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NOTES, DOCUMENTS AND REVIEW ARTICLES

Form and Transformation in Ariosto, Tasso, and Spenser

JOANNE T. DEMPSEY

For such poets as Ariosto, Tasso, Spenser, and Milton who understood themselves to be "Poets, even as Prophets, each with each/Connecting in a mighty scheme of truth," the concept of *imitatio* is not only a pedagogical tool and a literary technique, but also and preeminently a principle of order containing implications for the interpretation of history and a conception of the self.¹ In his reading of Virgil the Renaissance poet found the paradigm of a maker concerned with history and man's nature as a moral and historical being. Indeed, epic, as Andrew Fichtel has said, "is built to evoke man's struggle to orient himself in time" (98).

In the Christian "scheme of truth," both the individual life and history possess a different closure from that imagined by the classical poet. *The Aeneid* concludes with the death of Turnus, but does not show us the foundations of the city of Rome. For the poet of the Christian Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the "end" is known, though it is yet to come; the individual life is not ended, but changed; and the end of history itself is the beginning of a New Kingdom. This sense of time's momentousness is reflected in the structure of narrative: "sequence links narrative to history since both move through time" (Bloomfield 107).

In a chronological framework, the terms "epic" and "romance" apply to a clearly sensed distinction between early and high medieval narrative. The heroic age is reflected in the epic action of war; the chivalric, by the love intrigues that supplement those of combat, and by the element of mystery or the marvelous. The two forms are distinguished more objectively and intrinsically in the structural and theoretical approach delineated by Morton Bloomfield who characterizes the motivation of epic episodes as "rational," that is, properly motivated *from within the narrative*:

Behind epic is the notion of following a pattern, serving one's destiny (overtly or covertly presented), and making use of all the clues and advantages the world offers us. The basic notion is serving and doing one's duty, not worshipping or wondering.

1 Thomas M. Greene defines the multi-valence of the idea and practice of *imitatio* in *The Light in Troy*.

Life is the framework of a man's destiny and within its limits manipulable; it is not, as in the romance, a dialogic encounter. (106-7)

The distinguishing feature of romance sequence is the *aventure* or "unmotivated" episode. Yet the "irrational" or "unmotivated" episode may be crucial to the narrative line, the structural affirmation of the mystery which is the "end" (source, purpose, and goal) of the romance quest.

The "rational" or "motivated" episode of epic actually persists into later chivalric romance, and the epic, from Homer to Milton, contains wonders, as myth passes into history. Yet even in the intermingling of episodic elements there is a distinction to be made in the very nature of mystery and marvel. In the pursuit of his destiny the epic hero may or must encounter the unknown. On "the enchanted ground" of romance, however, "the 'meaning' of the action is not self-explicable but depends upon the unknown," and this compound element of "meaning" and "mystery" is largely conveyed in an episodic structure which creates a sense of strangeness and irrationality (107; see also Hurd).

Tasso, in the *Discorsi dell'arte poetica e del poema eroico* (1594), at once sharpened the distinction and reconciled the conflicting claims of the different wills to meaning expressed in epic and romance. The proliferating episodes of romance he submitted to a vision of unity by referring nature's diversity to the unity of its creative source (Tasso 139-40). In this way, he reconciled the antithetical claims of the traditional ideal of *imitatio*: the Christian poet who would build a true epic poem must look not to a single text or composite of texts, but to "an idea of the most excellent kind of poem" and to the ideal of noble action:

al poema eroico fossero convenienti le cose bellissime; ma bellissimo è l'amore, come stimò Fedro appresso Platone ... non si può negare che l'amor son sia passione propria de gli eroi, perché a duo affetti furono principalmente sottoposti, come stima Proclo, gran filosofo nella setta de' platonici: all'ira e all'amore; e se l'uno è convenevole nel poema eroico, l'altro non dee esser disdicevole in modo alcuno. (104)

Love, in Tasso's enlarged definition, is not only human passion (though that love is included), but also a high and noble motion of the will toward God. In the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, Tasso imitates the structure of romance in

order to redeem it.² What we witness in the poem is a transformation, not simply, I would argue, a translation of terms — of a Christian idea of unity for an Aristotelian one, of a Christian figure for a Virgilian character, of a spiritual kingdom for an historical city. The poem, read in the light of the *Discorsi* and the *Allegoria del Poema* (which Tasso appended to early printed texts of his epic), becomes an expression of the freedom of the mind as a creative agent in the world of the poem and in the world outside the poem.

