Comic Spenser: Faith, folly, and The Faerie Queene

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The Aesthetics of Space is a valuable voice in the ongoing conversation around literary and cultural modernity in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. While the focus on Ruskinian *theoria* and *aesthesis* is not established as indispensable to reading the aesthetic tradition, perhaps because Ruskin expressed a dichotomy that was in the cultural firmament, articulated in various ways by various people across the century, it is certainly shown to be a productive (to use a Lefebvrean word) perspective for reading the spatial dynamics of the so-called aesthetic writers, and beyond that of the modernists who would follow them.

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Comic Spenser: Faith, folly, and The Faerie Queene, by Victoria Coldham-Fussell, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2020, 256 pp., £80.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-5261-3111-9

Despite the fact that humour studies have become a fully-fledged and important area of interdisciplinary research, the tendencies in literary analysis to not take humour entirely seriously, to reduce what is funny to simple cases of comic relief, and to fail to recognise a work's humour as integral to its purpose have far from disappeared. This is also the case for scholarship on Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, that, as Victoria Coldham-Fussell notes in her introduction, still suffers from a longstanding tradition of "conjur[ing] expectations of humourlessness" (p. 4). Her study of this epic makes a fine contribution to a small but strong strand of scholarly inquiry that engages with humour in early modern English culture on its own terms. Here one can think of Indira Ghose's *Shakespeare and Laughter: A Cultural History* (2008), Adam Zucker's *Places of Wit in Early Modern English Comedy* (2011) and the edited volume *The Power of Laughter and Satire in Early Modern Britain: Political and Religious Culture, 1500-1820* (2017) by Mark Knights and Adam Morton. Focusing on the questions as to what makes *The Faerie Queene* funny and why this is important, Coldham-Fussell offers a fresh and inspiring reading of the epic poem that points to the profound connections between humour, the literary imagination and Spenser's conception of the fallible Christian subject.

To do so, Coldham-Fussell presents her own understanding of comic theory, which she captures in the principles of "reduction," "ambiguity" and "play" (p. 5). These correspond, respectively, with the better-known theories associated with humour: superiority, incongruity and relief, a clever approach, because it moves the attention away from the (faulty) idea that they are all-explanatory and competing theories, and allows her to focus on their mutual connections and on what she considers central to Spenser's humour. Reduction pertains to literal and figurative forms of "lowering," for instance regarding the body, inferiority and notably the idea of bathos, which takes centre stage in *The Faerie Queene* (p. 7). Ambiguity is at the philosophical heart of humour and the human condition, a "willingness to recognize [it] and admit confusion [being] conducive to comic recognition" (p. 10). Play relates to humour's aspect of pleasure and amusement, and, as such, characterises Spenser's humour

as friendly and self-reflective, rather than acerbic and antagonistic. These principles form the basis of analysis of the chapters that follow.

The first chapter after the introduction is devoted to a historical survey of humour in Renaissance literature. It considers authors, contexts and forms that are relevant to this period, such as Ovid and Lucian, jestbooks, humanism, the Protestant Reformation, with the purpose of showing the rich extent to which *The Faerie Queene* is informed by Renaissance culture. More specifically, it enables Coldham-Fussell to show that the Renaissance insistence on the importance of gravity and solemnity, especially in connection with subjects such as piety and nationalism and literary criticism, produced a tension with its culture of humour, which offered fertile ground for Spenser's epic.

This introductory chapter is followed by four well-connected chapters that offer readings of *The Faerie Queene*, with special emphasis on books I, III and IV. Chapter two explores the theme of Red Crosse's heroism and the notion that the knight's fallibility is informed by a naïve focus on outward action and violence, which is parodically exposed and contrasted with his lack of spiritual insight and reliance on God. The third chapter turns to another defining characteristic of the epic and in particular Book I: its bawdy language, showing that the target of Spenser's humour is not so much sex, or sexual desire, as "bodily shame" (p. 115). Indeed, when associated with marriage and procreation, humorous descriptions of sexuality exude a sense of joy and victory, rather than mockery. This allows Coldham-Fussell to expose jokes that have typically gone unnoticed, a notable example being the "punning allusion, in 'vnacquainted', to *vna's quaint*" in x.29.7-9 during Redcrosse's battle with a dragon (p. 135). It is furthermore anticipated by a "bawdily" amusing description of dawn on the day Una sees the end of the battle in I.xi.51 (p. 135), that personifies dawn "in a state of post-coital disarray" (p. 135). This moment displaces cheerlessness with merriment, "using humour and (notwithstanding Aurora's red cheeks) unabashed sensuality to signal the coming victory" (p. 135). Chapter four continues on the correlation between humour and love and discusses how sin and redemption are in fact intimately connected, something that finds subtle expression in humorous depictions of vulnerable and imperfect lovers. The final chapter turns towards to the epic's attitude towards Elizabeth I and the characters that can be seen to represent her, such as Lucifera, Belphoebe and Gloriana. Humour allows Spenser to highlight her status as a mortal being "against claims of her transcendent virtues" (p. 173). This also enables Spenser to cultivate a "spirit of self-satire" targeting his own attempts at flattering the Queen (p. 180). The epilogue connects humour to the epic's principal literary device and argues that humour—through bathos, ambiguity and pleasure—makes Spenser's allegory work.

Coldham-Fussell's reading of *The Faerie Queene* through a comic lens, and in a rich context of Chaucerian, Erasmian, Cervantic and Ariostian wit, demonstrates the importance of attaching critical significance to humour as an aspect of literature that simultaneously exposes and empathises with human weakness. As such, it will appeal to students and scholars of Spenser, but also of the literary culture of the Renaissance and beyond.

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