

Writing and weaving: The textual and the textile in Spenser's 1590 *Faerie Queene*, III.i*

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ABSTRACT

Most often, Ovidian allusions are woven into Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (Books I–III, 1590) without developing into an open re-telling of myths. One significant exception occurs in Book III, Canto 1: there the action comes to a temporary stop in order to make space for a detailed description of the tapestry in the hall of Castle Joyous, which depicts the story of Venus and Adonis. This article intends to offer a reading of that episode that focuses on the importance of materiality and self-reflexivity as keys to its significance at the opening of Book III, and in the larger structure of *The Faerie Queene*.

Here, the descriptive powers of the poet are both foregrounded and questioned, in a double movement of ekphrasis which gestures towards a serious interrogation of the value of representation, both in poetry and the visual arts. Implicitly, it is the poet (and through him, the reader him/herself) that must question his/her role and participation in the gradual and often painful awareness of the body that is foregrounded throughout Book III.

KEYWORDS: Spenser; representation; “Arras” tapestries; ekphrasis; textuality; Britomart; body.

Escritura y tapiz:

Lo textual y lo textil en *The Faerie Queene* de Edmund Spenser, I.1 (1590)

RESUMEN: Muchas alusiones ovidianas se incluyen en *The Faerie Queene* (1590) de Edmund Spenser (Libros I–III), sin que ello implique una recreación completa de esos mitos. Una excepción muy significativa a esta regla sucede en el Libro III, Canto I: en ese momento la acción del

Escrita e tecelagem:

O textual e o têxtil em *The Faerie Queene* de Spenser, III.1. (1590)**

RESUMO: Texto São muitas as alusões ovidianas que Edmund Spenser entetece em *The Faerie Queene* (Livros I–III, 1590), sem que isso implique voltar a narrar esses mitos inteiros. Uma exceção significativa ocorre no Livro III, Canto 1: aí a ação é temporariamente suspensa para dar lu-

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poema llega a detenerse por unos momentos, para así hacer una descripción detallada del tapiz del salón principal de Castle Joyous, que narra la historia de Venus y Adonis. El presente artículo pretende ofrecer una lectura de ese episodio que se centre en la importancia de los conceptos de materialidad y autoconciencia como claves de su significado, al principio del libro III.

En este episodio, los poderes descriptivos del poeta quedan notablemente destacados, pero también cuestionados, en un doble movimiento de ekphrasis que apunta hacia una interrogación seria del propio valor de la representación, tanto en la poesía como en las artes visuales. Implícitamente, es el poeta (y a través de éste, el propio lector o lectora) quien debe cuestionar, al fin, su papel y su participación en la gradual y dolorosa conciencia del cuerpo que se desarrolla y se explora a lo largo de todo el libro III.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Spenser; representación; tapices de "Arras"; ekphrasis; textualidad; Britomart; cuerpo.

gar a uma descrição detalhada da tapeçaria no salão de Castle Joyous, que descreve a história de Vênus e Adônís. Este artigo oferece uma leitura desse episódio centrada na importância da materialidade e da autoreflexividade como chaves para a sua relevância na abertura do Livro III e na estrutura mais vasta de *The Faerie Queene*.

Neste episódio, os poderes descritivos do poeta são simultaneamente postos em relevo e em questão, num duplo movimento de écfrase que aponta para uma interrogação séria sobre o valor da representação, tanto na poesia quanto nas artes visuais. Implícitamente, é o poeta (e, através dele, o próprio leitor ou a própria leitora) que deve questionar o seu papel e participação na consciência gradual e muitas vezes dolorosa do corpo que está em primeiro plano ao longo do Livro III.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Edmund Spenser; representação; tapeçarias de arras; écfrase; textualidade; Britomart; corpo.

1. Introduction

On the walls of a magnificent inner room at Castle Joyous, several tapestries are hanging. The reader of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* has the opportunity of considering them in detail in Canto 1 of the third Book, in the 1590 edition of the epic; as the female knight Britomart is received into Malecasta's rooms along with Redcrosse, the poem noticeably slows its pace so as to offer a detailed description of these embroideries, which showcase a vivid re-telling of the myth of Venus and Adonis. Spenser was of course familiar with tapestries such as these existing in actual reality, and many of the readers of the 1590 *Faerie Queene* were as well, especially those belonging to the upper circles of the aristocracy or to the immediate environment of the court. But the imagined hangings in the poem exert a peculiar fascination of their own, being "a work of rare deuce, and wondrous wit" (III.i.32.6). They call attention both to the short narrative they offer and to their own nature as objects of decoration and art, and this double function requires a particular attention and effort on the part

of the reader/viewer. An attention that the abundant secondary literature on the poem has not always dedicated to them, often being attracted to other, more polemical critical loci.

The aim of the present article is to return to that specific moment in the poem, to re-evaluate its significance within Book III and within the quest of the female knight, Britomart; beyond this, it attempts to assess its ekphrastic quality and the light that it sheds on Spenser's critical self-consciousness as a poet. I intend to show that this episode, because of the questions it poses (rather than the certitudes it may offer) is especially indicative of one aspect of Spenser's art of allusion and suggestion, allowing the reader not only to establish key thematic connections all across the fabric of the poem, but also leading him or her to consider the difficult position of the poet in his artistic endeavor. All this is done through a serious emphasis on the material quality both of the tapestries that are described and of the text within which they are embedded; both poem and visual art appear here as complex, physically articulated constructs that require a consideration of their involvement within each other, and of the author's role as the ultimate maker of both. It is necessary to proceed, however, from a brief consideration of previous critical discussions of this passage; it is only in this way that we will be able to weave our own path into the patterns of the poem.

