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‘So liuely and so like, that liuing sence it fayld’: *Enargeia* and ekphrasis in *The Faerie Queene*

In the Letter to Raleigh accompanying the 1590 Books of *The Faerie Queene*, Edmund Spenser explains that precisely because his poem is ‘a continued allegory, or darke conceit, I haue thought good aswell for auoyding of gealous opinions and misconstructions, as also for your better light in reading thereof ... to discover vnto you the general intention and meaning, which in the whole course thereof I haue fashioned’. In using these terms, Spenser signals his understanding of allegory as a challenging, esoteric discipline, one for which his readers will need this clarification. This language of ‘darke conceit’, of treasures ‘clowdily enwrapped in Allegoricall deuises’ (Letter), is further corroborated by Spenser’s later references to the ‘couert vele’ and ‘shadowes light’ (II. Pr. 5) of his poetic fictions, through which (in one deployment of allegory) he represents Queen Elizabeth to herself and to her subjects. But Spenser’s chosen allegorical model comes into conflict on two levels with another staunch poetic principle: his didactic intention to ‘fashion’ virtuous readers, and his methods for so doing.

His reliance on narrative, on universally pleasing fictions, to deliver moral pedagogy is the first point of conflict. ‘The generall end therefore of all the booke,’ Spenser declares in the same Letter to Raleigh, ‘is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline: Which for that I conceiued shoulde be most plausible and pleasing, being coloured with an historicall fiction, the which the most part of men delight to read, rather for variety of matter, then for profite of the ensample.’ His provision of a separate hero for each Book of the poem and each

virtue to be inculcated, heroes with whom readers are encouraged to identify and join in learning, Spenser invests further in the plot, the surface narrative. But the model of allegory on which he draws is one requiring readers to penetrate beneath the ‘historically fiction’, to break through the unity of the narrative. In fact, the dominant metaphors of esoteric allegory promote discarding the surface narrative (to stick with contemporary terms) in favour of what is hidden beneath it: Sir John Harington talks of the surface narrative as the ‘vtmost barke or ryne’.¹ This dismissal of the surface narrative has long been a difficulty for commentators, and is particularly problematic in the case of the rich narratives of Spenser’s work, in which resonances and allusions work as much horizontally as vertically.²

A second issue for Spenser’s didacticism is that this tradition of esoteric allegory shows little concern for weaker readers, ‘the most parte of men’ and those in most need of fashioning. Traditionally, esoteric allegory offers protection against the travesties of the ignorant, privileging the wisdom of the select few. Protection from slanderous imputations was no small concern: the punishments meted out to the Collingbournes and Stubbeses of the sixteenth century were well-known.³ So, for

¹ ‘The ancient Poets haue indeed wrapped as it were in their writings diuers and sundry meanings, which they call the sences or mysteries thereof. First of all for the litterall sence (as it were the vtmost barke or ryne) they set downe in manner of an historie, the acts and notable exploits of some persons worthy memorie; then in the same fiction, as a second rine and somewhat more fine, as it were nearer to the pith and marrow, they place the Morall sence, profitable for the actiue life of man ...’. This appears in his ‘Preface or rather a Briefe Apologie of Poetrie’ to his 1591 translation of Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso* (London: Richard Field, 1591).

² David Galbraith discusses this problem in *Architectonics of Imitation in Spenser, Daniel and Drayton* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp. 17-28.

³ See Cyndia Susan Clegg, *Press Censorship in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), especially pp. 3, 123-37.

example, *The Arte of English Poesie*, expressly declared that ‘in a full allegorie [the intention] should *not* be discovered but left at large to the readers judgement and conjecture’.⁴ In this way is the writer safeguarded, but at the expense of a needy contingent of readers. As Angus Fletcher once noted, ‘[e]nigma, and not always decipherable enigma, appears to be allegory’s most cherished function’.⁵ In providing an explanatory letter to his readers because of the allegory, Spenser therefore treads a dangerous path, most notably in specifying that his Faery Queen is just one of many allegorical representations of Queen Elizabeth in the poem. Writers such as Torquato Tasso had sidestepped this problem of prejudicial misreadings by drawing on a medicinal image to insist that errant or less able readers ‘drink deceived; and so deceived they live’, but the perils of ignorance are too often illustrated in *TFQ* for Spenser’s readers to blithely imbibe his own ‘medicine of cherries’.⁶

How does Spenser reconcile esoteric allegory with his narrative-centred didacticism? The answer lies in his use of ekphrasis. Although as Ruth Webb reminds us in a special issue of this very journal, ekphrasis originates in classical rhetoric, the technique of describing visual art in a literary work – with all the demands of vividness that that involves – is one that came to be used by epic poets following

⁴ Cited in Mindele Anne Treip, *Allegorical Poetics and the Epic: The Renaissance Tradition to ‘Paradise Lost’* (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), p. 25; emphasis mine.

⁵ Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), p. 73.

⁶ Torquato Tasso, *Godfrey of Bulloigne, or Jerusalem Delivered*, trans. Edward Fairfax, ed. Robert Aris Willmott (London: Routledge & Sons, 1865), Book I, stanza 3. The description of literature as a ‘medicine of cherries’ comes from Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 114.

