occasion’s interactions with Sir Guyon. It should be noted, however, that for Pyrochles, the wrathful passions turn back upon the self only when he does grasp at the opportunity. It is his ownintemperate and impulsive wrath which turns on himself. The intemperance of Pyrochles refuses to allow him to fly from this place of self-entrapment. Sir Guyon once more warns Pyrochles of the dangers that he is about to bring on himself by unbinding Occasion and Furor:

Great mercy sure, for to enlarge a thrall.

Whose freedom shall thee turne to greatest scath.
Nath'lesse now quench thy whott emboyling wrath.

(2.5.18)

As soon as Occasion and Furor (ultimately allegorical symbols of Pyrochles himself) are freed, they turn on Pyrochles in attack, beating him more and more until he is covered in dirt and blood and burning brands. Pyrochles calls out to Sir Guyon for aid; the Palmer, however, advises against it, stating that

He that his sorrow sought through wilfulnesse,
And his foe fettred would release agayne,
Deserues to taste his follies fruit, repented payne.

(2.5.24)

Allowing evil to run out its own self-destructive course becomes characteristic of Sir Guyon and the Palmer, whose motto later becomes, “Let Gryll be Gryll.”

In canto six, we meet Pyrochles once more, and we see the way in which “freedom shall thee turne to greatest scath.” The insignia on his shield reads, “Burnt I doe burne,” and we see the way in which the outer fire caused by Occasion and Furor runs parallel with Pyrochles’ own inner ire. Pyrochles’ own fiery rage has become so great that he seeks his own death:

I burne, I burne, I burne, then lowd he cryde,
O how I burn with implacable fyre,
Yet nought can quench mine inly flaming side,
Nor sea of licour cold, nor lake of myre,
Nothing but death can doe me to respyre.

(2.6.44)

Like Despair in Book One, however, Pyrochles is unable to bring about his own end. He is pulled up on the bank by Atin, only to be burnt and burn again another day.

Spenser reinforces this image of a fiery mind seeking its own death in Arthur’s fight with Maleger and his two hags, Impatience and Impotence. After Arthur defeats
Maleger, whose “owne paynes did make” (2.11.46), the hot-headed Impatience and the lame-footed Impotence flee like mad dogs. They flee, however, not unto safety but death:

Throwing away her broken chains and bands,
And having quenched her burning fier brands,
Hedlong her selfe did cast into that lake;
But Impotence with her owne wilfull hands,
One of Malegers cursed darts did take,
So ryed her trembling hart, and wicked end did make.

(2.11.47)

Here Spenser emphasizes that both the excess and the deficiency of the golden mean—both the impatient and the impotent mind—lead to destruction. The rash mind of Impatience foolishly follows her master into his watery grave. The feeble mind of Impotence, conversely, though it desires to follow its master, is too weak to pursue Maleger’s path. Instead, Impotence obtains one of Maleger’s cursed darts, and pursues her own end there on the earth. Commenting on the ethical necessity to control the will, Philip Rollinson expresses the misrule of Impatience and Impotence:

The two are perfectly balanced aspects of misrule, one the concupiscible, the other its irascible counterpart.... Impotence is the aspect of misrule which cannot control the concupiscible part of the passions (love/hate, attraction/aversion, joy/sorrow). Impatience, on the other hand, [is related to and cannot control] the irascible passions (hope/despair, fear/audacity, and anger).  

For a proper ruling of the will, one must have a proper control of one’s passions. That is, one must love what is good and hate what is evil; one must be attracted to what is beautiful and have an aversion to what is ugly; one must rejoice with those who have joy and weep with those in sorrow. Any imbalance in this rule of the will, either on the fault of impotence or impatience, can cause harm not only to others but also to one’s own self.

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There has been much criticism on Spenser’s Bower of Bliss considering that Sir Guyon’s actions seem anything but temperate as he destroys the Bower “with rigour pittlilesse” (2.12.83). In his essay, “Moral Ambivalence in the Legend of Temperance,” Paul Suttie notes that Guyon is really between a rock and a hard place as he enters the Bower. Suttie explains that for Guyon, the danger of the Bower is not to let go of his quest, like Verdant, with Sensual self-abandon. For Guyon, the danger lies in fulfilling his quest to destroy the Bower; that is, to carry [his quest] through in terms that will reveal in his very success something potentially as culpable as his failure would have been.... In sum, he looks damned if he doesn’t, and also damned if he does.\textsuperscript{57}