2. Earlier approaches

While the ornaments in Malecasta's rooms have been examined several times in the complex alleyways of Spenserian criticism, some significant work remains to be done. Let us discuss briefly the emphases of these discussions, before moving on and trying to complement them. In the classic *The Allegory of Love*, C.S. Lewis cannily described those tapestries as "a picture not of lust in action, but of lust suspended, lust turning into what now would be called *skeptophilia*"; the figures of Venus and Adonis were considered there not as related to Britomart's individual quest, but only in contrast to their later representation in the *Gardens of Adonis* (1936, 331–32).¹ Only a few

¹ Immediately after his discussion of the *Gardens of Adonis* and of the *Bower of Bliss*, Lewis was quick to point out that "allegory is not a puzzle [...]. The worst thing that we can do is to read it with our eyes skinned for clues, as we read a detective story"

years earlier (1930), Frederick Hard had explored a completely different approach, focusing also on the tapestries, but broadening the perspective so as to imagine Spenser's experience of similar works within aristocratic houses, and in the court itself; in this way, a solid connection was established between the fictional hangings and their role in actual reality as objects of luxury, even if no direct links were established with specific historical embroideries. In later studies concentrating on Britomart's adventures, such as the magisterial monograph by Thomas P. Roche on Books III and IV of *The Faerie Queene* (*The Kindly Flame*, 1964), the Venus/Adonis tapestry was alluded to, but only in passing and connecting it to C.S. Lewis's earlier analysis, and thus relating the lascivious gaze of Venus on Adonis to that which Malecasta projects on Britomart: "Lust in the eyes is precisely the particular vice of Castle Joyous, and the tapestry of Venus and Adonis is its appropriate emblem [...]. The vice of skeptophilia is precisely what Spenser emphasizes in describing Malecasta" (1964, 68). At this particular point, thematic analysis still predominated over materialist readings, or over interpretations involving the history of decorative objects.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, other works of art and other tapestries in *The Faerie Queene* were commented on far more often than Malecasta's: the embroideries at the castle of Busirane, as well as his sadistic pageanties, naturally attracted more critical attention, in great part because they are more transparently involved with gender politics. Essential articles concentrating on Book III, such as the one published by Lauren Silberman in 1987, do not even mention the episode at Castle Joyous. An earlier article from the seventies, however, needs to be mentioned in this context: Claud A. Thompson's "Spenser's 'Many Faire Pourtraicts, and Many a Faire Feate'" (1972), which considers the visual arts and their various roles in the poem, paying special attention to the rhetorical devices through which Spenser makes their descriptions so vivid, beyond their possible allegorical function. A major step in the same direction has been made more recently by Christopher Burlinson in his book-length study *Allegory, Space and the Material World in the Writings of Edmund Spenser*: a short but suggestive mention of the Castle Joyous episode

(1936), an observation that has been inspirational to much criticism on Spenser, and that I have also tried to take into account in this article.

allows Burlinson to sidestep the question of poetic signification and to place it within a richer, wider context:

Paying attention to objects allows us to think historically about them, about how their stories are inscribed or effaced both within the poem and in the world from which the poem emerges. Such questions invite a partly historicized reading; looking at the literary passage describing the hangings against the physical contexts which informed gallery spaces in the sixteenth century, but also a reading that is sensitive to the poem's approach to objects and the difficulty it has (and flaunts) when describing them. (Burlinson 2007, 65)

Here we are far closer to cultural history than to a simple literary analysis. The consideration of the tapestries qua tapestries (which Burlinson proposes, but does not develop in relation to the Venus/Adonis hangings) will allow us to think of them as objects, deeply embedded within *The Faerie Queene*, but also finding their place within the history of material goods in the Renaissance.² The cultural role of such possessions responded to a variety of political, social and artistic intentions, and could be put to a wide number of uses. This suggests that it would be a mistake to oppose the allegorical or poetic content of the tapestries to their role as physical possessions; both aspects, in fact, are essential in the overall effect produced by the scene, and both are part of the game of signification elicited by it. However, there have been only occasional approaches to *The Faerie Queene* using this kind of methodology: a significant exception is a chapter by Rachel Eisendrath in her book *Poetry in a World of Things: Aesthetics and Empiricism in Renaissance Ekphrasis* (2018), in which she identifies the ekphrastic patterns used by Spenser when presenting pictorial works in his poem, but without considering those in Malecasta's castle. Even though Eisendrath produces a major material and objectual reading of the art collection in the House of Busirane, she does not mention the hangings in *Castle Joyous* at any point.³ Much work on them, therefore, remains to be done.

² A tradition of analysis that was heralded by the influential study by Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods* (1996).