Homer.⁷ The description of the Shield of Achilles in the *Iliad* is the inaugural moment of this literary tradition of ekphrasis, one which (at least in the early modern period) does not entirely lose sight of its rhetorical roots, as my discussion of *enargeia* shows.⁸ Through his treatment of ekphrasis, Spenser counters the subjugation of narrative to allegorical meaning, and does so in a way that is paradigmatic for the work as a whole. Crucial to Spenser's treatment of ekphrasis is the admission of a visual component to the twin processes of reading and learning from his poem. By calling upon his heroes – and his readers – to stare directly and interrogatively at instructive images, and to relinquish themselves to the visual force-field of these ekphrases, Spenser tempers the recondite and alienating impulses of his allegory and restores the narrative to semantic primacy.

Where allegory cautiously enwraps, ekphrasis flagrantly reveals. (This divergence between the functions of ekphrasis and allegory goes some way to explaining the prudence of Virgil's choice of Augustus as the centre-piece of his ekphrastic shield.) In ekphrasis, conjuring up art-works before the eyes of his audience, the poet describes as literally as possible what is being offered to their eyes, inviting identification and visualisation of the art-work described; a 'couert vele', on the other hand, wilfully but expediently obscures, the precious object 'Couered from peoples gazement with a vele' (V. iii. 17). Early modern defences of poetry (and

⁷ Ruth Webb, 'Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern: the Invention of a Genre', *Word and Image* 15 (1999), pp. 7-18. Other essays in this special issue on ekphrasis, edited by Mario Klarer, treat subjects outside the early modern period. Recently, Janice Hewlett Koelb has joined Webb in taking issue with critical assumptions about ekphrasis as a literary device; she defines the practice by reference to its creation of vivid worlds rather than its subject, in *The Poetics of Description* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

⁸ For a detailed analysis of the Shield of Achilles as a literary device, see Andrew Sprague Becker, *The Shield of Achilles and the Poetics of Ekphrasis* (Lanham and London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995).

especially theories of allegory) often inveigh against readers' tendencies to literalise what they read, to misread texts by unduly privileging the surface narrative. One worry is that this literalising fosters absorption in the narrative at the expense of any more demanding exegesis – the forms long-validated in theological and literary tradition.⁹ The other worry is the immense power of affect that such absorption commands. Ekphrasis, on the other hand, positively invites such fantasies of absorption, most notably through its reliance on the trope of *enargeia* – the commitment to creating intensely vivid images in the mind's eye of the reader. It is with an eye to its powers of affect that Spenser turns to the unlikely quarters of ekphrasis to help preserve the fullest possible significance for his allegorical narrative, and the greatest possible didactic effect on his readers. The *entente* – and Spenser's object lesson – occurs at the level of the reader's experience of the poem. More precisely, I will show that it occurs where the hero's gaze at the ekphrastic object is reciprocated by the reader even as that reciprocation and its pleasures are deliberately interrupted. This instructive use of ekphrasis, and particularly of *enargeia*, to simulate in microcosm wider principles of the reading experience is what distinguishes Spenserian ekphrases from those of his literary antecedents.

That Spenser considers the shaping of his readers through their experience of reading the poem as a parallel or similar task to the shaping of his poem is suggested in his use of the term 'fashion' for both projects in the lines quoted from the Letter to Raleigh. Ekphrasis unites these parallel tasks by providing a platform from which the author can make a direct address to an ideal reader from a privileged position within the world of the poem, a platform created when the poet self-consciously fashions another work of art in miniature. In their exploitation of ekphrasis for politic purposes

⁹ The drowning of Narcissus show the dangers of such a direct gaze.

both Virgil and Ariosto make expedient use of this unusual feature. Ariosto had gone so far as to consider using the figure of the ekphrastic shield encomiastically, to tweak dynastic history in praise of his patrons, the Este family, as Virgil had done so spectacularly with Augustus.¹⁰ But this address is always mediated through the narrator, and the good faith of such figures is once again a function of the world of the poem. Oscillating between between the twin impulses to teach and delight, Spenser's narrator can be frustratingly coy in his narration of ekphrases.

In thus relinquishing the opportunity for direct address, Spenser's makes the limitations of the narrator flag up the limitations of the reader's vicarious viewing experience, however appealingly framed. The ekphrases in *The Faerie Queene* are varied, and each invite a readerly 'gaze' differently. What unites them, however, is Spenser's concern to separate the perspective of the viewing hero from that of the reader at the very optimum moment of absorption: a destabilising of the identification between reader and hero, perhaps a refusal of what Patricia Parker has called (in another context) moments of 'visual gluttony'.¹¹ Ultimately, Spenser exploits the privileged platform offered by ekphrasis to subject the grounds of ekphrasis itself to scrutiny: he takes on the criterion of *enargeia*, in order to tease out the qualitative differences between the reader's gaze and that of the protagonist with whom they identify, in order to re-insert a critical distance into the reader's experience of the plausible and pleasing fictions of the plot at precisely the point of maximum affect.