Tasso's theory of *imitatio* can be used as the crucial text to look at a particular kind of episode or "movement" in the epic-romances of Ariosto, Tasso, and Spenser — moments of instruction and revelation in which the hero discovers direction in his wayfaring through the world's wilderness, which changes his perception of time and his place within its boundaries. Ruggiero's vision at the palace of Logistilla, Astolfo's voyage to the moon, Rinaldo's and Tancredi's revelations in the Enchanted Woods, the Red Cross Knight's sojourn at the House of Holiness — all open out to the questing knight and to the reader perspectives that affect our reading of history. Each of these moments is time-bound and locates us in secular contexts. Each directs our gaze to images that may be understood to exist in history or in a dimension of reality distinct from that of other images in the poem. If these scenes or setting stand for moments of moral realization, they are also moments of metaphysical revelation: each of these fictive moments or sequences embodies a hope for human transcendence or transformation, or (as in Ariosto) leads to a discovery or recognition of the limits of the self as citizen of the city of man. As Isabel MacCaffrey has said of the Red Cross Knight's vision of the New Jerusalem,

From both the historical and the visionary planes, the fictive boundaries open to let us see the true boundaries which give our lives meaning; an ever-present realm of unseen reality, and the vanished but accessible past, especially the history of the imagination's efforts to make sense of human life. (66)

To examine these "non-metaphorical visions" is to become aware not only of the interrelation of "rational" epic episode and romance mystery in the Renaissance mixed-genre of epic-romance (the art of the maker) but also of the integrity of the fiction offered as a model, illustrating its own principles of being and operation (MacCaffrey 66). In these moments of poetic self-consciousness, we bear witness to the poet's participation in history, his

2 Fichtel discusses this idea in terms of the redemption of Rinaldo: "Just as Rinaldo must first be truant to his cause before he can be redeemed, so the poem must first represent itself as romance before its epic structure can be discerned" (115). I am referring the idea specifically to the movements of the poetic mind in the selection and forming of its materials.

contribution to a literary sequence that begins in the fictions of Homer and Virgil. Finally, in these moments of awareness, we may experience the fulfillment of Tasso's faith in the great potency of "our intellect that is capable of receiving every form."

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Not Recommended for Calorie Counters: A Review of *Literary Fat Ladies*

PATRICIA DEMERS

This eight-essay collection, exploring the links between textuality and the female body and the traditions of order, governance and disposition in language and the polity, highlights Patricia Parker's resourcefulness as an interpreter of rhetoric. In the wording of one of the Renaissance handbooks which Parker cites repeatedly, the Interpreter is a figure of store, enlarging and describing one thing by a host of others: "for many words of one nature and sence, one of them doth expound another" (Puttenham 214). Amplitude and diversity characterize Parker's discussion of texts — from the Bible, Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton, to Rousseau, Emily Brontë and Freud — and her perception of the motivated discourse of rhetoric itself, "the ordering it both stages and reflects" (98). She cites rhetorical tropes not to furnish a catalogue of such dusted-off terms as *hysteron proteron*, *geminatio*, *chiasmus*, and *antimetabole* but instead, to pursue "the figurative logic ... [of] the order of discourse and the discourse of order" (96). Deliberately eschewing the more contemporary theories of rhetoric of de Man and Barthes, Parker focuses on the structural force of conventional figures as her suggested way of breaching the "impasse of a now apparently outworn formalism and a new competing emphasis on politics and history" (96). With a couple of exceptions most of these essays have been published or delivered at various symposia and, hence, despite the claims of Parker's "retrospective" introduction about the "connecting links" (3), the collection consists of discrete and sometimes disjointed parts.

The first and last essays are, to my mind, the most engaging yet problematic: selective, as all arguments must be, in their choice of sources, but tendentious too, in their stretching of certain texts and topics. As the epigraph suggests, the title essay takes its cue from the examination of *écriture féminine* and specifically from Luce Irigaray's exhortation for a woman "to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse ... [and to make visible] 'the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language'" (8). Accordingly Parker launches a discussion of dilation, expansion, and deferral in a variety of Shakespearean texts as a way of foregrounding male anxieties about the dalliance-inducing bodies of female enchantresses and about the "feminization of the verbal body and *copia* of a text which delays