³ One general point made by Eisendrath deserves special consideration: the idea that, when it comes to representations of visual arts inside the poem, *The Faerie Queene* "strives towards a completion of meaning at which it can never fully arrive [...]. The poem remains in a state of internal conflict and irresolution, calling for our ongoing involvement" (2018, 80, emphasis mine). The various responses that our specific stanzas (III.I.34–38) may elicit in the reader are also an essential aspect of the present article.

This article will now proceed from a consideration of the material nature of the tapestries towards a discussion of their potential for signification, and of what this potential entails for the respective positions of the reader and the poet.

3. The tapestry and/in the text

As the Christian knights enter Castle Joyous, the attention of the reader (far more than that of Britomart or Redcrosse) is led towards the lavishly decorated walls:

The wals were round about apparelled
With costly cloths of Arras and of Toure,
In which with cunning hand was pourtrahed
The love of Venus and her Paramoure
The faire Adonis, turned to a flowre,
A work of rare deuice, and wondrous wit. (III.i.34.1-6)

From the beginning of the description, the notion of wonder is associated with the hangings. They are presented as “work of rare deuice and wondrous wit,” both characteristics being related to the higher (rational) capacities of the soul: a “deuice” can only be created and appreciated with the help of the intellectus, the “wit” is indispensable in the organization of abstract thought and, of course, in the production both of art and of poetry. Penelope will also be presented by Spenser in the Amoretti as having “deuiz’d” a “web” or tapestry thanks to her “subtile craft” (23), and the pen of an artist or of the poet will also be presented there as able to “deuize” the colors in his portrait of the beloved (17); in both poems, significantly, this artistic capacity is undercut by the weaver’s will (23) or by the artist’s own shortcomings (17), and in neither of them does the work lead to a full, satisfactory mimetic performance. The “wit” and the “deuice” that are so visibly present in the tapestry at Castle Joyous, however, have the function of conveying meanings or significant connotations to their viewers or their audience, even as their relation to the immediate action of the poem is far from immediately transparent.⁴

⁴ And, in any case, it can never be fixed into a stable, fully unified message, as in the case of most medieval allegories. As Kenneth Gross has put it in relation to Spenserian iconography, “in every expansive progression towards a stable center, in every attempt to achieve something like visionary identification with a sacred emblem, the fear of fixation in subsequent misreadings haunts the literary quest like a demon” (1985, 17).

In order to understand their function in this particular passage and in Book III at large, we will have to broaden our perspective.

The explicit reference to the “costly clothes of Arras and of Toure” in stanza 34.2 leads the reader’s attention firmly towards the material quality of the hangings, and creates a specific set of expectations that frames the entire reading of the following stanzas. These lines appeal directly to cultural memory; in 1590, a number of the readers would have had direct experience of hangings similar to these, and the text seeks to access that part of their experience and to make it work to the benefit of the poem. In late sixteenth-century England, those who had not seen similar tapestries would have at least heard of them; the mention of “Arras” and “Toure” establishes a direct continuity between this precise moment in the poem and the culture of great English houses, where textile works imported from these foreign locations, or commissioned to them, had been prominent since the great revival of that art form under Henry VIII. The tapestries commissioned to Arras, or imported from there, were far more prestigious than those coming from Tours; they would be most vividly displayed in the diplomatic meetings where they performed a decorative role. According to the latest historical scholarship in this area, Queen Elizabeth did not buy many tapestries in her reign; she generally used the enormous collection that had been gathered by her father, which at the end of the century was still considered luxurious enough to be put on display repeatedly. Sometimes the doors of places holding the royal collection of tapestries, such as the Great Wardrobe Depot, were open for specific visitors, such as the lawyer Paul Hentzer:

Upon entering, we were obliged to leave our swords at the gate and deliver them to the guard. When we were introduced, we were shown about ten large pieces of “Arras” belonging to the Crown, all made of gold, silver and silk; several saddles covered with velvet of different colours; an immense quantity of bed-furniture, some of them most richly ornamented with pearl [...]. (Rye 1865)

This description gives us an initial idea of the richness and variety of the tapestries, even when they were compared to the lavish and pearl-ornamented bed-furniture of the House of Tudor. But it was at Hampton Court that the tapestries were exhibited to their greatest effect. It was assumed that a number of them would decorate the walls when diplomatic missions were received there, and that the Queen would surround herself with them, in order to produce a rich,

brilliant, multi-colored space for the negotiations to take place. Modern historians have suggested that a group of three sets was left hanging all the year round in Hampton Court; these would correspond to the Abraham, Tobias and Caesar pieces, three favorites of Henry VIII, which would remain an essential part of the Tudor court decorations until the early seventeenth century.⁵ In 1599, Thomas Platter wrote about his own experience of these or similar tapestries in a guided visit to Hampton Court. There he was led to a large hall

[...] containing many fine royal beds, also numerous canopies and royal chairs all very lavish and ornate; and the walls everywhere were hung with extremely costly tapestries worked with gold, silver and silk, so life-like that one might take the people and plants for real. (1937, 201)

This “life-like” quality is the most remembered characteristic of the tapestries, the one which recurs most often in contemporary descriptions of them. This almost illusionistic capacity was generated by the suggestion of the tinctures, including deep reds, blues and greens that were richly painted over the metallic threads of the embroideries, aiming to preserve their brilliance for centuries. It is precisely in these terms that we have to think of Malecasta’s tapestries: as richly ornamented textiles meant not only to dazzle and to impress, but to provoke in the viewer an impression of liveliness that, for the contemporary reader, would be unequalled by any other material goods of the period.