¹⁰ In the end he settled for a gallery of prophetic pictures executed by Merlin outlining the future wars between France and Italy, including the heroic exploits of the family. This section was added in the third edition (1532). Augustus, Virgil's privileged reader in the *Aeneid*, is placed at the centre of Aeneas's shield.

¹¹ *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 104.

This synthesis of immediate sensual experience interrupted by a sudden critical distance at the height of that visual absorption is the characteristic movement of Spenserian ekphrases, as it is of the reading experience of *The Faerie Queene* itself.

‘Ye might haue seene the frothy billowes fry / Vnder the ship’

The first ekphrasis in *The Faerie Queene* is both traditional and innovative, a vignette of just over two stanzas describing the artfully wrought gate to Acrasia’s Bower of Bliss (II. xii. 43-46). No stalwart defence like the armour of Achilles or Aeneas, this gate is a tourist attraction which ‘euer open stood to all’, a turnstile ‘wrought of substaunce light / Rather for pleasure, then for battery or fight’ (II. xii. 43).¹² It is both a perversion of the high tradition of ekphrasis in classical epic and a recognisable contribution to it. Acrasia’s choice of subject ‘ywrit’ on the gate – the story of Jason and Medea, of magic and female sexual desire – uses classical sources and has a personal, proleptic relevance. Her own Circe-like entralling of Verdant and a host of previous lovers to her desires is a terrifyingly obsessive enactment of what Medea had failed to do, despite her cruellest efforts. The apotheosis of destructive female sexuality in Spenser’s poem, Acrasia is present in the smallest details of her invidious *hortus conclusus*, and the gate’s representations of Medea’s self-serving brutalities in the name of love make it an apt portal to her domain.

Guyon the knight of Temperance at the culmination of his quest arrives at this gate, but the narrator withholds his reactions to these helpful warnings. Guyon’s connections with Aeneas – the hero who unwittingly in his armour ‘Bore aloft the

¹² Armida’s *locus amoenus* in Books 15 and 16 of Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata* is a likely source.

fame and fortune of his race' – are thereby reinforced.¹³ Were he (like Aeneas) to have elucidated the 'moral', however, he might have taken heart from the choice of narrative: Jason's success, albeit at the expense of Creüsa. The reader, however, is treated to a careful description of what 'Ye might haue seen' or 'might ... / Be red' therein (II. xii. 45-46), one that makes strategic use of the ekphrastic staple of *enargeia*. Spenser's syntax pursues the rhetorical effect of *enargeia* by merging details of the material (or artistry) and subject. So the waves depicted on Acrasia's gate are adorned with the sprinkling ('sprent') of 'vermell, like the boyes bloud therein shed' (II. xii. 45), but Spenser's ambiguous phrasing leaves open the question of who does the sprinkling – Medea or the craftsman? The reader's reception of the image is further complicated when the act of sprinkling recurs, coalescing with the 'gold besprinkled' two lines later, which in turn 'seemed th'enchanted flame, which did Creüsa wed' (II. xii. 45).¹⁴

The recursive movement that Spenser orchestrates here is paradigmatic of the larger functions of his ekphrases within the allegory of his poem: transporting the reader sensually into Faeryland and then jolting him or her back out again, encouraging a fully visualised experience of Faeryland before marking the distance between reader and text once again. In its way, this builds on the popular story of birds so deceived by the lifelike grapes in a painting by the classical artist Zeuxis that they sought to eat them. A tale incessantly repeated in aesthetic and poetic theories of

¹³ This is John Dryden's translation. *Virgil's Aeneid*, trans. John Dryden, intro. Clarence A. Andrews (New York: Airmont Publishing, 1968), p. 224.

¹⁴ The term 'sprent' is used first, for the sprinkling of vermilion, and is related to 'besprinkled' (gold) two lines later, through both 'sprinkle' and the now obsolete root term, 'sprenge'. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1933) cites *The Faerie Queene*, IV.ii.18 – 'all the ground with purple bloud was sprent' – as an example of the past participle of 'sprenge' meaning 'besprinkled'.

the period, P.R. Hardie points out how it demonstrates the role of will and desire – the birds’ appetites – in the success of *enargeia*, ‘in working the trick of illusionist absent presence’.¹⁵ Spenser wants more of his readers than a simple jolt back to reality. Instead, their experience of the poem seeks to balance a full and sensually-aware identification with the heroes and their adventures with the horizontal and vertical interpretative acts it demands. This fusion of sensual experience and critical enquiry, then, grounds Spenser’s literary didacticism.

Assertions of *enargeia* are, therefore, crucial to the pedagogy of Spenser’s ekphrases. This is at least in part because the dynamics of this trope capture in miniature the reader’s experience of Faeryland, one in which sensual absorption is simultaneously invited and repelled to instructive ends. Spenser’s strategy of blurring referent and material to create the effect of *enargeia* follows classical epic tradition more directly in his description of the waves represented on Acrasia’s gate: the Argo’s wake is depicted in ivory so convincingly – either because of their white material or because of the skill with which they are rendered – ‘[t]hat seemd the waues were into yuory, / Or yuory into the waues were sent’ (II. xii. 45).¹⁶ Here Spenser picks up on some of the most intriguing lines of Homer’s ekphrastic description of the shield of Achilles. Homer describes a scene of ploughmen tilling a field, where ‘the earth darkened behind them and looked like earth that has been ploughed / Though it was

¹⁵ Hardie, *Ovid’s Poetics of Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 176.