Granted, there does seem to be something in Guyon’s destruction of the Bower of Bliss that is intemperate. However, in the characters of Impatience and Impotence, Spenser reminds us that Book Two is rooted in the ethics of Aristotle. And as we move from canto eleven to canto twelve, we are prepared to find the golden mean in the Bower of Bliss. In Acrasia’s Bower, Sir Guyon is neither impatient nor impotent. Instead, he is, it appears to me, quite temperate; he has his loves and hates properly aligned. In his \textit{Ethics}, Aristotle expresses the evils of intemperance, the defect and excess of the golden mean of meekness:

\textbf{The defect, call it Angerlessness or what you will, is blamed: I mean, they who are not angry at things at which they ought to be angry are thought to be foolish, and they who are angry not in right manner, nor in right time, nor with whom they ought; for a man who labours under this defect is thought to have no perception, nor to be pained, and to have no tendency to avenge himself, inasmuch as he feels no anger: now to bear with scurrility in one’s own person, and patiently see one’s own friends suffer it, is a slavish thing.}

\textbf{As for the excess, it occurs in all forms: men are angry with those with whom, and at things with which, they ought not to be, and more than they}

ought, and too hastily, and for too great a length of time. I do not mean, however, that these are combined in any one person: that would in fact be impossible, because the evil destroys itself, and if it is developed in its full force it becomes unbearable.\footnote{Aristotle, \textit{Ethics}, trans. D.P. Chase. (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1950), 96-97. The passage is found in Book 4 Chapter 5 of \textit{Ethics}.}

Where the preceding cantos focus on the dangers of excess and the self-destruction that brings—Both Pyrochles and Impatience are angry more than they ought, and too hastily, and for too great a length of time which eventually leads to their own self-destruction—the Bower of Bliss focuses more on the defect, Angerlessness. In Acrasia’s Bower, we find foolish creatures who are not angry at things at which they ought to be angry, and thus enervate their own lives. The only danger in the Bower of Bliss is the self-defeating Angerlessness of one’s own heart.

As Sir Guyon and the Palmer enter the Bower, Spenser notes that “Instead of fraying, they them selues did feare” (2.12.40). The ambiguity of the pronoun \textit{themselves}, whether it is intensive or reflexive, is a trademark of Spenser’s throughout \textit{The Faerie Queene}. This line can be read, “Instead of frightening others, Sir Guyon and the Palmer were frightened by others (or the Bower). Or, the line can be read, “Instead of frightening others, Sir Guyon and the Palmer frightened themselves.” It seems as if Sir Guyon and the Palmer know that the danger is not in the Bower itself but in their own reactions toward the Bower. This is emphasized when Spenser describes the Bower’s enclosure:

\begin{quote}
Goodly it was enclosed round about,  
Aswell their entred guestes to keep within,  
As those unruly beasts to hold without;  
Yet was the fence thereof but weake and thin;  
Nought feard theyr force, that fortilage to win,  
But wisedomes power, and temperaunces might,  
By which the mightest things efforced bin:
\end{quote}
And eke the gate was wrought of substance light,  
Rather for pleasure, then for battery or fight.  

(2.12.43)

The Bower’s enclosure is merely aesthetic: it is the anger or angerlessness of the men’s own hearts which encloses them within the Bower of Bliss. Only meekness, the golden mean, only “wisedomes power, and temperaunces might” has enough holy force to break out of Acrasia’s trap.

Entering the Bower, Sir Guyon exhibits his temperance as he “passed forth, and lookt still forward right, / Brydling his will, and maystering his might” (2.12.53). Sir Guyon must indeed bind his own will and master his own might. He must become neither impatient (attacking hastily and in anger) nor impotent (succumbing to the temptation of the place like the poor and pitiful Verdant). As he progresses through the Bower, Sir Guyon must bind his will and master his might against an onslaught of temptations. In nearly all of these images of temptation, Spenser poetically writes with overtones which highlight the manner in which these images provide a medium for self-entrapment. I will use Sir Guyon’s first temptation, the grapes, as a chief example. As Sir Guyon enters the Bower, he notices the grapes,

Whose bounches hanging downe, seemd to entice  
All passers by, to taste their lushious wine,  
And did them selues into their hands incline.

(2.12.54)

As the enticing grapes seem to slope toward the hands of the passersby, the passersby seem to incline themselves to the evil way of their own hands by reaching toward the grapes and bringing upon themselves the deceit of that fruit. It has been noted that this passage from Spenser is similar to passages from Tasso and Ariosto, yet Spenser offers a
new twist. Robert Durling notes that "[Spenser] is not describing like Tasso, and Ariosto before him, the illusions of beauty... but rather the way in which the mind shapes actual objects in order to corrupt the appetite."\(^{59}\) The real danger of the Bower lies within Guyon himself, not without. Though the grapes have an alluring temptation, they are not dangerous in and of themselves. The real danger lies within Guyon and his ability to bring the grapes into the action of corrupting his own appetite and altering his temperate demeanor.