Once the connections to actual material tapestries have been established (a subject to which I will shortly return), the poem proceeds to the description of the myth itself. To what extent is its rendering of a visual narrative successful? The answer to this question must depend on the degree to which the reader is willing to collaborate in the appreciation of the textual and poetic quality of these specific stanzas. Their emphasis is put on the active role of Venus as seducer, and on the passive position of Adonis as seduced; the hunting scenes from Ovid are completely sidestepped, so that the erotic aspects of the narrative can be enhanced. In doing this, Spenser moves away from the cynegetic themes that were common to many real-life tapestries, and which had contributed so much to their dynamism and visual impact (for instance, in the lavish and

⁵ This detail has been suggested by the art historian Thomas P. Campbell (2007, 352).

spectacular Hunts of Maximilian, produced in 1531–1533 in Brussels, in which the representation of the encounter with a boar plays a fundamental part).⁶ The natural environments that are described instead in stanza 35, however, are also among the favorite themes of the art of Arras tapestries: the lush, flowery spaces in which Venus makes the garlands for his lover (“girlonds of each floure that grew, | To crowne his golden locks with honour dew,” III.1.35, 4–5), or the fountain where she bathes him away from the sight of mortals (“[...] or bathe him in a fountaine by some covert glade,” III.1.35, 9). This allows the reader to think of scenes in which the predominant tinctures would be bright green and deep blue; at this point it is the reader him/herself who is establishing the connection between words and images, since the situations are enumerated rather than described. The expectations that have been generated by alluding earlier to the Arras/Tours tapestries work here to provide the cultural memory on which the poet is counting, so that these scenes can be imagined by the reader in visual terms as the lines enumerate them.

In stanza 36, the visual and sensual quality of the description takes a clear precedence over the simple narration of events. The mantle of Venus is spread over Adonis, “colour’d like starry skies,” while her arm is set “underneath his hed” (III.i.36, 1–3); here her gesture and bodily attitude are captured in movement as she covers him, and the colors of her clothes reproduce a clear nocturnal sky, thus evoking, over the surface of the tapestry, an interplay between golden and deep blue tinctures (stars and sky). The visual description is here carefully framed in lines that, at the same time, call our attention to their own verbal nature; with the help of anaphora and of alliteration, the reader is led to appreciate the linguistic quality of the text even as the description of the images proceeds:

And with ambrosiall kisses bathe hereyes;
 And whilest he bath’d, with her two crafty spyes,
 She secretly would search each daintie lim,
 And throw into the well sweet Rosemaryes. (III.i.36, 4–7)

The text is here as ornamented, through purely linguistic means, as the textile surface that is described, verbal virtuosity mirroring the tintured decoration of an Arras tapestry. The anaphorical and

⁶ It is in the tapestry dedicated to the month of December where the hunting of a wild boar features more prominently. The series Hunts of Maximilian was designed Barend van Orley. http://cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/visite?srv=car_not&idNotice=14769.

alliterative nature of these lines appeals to the ear of the reader as much as the imaginary tapestries would appeal to the eye of its viewers.⁷

The removal of Adonis' encounter with the boar from this version allows it to sidestep, to a large extent, the conventional Christian discourse on the story, and diminishes its doctrinal or moral content; by the same token, it enhances the more decorative and sensual quality of the text/tapestry. The Spenserian rendering of the Ovidian myth concentrates first on the erotic play between the lovers, in which Venus takes the active part, and secondly on the bloodshed of Adonis's body and the lamentation of Venus, which finally leads to her regenerating act of life-giving, turning his gory remains into a living plant, one that seems to live simultaneously on the tapestry and on the page. The removal of the boar from the scene certainly responds to an iconographic tradition that was developing and asserting itself firmly throughout Europe. In the second half of the sixteenth century, the versions painted by Titian or by Paolo Veronese dwelt on different moments of the erotic attraction between Venus and Adonis, leaving aside the more violent aspects of the hunting scene. Veronese's 1580 version foregrounded an entirely relaxed contact between lovers, with Adonis profoundly asleep in Venus's lap, even as Cupid covered one of his dogs with a mantle, indicating an underlying tension in the scene which would only emerge later, but was not visible in the painting itself.⁸ Earlier approaches by Titian (from the decade of 1550) showed a far more conflicted situation with Adonis abandoning a pleading Venus, already on his way to his death. Titian's renderings of the story, and of that particular moment in it, showcased the fact that it was not necessary to actually represent the boar in order to explore its larger connotations: it was presented, therefore, as an erotic encounter prefacing a tragic ending. His last approach to the myth (1554) can be read as a delicate prolepsis, showing the movement of the boy away from the protection and love of Venus and towards the teeth of mortal, physical reality. The gesture

⁷ This particular solution of the *pictura/poesis* debates seems to follow very much along the lines of the indications given by Leonardo da Vinci in his notebooks on the subject, especially in what concerns the respective forms of sensorial reception by readers and by viewers (Da Vinci 1970, I, 57).