¹⁶ James Heffernan calls this effect ‘representational friction’, though friction seems not a particularly accurate way of describing this imperceptibly smooth interchangeability of referent. *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 72. See also W.J.T. Mitchell, ‘Ekphrasis and the Other’, in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 151-81.

gold'.¹⁷ The strange effect produced – a gold which looks black, or which makes us visualise it as black? – is what Spenser emulates in his description of the waves in the Argo's wake.

A paradox emerges here: whereas *enargeia* in the rhetorical tradition sought striking, clearly realised images which would have a purchase on their readers' minds, in the literary tradition ekphrasis can take a reflective turn inward, merging seen and imagined elements in ambiguous phrasing. The confusion between the material object, its referent and the effect of liveliness is included as a compliment to the artwork but, paradoxically, puts the reader at a loss to know what exactly is being described. The visual object described so assiduously remains, nevertheless, impossible to imagine precisely.¹⁸ *Enargeia* is a staple of the tradition of ekphrasis after Homer. But while it can heighten the viewer's experience of the object of the ekphrasis and seduce him or her into becoming absorbed in the world it represents, the mechanics of *enargeia* can bring strangeness, readerly alienation rather than visual raptness. Readers have only the narrator's word for this curious effect of a gold which looks like black earth. *Enargeia* thus demands our faith in the narrator and his methods and motivations – less easy in Renaissance epic romance than in Homeric epic. As a result, the effect of lifelikeness that ostensibly commends the object and allows it to make sense in our world can actually distance readers, leaving us in the power of the object and its spokesperson, alienated at the very point at which the

¹⁷ *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 18. 547-9.

¹⁸ Andrew Laird uses Homer's lines to identify this confusion as an effect characteristic of classical ekphrasis, and which he terms 'disobedient ekphrasis'. But this is only one of Spenser's methods for obscuring the 'utter visibility' of his ekphrastic images. See Laird, 'Sounding out ekphrasis: art and text in Catullus 64', *Journal of Roman Studies* 83 (1993), 18-30, especially pp. 20, 29.

object is at its most appealing. This is precisely the effect that Spenser exploits in his Faeryland ekphrases.

More recently, Seamus Heaney has captured what is at stake in this problem of *enargeia* by examining it in lyric mode in the title poem of his collection, *Seeing Things* (1991). The poem includes an ekphrasis of John the Baptist's baptism of Jesus carved on the façade of a cathedral, and nicely enacts the contradictory aspirations that *enargeia* imposes on the reader. The question is already posed in the title: is ekphrasis about seeing the surface details of things, or about seeing more abstract and spiritual matters through the material? Heaney manages to delicately balance both for his reader, whereas (as I will demonstrate) Spenser instead divides the burden between two viewers: the hero and the reader. By his ekphrastic act, Heaney seeks to see through things, to gain glimpses of the transcendent through the momentary animation of the carvings he describes: 'And yet in that utter visibility / The stone's alive with what's invisible'. But the invisible is only available cloaked and even constituted, he hints, in materiality, despite Heaney's having harnessed the full force of Thomist theology for his poem's watchword: 'Claritas'. '[W]hat's invisible' turns out to be not God's grace or the promise of eternal life for the baptised that we might expect from such a meditation, but rather 'Waterweed, stirred sand-grains hurrying off, / The shadowy, unshadowed stream itself'.¹⁹ Heaney's ekphrasis focusses the reader's attention onto elements of the represented scene but, crucially, the poem also admits the possibility that the waterweed and sand-grains might take different forms of materiality beyond their represented forms. They might as easily be the contribution of the material in which the scene is carved – perhaps fossil-ridden sandstone? Nor can we be sure how much of the detail we read about is really there in

¹⁹ *Seeing Things* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1991), p. 17.

the seen object and how much comes from the poet-viewer's own absorption in the scene represented. This fine balance is struck repeatedly: for example, the description of 'the air we stood up to our eyes in' uses a far-off verbal echo to become more redolent of the waters into which John the Baptist welcomes his cousin. Heaney's achievement is to include the reader in this mystical half-vision. Spenser's ekphrases, on the other hand, always divide reader and viewer for pedagogic purposes.