After Sir Guyon passes by all of the "tests" of the Bower of Bliss, the golden mean of his temperance is juxtaposed with the deficiency of Verdant, as Sir Guyon destroys the Bower "with rigour pittilesse" (2.12.83). After he gives Verdant a lesson in proper temperance, Sir Guyon, along with the Palmer, offers a golden life to the excessive or deficient beasts. Before Sir Guyon and the Palmer depart, Spenser reminds the reader once again of one of his central themes: evil's tendency to bring this destructive evil upon itself. Though the hoggish creature, Gryll, is offered the grace of new and abundant life, he chooses instead his own beastly way.\(^{60}\) Sir Guyon and the Palmer conclude with the following:

\begin{quote}
Saide Guyon, See the mind of beastly man,
That hath so soone forgot the excellence
Of his creation, when he life began,
That now he chooseth, with vile difference.
To be a beast, and lacke intelligence.
To whom the Palmer thus, The dunghill kinde
Delightes in filth and fowle incontinence:
\end{quote}


Let Gryll be Gryll, and haue his hoggish minde.

(2.12.87)

Noting that the excellence of humanity consists in man’s capacity to make choices, Nohrnberg writes,

In giving Grylle his will, the poet dignifies Grylle’s will as free as human, for he is allowed the exercise of his power of choice. But in making the Palmer say that Grylle has forgotten the being with which he started out in life—he surely cannot have renounced it.61

Here Nohrnberg strikes at the heart of evil’s self-destructive way. There is something pitiful in Grylle’s insistence to remain a beast. However, there is something tragic in the fact that Grylle’s original self has become so destroyed that he has lost the ability to choose to be good. Grylle’s deprivation of good is so great that he “has forgot the excellence / Of his creation, when he life began.” And, as Nohrnberg notes, in this forgetting, he has lost his ability to renounce—or conversely, to reclaim—his former self. And so, because of his deprivation, Grylle leaves himself with all that he knows, the “filth” and the “fowle” of his own “hoggish minde.”

Conclusion: The Circle Revisited

Because there is no need to belabor the point, and because the theme of evil’s self-destructive tendency, though prevalent, does not alter much in the subsequent books, I have worked this theme out thoroughly only for Books 1 and 2. Spenser’s expression of the manner in which evil brings destruction to itself, however, can be seen throughout The Faerie Queene. For example in Book 3, Malbecco’s jealousy not only causes harm to others but also to himself:

61 Nohrnberg, 502.
But all his mind is set on mucky pelfe,
To hoord vp heapes of euill gotten masse,
For which he others wrongs and wreckes himselfe.

(3.9.4)

So doth he punish [Hellenore] and eke himselfe torment.

(3.10.3)

His jealousy drives him mad until he is left alone with his "selfe-murdring thought"
(3.10.57). "Yet can he neuer dye, but dying liues, / And doth himselfe with sorrow new sustaine" (3.10.60). Like Despair, Malbecco attempts to end his own misery, but he is too impotent to succeed in even this. And so, like Gryll, his privation of good becomes so great that he loses his own humanity: He "Forgot he was a man, and Gelosy is hight" (3.10.60).

In Book 4, we see a "friendship" turn on itself as Paridell and Blandamour, spurred on by Ate, expend their own energies in the harming of themselves and their friendship:

Their firie Steedes with so vntamed forse
Did beare them both to fell auenges end,
That both their speares with pitilesse remorse,
Through shield and mayle, and haberieon did wend,
And in their flesh a grisly passage rend,
That with the furie of their owne affret,
Each other horse and man to ground did send;
Where lying still a while, both did forget
The perilous present stownd, in which their liues were set.  

(4.2.15)

Or in canto 7, Amoret is able to escape from being raped and eaten by the Carl only because the Carl’s lust is so great that he first turns on himself in masturbation before pursuing Amoret: “And spredding ouer all the flore alone, / Gan dight him selfe vnto his wonted sinne; / Which ended, then his bloudy banket should beginne” (4.7.20).
In Book 5, it is Malengin’s own trickery which brings about his demise. Like Milton’s Satan, Malengin reduces himself—an artistic expression of the privation of good that is taking place. First Malengin becomes a fox, then a bush, a bird, a hedgehog, and finally a snake. It is this last transformation, however, which allows Talus to catch and trample Malengin to death:

But when as he would to a snake again
Haue turn’d himselfe, [Talus] with his yron flayle
Gan drive at him, with so huge might and maine,
That all his bones, as small as sandy grayle
He broke, and did his bowels disentrayle;
Crying in vaine for helpe, when helpe was past.
So did deceipt the selfe deceiuer layle,
There they him left a carrion outcast;
For beasts and foules to fee vpon for their repast.