⁸ Veronese's oil painting is in the Museo del Prado, and can be seen through the museum website: <https://www.museodelprado.es/coleccion/obra-de-arte/venus-y-adonis/692667da-d0f5-4765-ba03-30fdce3513d1>.

of Adonis wrestling himself from the arms of Venus was, without a doubt, the most original element of Titian's version; the moment of death was thus removed from the scene but elegantly suggested, with Cupid left sleeping in the background, unable to protect the couple.⁹ It can be asserted, then, that the removal of the boar from Spenser's approach to the myth in III.i (and, as a consequence, its relocation in a cage in the later description of the Gardens of Adonis) was a conscious and measured artistic option, which inserts itself in a specific tradition of visual renderings of the story. Considered exclusively as art objects, Malecasta's tapestries show interesting connections to the European iconographic tradition.

The last line of stanza 38 proves to be the one that poses the most questions, both in relation to the stanza it belongs to and in relation to Spenser's version of the myth ("Him to a dainty floure she did transmew | Which in that cloth was wrought, as if it liuely grew," III.i. 38, 8–9). The leaves of the anemone seem to come out of the tapestry as if they were alive; there are no further indications about this movement other than the reference to their lifelikeness, so we must assume that this is the impression they have given to the knights who see them as they head towards the inner rooms of Castle Joyous. This is the impression they give, as well, to the reader who has followed the description of the myth through the last five stanzas. The projection of his/her gaze meets the flower at the point at which it stands out from the entire work (or rather, works: textile and textual) it belongs to. Its organic quality has been given to it by the artists within its fictional world, but the ultimate responsibility for it lies with the poet. Does that near-miraculous presence confirm and complete the potent, bodily, sensual quality of the entire representation they belong to? And, if it does, does that naturalistic quality detract from the allegorical or moral potential of that representation?

The question can certainly be put in more general terms, before we return to stanza 38. Indeed, how can art (here, both visual and verbal) avoid becoming an enticement to physical desire if it inevitably depends on the figuring forth of vivid images, and if it is rendered in spectacular and lavish forms? At no point in the poem can we forget the deeply iconoclastic ideology rooted in late sixteenth-

⁹ Titian's painting is to be found in the Museo del Prado, and is available online through the museum website url: <https://www.museodelprado.es/coleccion/obra-de-arte/venus-y-adonis/692667da-d0f5-4765-ba03-30fdce3513d1>.

century Protestantism, which saw the use of images as dangerous in itself, and as responding to deep tendencies in the human soul. If this applies to religious discourse or to forms of spiritual teaching (as the writings of John Jewel, Richard Hooker and many others repeatedly asserted), the situation is even more dangerous in the case of secular writings or works of art. As Rufus Wood put it in his study of metaphorical language in *The Faerie Queene*, “the allegorist always faces either a representational compromise, or the risk of contaminating the work’s own metaphors” (1997, 140); in late sixteenth-century culture there is always an underlying risk of “contamination” or lack of purity in the use of complex images with didactic purposes. And yet, in the particular stanzas we are examining, these dangers are not only suggested, but actively assumed and integrated in the act of representation. Spenser chooses to confront head on the moral dangers of artistic mimesis. The erotic potency of stanzas 35 and 36 prevents, as we have seen, their being received only in abstract or didactic terms: the reader must integrate that sensuality on his or her act of reading, as an essential part of his or her enjoyment of the lines. Whatever moral content the text might communicate, it certainly cannot come at the cost of forsaking its sensual pleasures, which here are foregrounded rather than eluded.

The whole stanza in which Adonis’s transformation occurs (38) requires the full implication of the reader and cannot work adequately without it. The active wiping away of the blood from his body is represented as a constant movement of Venus’s soft garment over his snowy skin, stained with his own gore; the alliterative play on sibilants recovers and renews the sensuality of stanza 36, until the moment of the transformation comes. It is therefore even more significant that this metamorphosis should not be directly described, but only mentioned: “Him to a dainty floure she did transmew, | Which in that cloth was wrought, as if it lively grew” (III.i.38, 8–9, emphasis mine). The life-like quality of the anemones culminates the whole process of description (on the part of the poet) and observation (on the part of the reader), but the actual “transmewing” is not expanded on. The abundant blood, the white corpse, the movements of Venus are the elements described; what is it, then, that produces the powerful liveliness of the anemone? It is precisely the capacity of the reader him/herself to imagine that plant “in the cloth,” designed in the Arras tapestry and having become almost alive in it.

The emphasis on the textile nature of the scene (“which in that cloth was wrought”) insists pointedly on the fact that the whole experience we are recreating as readers is a transference, a *translatio*, between the textile and the verbal. The final line brings us back firmly to the material, objectual nature of the hangings, and reminds us that the whole description has occurred under the sign of ekphrasis, the description of an art object in verbal terms.¹⁰ More specifically, the poet has gone as far as to develop a form of notional ekphrasis, developed over an imagined artwork.¹¹ The sensuality of the description has ensured the reader’s involvement in the imaginative construction of the tapestry; at its end, the cultural memories and expectations invoked at the beginning of the sequence are firmly recovered, and it is precisely on them that the culmination of the episode depends. An “Arras” tapestry would have involved only the finest materials, metallic threads that would have been carefully colored, and periodically cleaned and polished to ensure their quality; their dazzling nature and brightness would have been their most evident and memorable characteristics. Spenser does not need to describe the anemone in full: the colorful nature of the final scene, along with the final reminder that this is all rendered in Arras-like quality, and with the colors (red, white, green) belonging to that level of artistic execution, ensures that the reader’s memories of actual tapestries (directly seen, or at least heard about) will allow the anemone to appear in his or her imagination.