An apparent exception to Spenser's experiments in unimaginable images is Spenser's second ekphrasis: the tapestries of Venus and Adonis at Castle Joyous, a pleasure palace ruled by the lascivious lady Malecasta. Ample visual cues are supplied, but the division of perspectives remains an important part of Spenser's didactic strategy. Here, it is Britomart who is left out of a full immersion or understanding in the world of the art represented (albeit through her own choice), and the reader's viewing position is strengthened with topical parallels with other moments in the poem in which the dynamics of Malecasta's ekphrasis are recapitulated, most notably in the origins of Britomart's love-quest itself. The shift in the balance of power between hero and reader can be attributed to the demands of representing the virtue of chastity. The burden of knowledge is an especially acute problem in the *Book of Chastity*, partly because of the equation of sexual knowledge with readiness to act sexually, but also because of the inadmissibility of lust within the ethos of Queen Elizabeth's resolute (and female) virginity, Chastity's more conservative partner.²⁰ As Elizabeth's fictive surrogate in the *Book*, Britomart quite literally cannot let her guard down; but this is precisely what Spenser's plot makes her

²⁰ A commonplace belief in the early modern period held women particularly susceptible to images, whether at the theatre, in the galleries and furnishings of their aristocratic homes, or in the more earthy milieu of fairs and shows.

do, as we will see. With this ekphrasis studiously ignored by the hero encountering it, the burden of knowledge of chastity and unchastity therefore falls mostly on the side of the reader in *Castle Joyous*.

Our heroine has developed dramatically, however, by the end of her quest. Although 'trew in loue' from her first sight of Arthegall, Britomart's training in chastity culminates in her willing recognition of an astonishing gallery of images of cruel, violent lust, in the ekphrastic furnishings at the house of Busirane. 'For loue in thousand monstrous formes doth oft appeare' (III. xi. 51). James Heffernan takes his lead from the ekphrases of Book III to note that Spenserian ekphrases are concerned with predatory sexual violence by men. But rather than simply standing as admonitory images, Spenser's ekphrases are angled to teach the hero and readers about love, specifically the sanctioned cultural form of Neoplatonic love. Only slowly and painfully does Britomart come to learn the violent premises of Neoplatonic love, and her responses to Busirane's ekphrases in Canto xi are self-aware as her responses to Malecasta's ekphrases early in her quest were not. The ekphrases of Book III, then, are a vital part of Spenser's strategy of forcing the knight of Chastity to confront the realities of violent, lustful love. Sanguine ignorance for her, as for Spenser's readers, is not an option, and it is primarily through the act of looking in this Book that knowledge – and Love – are eventually achieved.

'The image of superfluous riotize'

The stakes of knowing suddenly jump in the Book of Chastity, where love and lust become the objects to be mastered, not least because the knight of this Book is female and not easily admitted into the visual economy of ekphrasis. Cross-dressed as a male

knight, Britomart is on a love-quest to find the man whose image she has seen in an enchanted 'looking glasse' (III. ii. 18-19) and with whom she has fallen in love. Her temporary appropriation of masculine identity puts her in the position of the masculine viewing subject, but her gender ensures that – like Elizabeth – she remains vulnerable. Ironically, her new masculine identity does not protect her from predatory sexual violence figured within or outside of ekphrastic objects, as Spenser makes clear in the very first Canto of Book III. Britomart's disinterest in Malecasta's titillating tapestries is clearly linked to Malecasta's sexual assault on her soon after, and to the wounds she sustains in that episode.

Unlike Acrasia's ekphrasis, the first ekphrasis of the Book of Chastity, is relatively 'obedient' in offering up helpful visual details. The narrative of Malecasta's tapestries is told in stages corresponding to four panels, with deictics, touches of narrative colour, and even precise prepositions helping the reader to recreate the tapestry in his or her mind. The *enargeia* trope recurs, but this time as an aid to visualisation: Adonis metamorphosed into a flower '[w]hich in that cloth was wrought, as if it liuely grew' (III. i. 38). The narrator hereby simplifies a difficult image here by using *enargeia*: he clarifies that is not the outlandish metamorphosis itself that is pictured and to be visualised, but simply the anemone that he becomes. The reader is invited into Malecasta's palace as sensuously as Britomart herself. The context is one of display and sensual pleasure, the images are offered for eroticised visual gratification - apt furnishings for a room in which 'many beds were dight' (III. i. 39).

Quickened by the dynamics of visibility, secrecy and gazing, the Venus and Adonis story becomes a suitable subject for this quasi-pornographic setting. The tapestry depicts a clandestine love affair produced and sustained by the jealous and

possessive female gaze: Venus ‘ioyd his loue in secret vnespyde’ (III. i. 37) and goes to great lengths to feast ‘her two crafy spyes’ (III. i. 36) on her lover ‘in couert glade’ and ‘secret shade ... far from bright heauens vew’ (III. i. 35). All her pleasure is figured in visual terms, her secret surveillance of ‘each daintie lim’ (III. i. 36) as Adonis sleeps betraying the dynamics of the relationship, with Venus as the visually-stimulated agent. Reading horizontally back to Acrasia, it is evident that Venus shares with Acrasia the scopophilic pleasure of the viewer in the immobilised, dominated, even moribund object. But more ominously, the portrayal of Venus and Adonis also calls to mind the dynamics of Britomart’s first vision of Arthegall.