(5.9.19)

In Book 5 we also see the ways in which Gerioneo brings “hell vnto him selfe with horror great” (5.11.12), and the manner in which Enuie “feedes on her owne maw unnaturall, / And of her owne foule entrayles makes her meat” (5.12.31).

And finally in Book 6, we notice how the Saluage man turns Disdain’s whip against Disdain himself: “And from him taking his owne whip, therewith / So sore him scourgeth, that the blood downe followeth” (6.8.28). We also notice that like Malbecco who caused himself harm out of jealousy, so Coridon, who is jealous of Calidore, would “byte his lip, and even for gealousie / Was readie oft his owne hart to deuoure” (6.9.39). And, as we have seen so many times before, a lawless group cannot maintain order within itself; thus, when the captain withholds Pastorella, the Brigants turn on each other:

Like as a sort of hungry dogs ymet
About some carcase by the common way,
Doe fall together, stryuing each to get
The greatest portion of the greddie pray;
All on confused heapes themselves assasy.
And snatch, and byte, and rend, and tug, and teare;
That who them sees, would wonder at their fray,
And who sees not, would be affrayd to heare.
Such was the conflict of those cruell Brigants there.

(6.11.17)

After seeing the consistent manner in which Spenser expresses the circular and self-destructive patterns of evil in Books 1 and 2, and briefly here in Books 3-6, it is hard not to look for this same motion in the Mutability Cantos. And though the expression of evil seems absent from the Mutability Cantos, the circular pattern which evil manifests itself in is very much prevalent, although in a somewhat new form. Mutability’s claim to supremacy is supported in the power of her circle. That is, all is subject to change: Life decays and dies, but new life arises; the sun sets and darkness occurs, but the dawn follows; autumn ends and winter settles, yet spring warms the earth anew. However, in response to the circular power of change, Nature replies,

I well consider all that ye haue sayd,
And find that all things stedfastnes doe hate
And changed be: yet being rightly wayd
They are not changed from their first estate;
But by their change their being doe dilate:
And turning to themselues at length againe,
Doe worke their owne perfection so by fate:
Then ouer them Change doth not rule and raigne;
But they raigne ouer change, and doe their states maintain.

(7.7.58)

Here Nature gives new meaning to the circles of Mutability. Because the things of earth still hold some element of their first estate (that is, their created goodness before the Fall), the working out of change in them can ultimately lead to perfection or a return to perfection. In his note on this passage, A.C. Hamilton writes that the movement of Mutability “is not circular, then, but spiral in returning creation to its higher level.” Since moral evil seems to be absent from the Mutability Cantos, it is hard to know what to
make of this new image in relation to the circles of destruction that we have seen in the
first six books. And yet, Mutability does seem to represent the evils of this unstable
world, i.e., flood, fire, decay, death. The spiral, then, represents the ways in which
lasting good can arise from these evils; it is a linear progression coming out of the futile
circularity of Mutability’s rule. Regardless of whether or not Spenser had this spiral
image in his mind as regards to the Mutability Cantos, we can say that even in the
Mutability Cantos, the circle has a futility and a sorrowfulness to it that causes Spenser to
desire a more vertical movement. In his final two stanzas, Spenser expresses first his
sorrow at the futile movements of this earth, and then his joy at the thought of those
earthly circles coming to a heavenly rest:

When I bethinke me on that speech whyleare,
Of Mutability, and well it way:
Me seemes, that though she all vnworthy were
Of the Heav’ns Rule; yet very sooth to say,
In all things else she beares the greatest sway.
Which makes me loath this state of life so tickle,
And loue of things so vaine to cast away;
Whose flowring pride, so fading and so fickle,
Short Time shall soon cut down with his consuming sickle.

Then gin I thinke on that which Nature sayd,
Of that same time when no more Change shall be,
But stedfast rest of all things firmly stayd
Upon the pillours of Eternity,
That is contrary to Mutabilitie:
For, all that moueth, doth in Change delight:
But thence-forth all shall rest eternally
With Him that is the God of Sabbaoth hight:
O that great Sabbaoth God, graunt me that Sabaoths sight.

(7.8.1-2)

Though, again, this is a bit distanced from our earlier discourse on the self-destructive
patterns of evil, it still seems to offer Spenser’s conclusion to all that has come before. In
these lines we see a deep desire to exchange the futile and destructive movements of this earth for the permanent peace of the great "Sabbaoth God."

Finis.
Bibliography