The poet has enlisted the imagination of the reader in order to project living images in the mind of the latter. Commenting on the various uses of ekphrasis in *Don Quijote*, E. C. Riley has made the point that it is not necessary for the reader to directly remember a specific visual work, or to have direct knowledge of it, for the effect to take place. “A piece of verbal discourse (and initially nothing else) has evoked an image in the mind of individual readers [...]. These visual

¹⁰ The original use of the term in Hellenistic rhetoric was, according to Murray Krieger, “completely unrestricted: it referred, most broadly, to the description of something, almost anything, in life or in art” (1992, 7). It was only gradually that it came to define the description of an artistic object, with the description of the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad* as its main reference.

¹¹ The concept of a “notional” ekphrasis, as applied to fictional (non-existent) artworks, was originally introduced by Hollander (1988, 209), and was later developed by Heffernan (1993, 7). In an article centered on *The Rape of Lucrece*, Catherine Belsey has usefully offered a revision of scholarship on that theoretical matter (2012, 175–98).

recognitions are capable of triggering a response of recognition from people who only know the original by allusion or hearsay" (1988, 108). A similar effect would have been achieved by Spenser in readers who had not directly seen any real Arras tapestries, but knew them through verbal descriptions, or through their fame and prestige. Those few who had had a real experience of them would have been able to make the imaginary transition even more fluidly.

This particular use of notional ekphrasis, involving as it does the cultural memory of the reader and his/her knowledge of artistic objects, inevitably calls our attention to the very fabric of the poem (textual, not textile) and to its own nature as an object of delicacy and virtuosic art. The poem is no less finely woven, no less rich in textures, than the Arras tapestry it includes within itself. Ultimately, its narrative role as a proem to Britomart's quest reminds us that the poet is the author of both: the tapestry has allowed him to introduce key topics (seduction, bloody sacrifice, creation, life-giving) that are essential to the plot involving the female hero and her evolution. The gore that covers Adonis's body and Venus' clothes is not only the result of the boy's ambition as a hunter; it is not only the boar that has shed it, but also the author himself, in his verbal imitation of textile matter, and it will be shed again in Britomart's quest, in moments that will remind us of Malecasta's tapestries. And the first of these moments will come very soon, as Britomart tries to leave the castle after the public discovery of her real gender identity, and is slightly wounded by the arrow of the faery knight Gardante ("he who looks," in III.i. 65). Despite her virtue and bravery, she is not yet able to protect herself completely against the onset of an external and treacherous desire.¹²

The conclusion of the sequence of tapestries, then, is the starting point for Britomart's dangerous search for her bodily integrity and chaste fulfilment, but it also inaugurates a narrative in which the very body of the poem will be questioned from within, in an interrogation of the author's ambiguous role as creator of vivid images in the mind (*intellectus*) of the reader. As Ernest Gilman once put it, Spenser, working as "an artist self-divided [...], may thus be said to internalize

¹² As Thomas P. Roche Jr. once put it, "perhaps Spenser is telling us that Britomart has partially succumbed to the beauty of Castle Joyous and thus deserves this slight wound [...]. The power of beauty to draw the eyes is the basis of both lewd and chaste love" (1964, 70-71).

and, if uneasily, to accommodate the adversary postures of his age” (1986, 82). The ekphrastic quality of the entrance to Castle Joyous is in the end brought to bear on the poet himself and on his conflicted, difficult relationship to his verbal art.

4. Projections and continuities

The tapestries in Castle Joyous have acted both as proem and as prolepsis: they have given a ceremonial start to Britomart’s adventures and to the main themes explored in them, not only in Canto I of Book III, but through the whole of her quest. On the part of the poet, insofar as he has attempted to become the creator of living images, insofar as he has attempted to breathe into his verbal tapestries the breath of life, he has implicitly established a parallel between himself and other powers, often demonic, in the textual fabric of *The Faerie Queene*. The resonances of this moment are echoed in several parts of the poem, both in the 1590 and 1595 parts, but I will restrict my examples to two moments also occurring in Britomart’s quest.

The first of these moments occurs after the sinister procession, or pageant, created by Busirane in order to dramatize his fixation for Amoret in III.xii; there a series of characters masquerade so as to allegorize the diverse powers and capacities activated by personal love (hope, desire, doubt, fear, etc, often grouped in pairs). Allegory seems to run rampant here, representing a series of conventional poetic situations in terms that are sometimes formally coherent, and sometimes less so. In any case, the complex staging that Busirane creates requires a spectator, and does not get one but two: Britomart, the witness to the artistic scene, organized as a series of living pictures, and the reader him/herself, observing it from the safety of the act of reading, deciphering it on the printed page. We find ourselves, once more, in the domain of notional ekphrasis.