The origins of Britomart’s quest, her desiring gaze into Merlin’s enchanted ‘looking glasse’ (III. ii. 18) and her sight of Arthegall therein, are narrated in the second Canto, only after the reader and Britomart have encountered Malecasta’s saucy tapestries. They immediately recall that recent ekphrasis. Britomart’s initial act of looking, the spur to her quest is rendered in quasi-ekphrastic terms: ‘[e]ftsoones there was presented to her eye’ (III. ii. 24), and ‘The Damzell well did vew his personage’ (III. ii. 26) Indeed, the ‘comely knight’ (III. ii. 24) she sees in this glass is only identified by the arms he carries, conveniently marked ‘*Achilles armes which Arthegall did win*’ (III. ii. 25). Here, Spenser plays off the high tradition of ekphrasis in epic with the more magical modes of romance, but enables a striking connection across the narrative.²¹ Britomart’s encounter with ekphrasis in Castle Joyous is later paired with her adventures in the house of Busirane in the penultimate Canto, but as readers attentive to the narrative of the poem will see, both ekphrases also refract her own initial loving gaze at the artfully-conjured Arthegall, the gaze which has sent her

²¹ Ariosto’s gallery of pictures at the castle of Tristram, too, are made by Merlin and serve a similar prophetic function to Britomart’s father’s enchanted ‘glasse’. *Orlando Furioso*, cantos 32. 94 and 33.

on this quest. In each case, the loving parties are divided (Adonis's mortality, the unknown distance between Britomart and her beloved), misaligned and given to the pleasures of visual gratification in ways that are ironised for the reader. That Britomart will need to develop her love beyond this longing contemplation is graphically illustrated to the reader.

This parallel with Britomart's first vision of Arthegall prompts further exploration of Spenser's use of *enargeia*. Britomart's whole quest might be described as a response to ekphrastic *enargeia*: the image of a 'comely knight' is so lifelike and attractive that, like Zeuxis's birds, she is compelled to pursue that desired object, to consummate her visual pleasure in the attractive image further. The knocks and blows she receives along the way are lifelike in another sense: they cause her narrow conception of love to admit the existence of the wider, sometimes troubling field in which her love exists. Britomart's frustrating but ultimately rewarding experience of *enargeia* corresponds at the didactic level to the reader's, particularly the rebuffing of unmindful immersion in the world of the poem, unheeding trust in the appealing forms of the lifelike. Just as Britomart will eventually come to see and recognise the perpetrators and patrons of the 'thousand monstrous formes of love' in the house of Busirane, so the reader will have learned those lessons in tandem with her, but distanced from her more foolish choices.

Chief among those poor choices is Britomart's lack of attention to Malecasta's tapestries and their proleptic messages. Unlike Guyon and Aeneas, this is something for which she will suffer. The trials of her chastity prefigured by the tapestries happen almost immediately after its description, in a deadly game of 'crafty glaunce[s]' (III. i. 50) over dinner which will result later that night in Britomart being exposed unarmed to the eyes of all, her blood spilled by Gardante's arrow, the proof and indictment of

her futile coyness. No such threat awaits the reader's gaze, on the other hand, courted and gratified by the highly visual description, the obstructions of *enargeia* smoothed away. Here, the disparity between Britomart's gaze and that of the reader is a gap in which the hand of the artist becomes apparent. As in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, Venus's self-delusion is foregrounded, but in *Castle Joyous* it is figured less as futile resistance to the forces of fate than as her subjection by the artist. Venus's furtiveness is ironised by the fact that all her vain overtures in 'secret shade' (II. i. 35) are openly displayed by the artist to be witnessed by Britomart and Malecasta's throng of loose-living courtiers. The 'cunning hand' portraying Venus in the throes of her passion – whether the hand of the tapestry-maker or the hand of the poet – notches up a victory over the goddess by revealing her secretive wiles to the world and making her story available for other purposes: here as 'a bit to stay the appetite'.²² These sexual corruptions, then, are the new dangers of knowledge for Spenser's readers, as they will be for Britomart when she finally confronts and acknowledges them later in her quest.

'All which in that faire arras was most liuely writ'

The artist of the next ekphrasis, more than its subjects, is its strongest presence.²³ If the 'cunning hand' (III. i. 34) of the craftsman was just visible in the ekphrases of

²² In Thomas Middleton's play, *Women Beware Women*, the unsuspecting Bianca is shown around a gallery of 'lively' Ovidian art and sculptures much like Busirane's as a preparation for her imminent seduction by the Duke - or as her perfidious tour-guide calls it, 'a bit to stay the appetite' (II. ii. 406).

²³ Busirane has sometimes been read as one of Spenser's "bad artists", figures by which Spenser exorcises his concerns about the moral probity of his own artificial art of poetry. See A. Leigh DeNeef,

Acrasia and Malecasta, it is ominously so in Busirane's Ovidian tapestries. There, even the gleaming gold thread, generally used for spectacular display, 'shone vnwillingly' and 'lurked priuily, / As faining to be hid from enuious eye' (III. xi. 28). Classical ekphrasis usually glistened or gleamed attractively: symbols of bright favour and prospects, martial and aesthetic weapons for heroes who could not begin to understand their significance, but who admired them nonetheless. The covert workmanship of Busirane's tapestries works towards other ends: entrapment unawares in the thickly-woven strands of its mysteries. 'Kings Queenes, Lords Ladies, Knights and Damzels gent' have been jumbled with 'the vulgar sort' and 'raskall rablement' (III. xi. 46), all imprisoned in Busirane's nightmarish tapestries. The artist of these tapestries even implicitly identifies himself with the rapists he represents.²⁴ These tapestries, like Malecasta's, are permeated by the values of their owner and maker, but this time, Britomart pays heed. Besides the hefty 19 stanzas of descriptions of the tapestries, we realise that Britomart is fully engaged with these images: on leaving the room she 'backward cast her busie eye' (III. xi. 50), only to gape even more eagerly at Busirane's next room of trophies: 'ne could [she] satisfie / Her greedy eyes with gazing a long space' (III. xi. 53).

But if Britomart stares, the reader hangs behind her shoulder, confused by the pace and paucity of visual detail of the narrator's descriptions. Here the reader is excluded from the gaze tauntingly invited in Busirane's rooms and enjoyed by Britomart; name-checking replaces the lingering detail of the previous ekphrasis. Cues

Spenser and the Motives of Metaphor (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1982) and Rufus Wood, *Metaphor and Belief in 'The Faerie Queene'* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997).

²⁴ This is very clear in lines such as this description of the imminent rape of Leda: 'O wondrous skill, and sweet wit of the man, / That her in daffadillies sleeping made'. At moments such as these, the narrator and artist come into worrying proximity.

of recognition are used instead of close visual detail, apostrophes to the subjects of the tapestries rather than deictics, and all presented in a whirling, impressive tally. As Leonard Barkan points out, the tapestries are unhelpfully described as unfolding in time, one after the other, rather than in spatially-meaningful ways.²⁵ Moreover, the narrator simulates Busirane's abuse of power by abandoning close descriptions in favour of frequent recourses to statements of the liveliness of his tapestries, 'so liuely and so like, that liuing sence [they] fayld' (III. xi. 46). Invoking *enargeia* simply through certifying statements of the verisimilitude of the representation foregrounds the reader's dependency on the narrator, on the diegetic frame.²⁶ Descriptions of scenes 'most liuely writ' (III. xi. 39) obstruct visualisation. The net effect of this switch in narration is the impression that Britomart's experience of the tapestries is only fleetingly grasped by the reader. For the duration of this ekphrasis the verbal and intertextual cues (and the critical, illusion-rupturing distance that these involve) rather than the visual details are our principal way of imagining that we are there by Britomart's side. If the reader was in pole position to gaze at the forms of love (and their consequences, at Britomart's expense) in Malecasta's tapestries, the burden of

²⁵ 'Making pictures speak: Renaissance art, Elizabethan literature, modern scholarship', *Renaissance Quarterly* 48 (1995): 326-51 (333).

²⁶ Confusion between *enargeia* and *energeia* (vitality, or the Aristotelian quality of actuality) occasionally occurs in this period. George Puttenham, for example, in making a poetical ornament of both, reverses the terms in his contrasting of the 'speaches smothly and tunably running' of *enarg[e]ia* (as he has it) with the more affective 'speaches inwardly working a stirre to the mynde' of *energeia*. See *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), ed. G.D. Willcock and A. Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), pp. 142-3. For an alternative view of Spenser's poetics, one focussed on *energeia* rather than *enargeia*, see Joseph Campana, 'On not defending poetry: Spenser, suffering, and the energy of affect', *PMLA* 120 (2005): 33-48.

knowledge is Britomart's to command at the house of Busirane, the culmination of her quest.

Like Malecasta's Venus and Adonis, the subjects of Busirane's tapestries also indulge in impossible games of peek-a-boo which Britomart and reader witness all too clearly, as Busirane wants. The lascivious spirit of Malecasta's tapestries recurs, but in far darker tones. Here, even the victims of lust are deemed to be complicit in their rapes: Leda's consent to Jupiter's assault on her is adduced in the representation of her feigned sleep and covert pleasure: 'She slept, yet twixt her eyelids closely spyde, / How towards her he rusht, and smiled at his pryde' (III. xi. 32). Likewise, the narrator wryly points out the vanity of Danae's fortifications and vigilant 'watch' (III. xi. 31) when Jupiter's powers of transmogrification allow him to see all and defy any watch. If the ironies of vision are multiplied and more sinister than before, the usual constellation of ekphrastic subjects appear. Medusa features, as does Venus in another illicit love affair, this time cheating on her husband, Vulcan (maker of the shield of Aeneas) with Mars. The visual dynamics within the tapestries are reciprocated by Britomart. Spoils from the victims of love next attract her 'greedy eyes', and the masque of love she subsequently 'vewd / And merueild' (III. xii. 5) is an animated development of the rages and perversions of love woven into Busirane's tapestry. The contrast with her behaviour at Castle Joyous is obvious: Britomart is no longer a "green", untested hero, but a woman who has grappled with many disturbing forms of love, and who has finally recognised that her own love for Arthegall inhabits the same continuum. It is this dearly-bought knowledge that equips her to withstand the trial of Busirane's tapestries and finally defeat the nefarious enchanter.