Busirane is not only a wizard, but also a poet and an artist; the procession of living tableaux that includes and integrates the body of Amoret is the work of a creative mind, one that is deeply steeped in the Petrarchan discourses of love and in the *religio amoris* (cultural fields that Spenser himself had mastered so well). When the imprisoned and bound Amoret appears in the pageant, her breast is opened, her blood flows and her heart is ripped out, in a literal rendering of the allegorical tradition which puts the heart of the

beloved at its core (III.xii.21). But the most shocking image in this sequence comes after the procession itself, when we find Busirane dipping his pen in the open breast of Amoret, so as to write with her blood:

[...] And her small wast girt round with yron bands,
Unto a brazen pillour, by the which she stands.
And her before the vile Enchaunter sate,
Figuring strange characters of his art,
With liuing blood he those characters wrate,
Dreadfully dropping from her dying hart,
Seeming transfixed with a cruel dart. (III.xii.30, 8–9; 31, 1–5)

The visual, almost dramatic nature of this description, with Amoret tied to the pillar and her tormentor dipping his pen in her breast as he sits before her, both evokes and completes the sadistic pageant she has been a part of: it acts, in fact, as its culminating tableau vivant.¹³ Both Britomart and the reader witness the scene, and its ekphrastic nature is mediated by the presence of the heroine, who pays close attention, distancing herself from the situation even as she prepares to interrupt it.¹⁴ Britomart is not as innocent as she was in III.i. At this point she cannot become a passive object of desire, nor can she become a mere witness to the blood-shedding that male desire may bring about; she is now able to keep herself away from the dangers of a predatory seduction, and also to free others from it. Only to a certain extent, however: when taking the dart from Busirane's hands, she is also wounded by it and her blood once again falls on her white skin, thus repeating, on a smaller scale, the "goring" inflicted on occurred in Adonis's body in III.i:

From her (i.e. Amoret), to whom his fury first he ment,
The wicked weapon rashly she did wrest,
And turning to her selfe his fell intent,
Unwares it strooke into her snowie chest,
That little drops empurpled her faire brest. (III. Xii. 33, 1–5)

¹³ Harry Berger Jr. notes, in a similar vein, that "one is tempted to read the previous masque as an explication of what is happening here—or, conversely, to read this scene as the dramatic situation, previously unarticulated, which anchors the masque in the story of Britomart, Amoret, and Scudamour" (1988, 184).

¹⁴ As Lauren Silberman has cleverly pointed out, in the House of Busirane Britomart has become "the reader's surrogate as an onlooker" (1995, 67).

Britomart's wound has been "nothing deep imprest" (line 7), as the poet quickly specifies, and the wizard has cut her "unwares," as his attack was meant for Amoret. But still "little drops" of her blood have fallen once more, as they did at the end of Canto III. i. The wounds in Amoret's breast will be closed as soon as Britomart rescues her from the wizardry of Busirane, yet the traumatic episode has already taken place, to a different degree, for both women: their blood has been shed in a terrifying staging of artistic fantasies, which have brought pictorial images to a semblance of life. If the third Book of *The Faerie Queene* is, as Harry Berger Jr. once put it, an exploration of "one-sided and premature union, development or fulfillment which must be obstructed or destroyed so that they may be repeated in more adequate form at a later, more appropriate phase" (1988, 117), then it must be added that both the beginning and ending of this exploration are marked by ekphrastic moments (in Cantos i and xii, with bleeding bodies at their respective centers) that involve a dangerous yet unavoidable bloodletting. The process of individuation and growth into chaste sexuality that Britomart has undertaken cannot take place, cannot be fulfilled, without these steps that make her painfully aware of her body, of its nature and of its limitations.

This physical and figural "goring" projects itself even beyond Book III, and reaches its culminating moment in Britomart's quest, her encounter with Radigund and her rescue of Artegall (V.vii. 29–34). If all of Britomart's progression has been defined by her desire to give a body to her original vision of Artegall in the magic mirror, her definitive encounter with him is preceded by a battle in which her identity as a female warrior has to be finally certified, in opposition to the unruly and matriarchal power of the Amazon: a fight between two models of femininity in which only one can remain. The encounter between them begins in traditionally Arthurian fashion, with each of them running against the other in full determination, until they begin to use their swords in order to mutilate the other's "dainty parts, created | for other uses than they then translated" (V.vii.29,8). This is a battle to the death in which the concept of femininity itself is at risk: it is only logical that blood, associated with female biology and with the act of birth giving, should flow abundantly in terms that take us back once more to the tapestry in Canto I. The women warriors cut each other's body deeply, so that their corporal fluids and entrails issue abundantly from their wounds (just like Adonis's blood fell out of his in III.i.38) and fall over the verdant ground, where they bathe

the green grass, rendering it unrecognizable: from a site of life and fertility, it seems to be transformed into a space where only death is possible. Only the beheading of Radigund at the hands of Britomart, when she “both head and helmet cleft” (V.vii. 34, 6) reverses this situation.¹⁵ Britomart has been “engor’d” with her own blood, but this blood is also what allows her to free Artegall and to become united to him, in a marriage that will be abundantly blessed with royal offspring.

The use of red, white and green that was so prominent in Malecasta’s tapestries is put to spectacular use in the final battle of Radigund versus Britomart. That connection in brilliant colors and in the theme of bloodletting can only become significant if the reader him or herself is willing to weave and unweave the poem as he or she is reading it, even if this reading takes place in different moments over time. Such a movement back and forth, in which colors and themes are constantly recovered, evoked or alluded to, that makes us move forwards even as we are looking backwards, is the most adequate image for almost any reading of *The Faerie Queene*. Because these thematic links have been established through two moments of strong notional ekphrasis (III.i.34–38, and III.xii.30–34), projecting themselves afterwards towards a third moment in the narrative (V.vii. 29–34), it is fully legitimate to ask ourselves about the significance of the relationship between visual arts and poetry in Book III. These two ekphrastic moments, with both reader and characters witnessing artistic pieces which involve a serious, material blood-shedding, suggest connections between the faerie weavers, wizards like Busirane and, inevitably, the author himself, who is weaving the largest pattern of all in his poem. If anything, these moments certainly point towards the strong self-consciousness of the poet, who is fully aware that his work, enmeshed as it is between the textual/textural and the representation of vivid bodily forms, necessarily runs the risk of spilling over from the merely artistic into the magic, the pagan or the daemonic (the creation of the false Florimell in III.viii. 5–8, if it is taken as yet another moment of artistic self-reflection on the part of the poet, would only seem to confirm this). The insistence on the fully material quality of the works of art recreated in the poem implies also, in the end, an insistence on the verbal materiality of the poem itself.

¹⁵ The role of Radigund as a counter-image of Britomart and her further function as a wider cultural signifier in Book V has been discussed in Curbet (2001, 157–72).

in which words, the very matter of language, are also being used by the poet to create a semblance of life.¹⁶

In the various processes of blood-shedding that occur in the moments we have examined, neither the author nor the reader are completely innocent. Both have to participate of the bodying forth that occurs in the text at different levels and in different roles, just as the weavers of Malecasta's tapestries require an admiring audience for the gory sacrifice that they have lavishly woven. In order for the work of art to achieve a full life-like quality (and, at the level of plot, in order for the female body itself to become both fertile and chaste) some blood needs to be shed, whether it is physical or figural, and the audience has to collaborate in its shedding. Like the hanging tapestries in *Castle Joyous*, the whole of *The Faerie Queene* stands precisely at the difficult point in which artistic representation attempts to become life-like, but also shows a full consciousness of the strong moral dangers involved in this attempt.

5. Conclusion

This article does not intend to suggest that the function of notional ekphrasis in Book III is to generate an "endless worke" of interpretation, as Jonathan Goldberg famously stated in reference to the whole of the poem, or as he has continued to affirm in more recent years (1981, 2009).¹⁷ Rather, my intention has been to show that the narratives embedded within the romance in the form of rich works of art, and witnessed by its fictional characters, draw strong attention to their own physical, material nature, and that by doing this they point to the materiality both of the poem and of the characters that inhabit

¹⁶ According to Rachel Eisendrath, the whole poem thrives on contradictions of this kind: "The poem would die of success if it ever overcame its own contradictions; *The Faerie Queene* would at last become the letter to Raleigh. Happily, this is not what has happened. The poem remains in a state of internal conflict and irresolution, calling for our ongoing involvement" (2018, 80–81).

¹⁷ It is worth remembering the entire sentence: "The writerly text is an 'endlesse worke' of substitution, sequences of names in place of other names, structures of differences, deferred identities. It plays upon a void: it occupies the place of loss, where Britomart's wound is extended to Amoret, where Amoret is 'perfect hole'" (Goldberg 1981, 12). Goldberg thus refers to an absolute sense of openness in the text; without going quite so far, I hope to have traced some spaces of fertile and productive ambiguity in my discussion of the tapestries both as objects and signifiers in Book III.i.

it. Seduction and blood-shedding are the main subjects of the tapestries featuring Venus and Adonis in Castle Joyous; they are rendered there in such a spectacular display of craftsmanship that they not only imitate life, but tend to make it occur on their surfaces and especially, as we have seen, in the mind of their spectator/reader. Seduction and blood-shedding, indeed, are also main topics in Britomart's quest, and they must be not only metaphorically assimilated but physically experienced by her, in a projection of artistic theme towards bodily and personal experience. The textual and the textile, as represented in Book III.i, establish a firm movement towards a greater, more complex awareness of the bodily.

The thematic components of the Venus/Adonis tapestries are projected all through Book III, while their capacity to produce an imitation of life acts as a mirror both of the poet's artistic virtuosity and of the serious moral dangers it entails. Is it possible to create a near-perfect imitation of life without a sacrifice of blood, bodily or figural? Is it possible to represent life, or even to generate it (and this specific word applies both to Spenser and to Britomart) without losing a part, no matter how small, of one's own virtue or integrity? Finally, is it possible for the reader to distance her or himself completely from the sensual quality of art, visual or verbal, and to escape the inevitable spiritual or moral danger that it entails? The answer to these three questions in the poem rather veers, as I hope to have proved, towards the negative, but this does not detract from our need to rephrase them again and again as we read Book III and the rest of Britomart's adventures. The fact that *The Faerie Queene* should confront its limits in such a serious and sophisticated way is not necessarily a proof of the author's doubts about his poetic ambition; what it rather indicates is his awareness of its inevitable moral pitfalls, and of his need to confront them not from the safety of a doctrinal position, but from within the verbal matter of the poem itself.

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