James A.W. Heffernan uses further ekphrastic echoes to argue that Britomart's encounter with Busirane's magical furnishings directly enables her subsequent rescue

of Amoret from his clutches, her experience of the woven scenes of violent lust converted into the '[e]xceeding' fervour (III. xii. 33) necessary for her to complete her quest. Heffernan finds the link between ekphrasis and rescue to be so close that the purple drops of blood which Busirane manages to draw from Britomart in the process actually become another ekphrasis, this time recalling Ovid's Philomela.²⁷ This reading produces a disturbing scenario which qualifies the upbeat tone of the concluding canto of the 1590 *Faerie Queene*: Britomart herself immobilised as an ekphrasis, the subject of another enchanter's dark magic. Some of the misogyny of Spenser's society emerges here, I think. Book III is, in many ways, about safeguarding female desire. The Book implies that this is primarily to be achieved by learning to regulate and absorb the volatile female gaze and to transform that dangerous act into a more stable concentration of power in the seen object: in effect, to make the powerful female – whether Queen Elizabeth or Britomart – the object of her own gaze.

This is partially achieved in the first ekphrasis of Book III, where it is left to the reader to recognise that what is depicted on Malecasta's tapestry reflects the process to which Britomart has subjected herself. By the end of Book III, and its final ekphrasis, Britomart, too, has learnt to recognise this and absorb its chastening lessons. Her coy dissembling in the first Canto finally gives way to gaping recognition of the crimes of Love depicted on Busirane's tapestries. Spenser's harshest expression of misogyny converts the female gaze into what he presents as its self-wrought circumscription: liberating Amoret, Britomart, stabbed ekphrastically by Busirane, imprisons herself within the masculine scopic economy which she had sought to

²⁷ Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, p. 74. Britomart's empurpled wounds inflicted by Busirane at III. xii. 33 also match those inflicted on her by Gardante at III. i. 65, as readers attentive to the plot might note.

inhabit on more favourable terms. At last, absorbed in Busirane's ekphrastic furnishings, Britomart closes the circle and exhausts the unstable forces released by her initial act of gazing into the patriarchal 'world of glas' (III. ii. 19) which Merlin had engineered for her father. Female desire and the troubles unleashed by the female gaze are subdued in her bloody struggle with Busirane. Even after Britomart's victory, Amoret pleads for Busirane's life so as to be released from his charms, and the dependency of all chaste heroines on a masculine order, however nefarious, is reasserted. That Spenser's misogyny may not have run deep is suggested by the first ending he gives to Book III in 1590. In the final stanzas, Britomart is briefly restored to the position of the gazing subject, her gaze still tinged with unexhausted desire as she 'muche empassiond' witnesses the reunion of the lovers Amoret and Scudamour, 'halfe enuyng their blesse' (III. xii. 46 (1590)). Her equanimity is restored with Spenser's 1596 postponement of this reunion, but it is dearly bought; she has been written off, her gaze spent, her own good self, finally, its only object.²⁸

The didactic content of Spenser's ekphrases turns on their experiments with *enargeia* and their illustration of similar but larger epistemological structures at work in the poem. The readerly gaze elicited and validated by these ekphrases is one that can meet the demands of allegoresis without abandoning the narrative and its own lessons. Enabling these complex syntheses of horizontal and vertical readings are Spenser's experiments with the possibilities of *enargeia*. If *enargeia* epitomises the insistently superficial quality that an ekphrasis can have, inviting all eyes to focus on its wondrously lifelike surfaces, it also trains the readerly gaze. An effect which pays tribute to the 'utter visibility' of the artefact, in Spenser's hands often ends up making

²⁸ That she does not recognise Arthegall when she eventually meets him in Book IV humorously supports this (IV. vi. 11-23).

that appealing object invisible, unvisualisable. Spenser inverts the usual celebratory function of *enargeia* to complicate the gaze enjoyed (fictionally) by the protagonist in the first instance and then by the reader. Ekphrastic invocations of *enargeia* attract the reader but compromise his or her absorption in the scenes represented. Spenser's didactic values turn these rebuffals to instructive ends, however, stimulating critical thought at the prime moment of sensual affect.

Spenser's adaptation of *enargeia* to infuse his ekphrases with didactic purpose, and the fallacies of the readers' absorption in such scenes, is beautifully compelled in the description of the single element linking Busirane's fearsome tapestries. These tapestries are 'entrayld', surrounded by Cupid's broken bows and arrows, '[a]nd a long bloody riuer through them rayld, / So liuely and so like, that liuing sence it fayld' (III. xi. 46). That as figurative a subject as a river of blood and Cupid's broken arrows can be deemed lifelike confirms the false promise of *enargeia*, its conventionality and malleability. 'Living sense', the gaze of the living readers, can only fail where it submits wholly to the world of the artist, even (especially) where it has been most assiduously courted. *Caveat lector*.