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SPENSER'S CANNIBALS: PORNOGRAPHY PUNISHED

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Serena’s encounter with the cannibals is commonly recognized as an arresting and critically challenging episode. That she should fly the scene when Disdaine and Scorne overcome Timias, and that she should eventually settle down to rest in some terrible wilderness believing herself completely safe, is altogether unremarkable. But then we should expect her to wake to a lascivious knight or a monster of depravity. The cannibals come as a surprise: they are an eccentric device; they do not quite fit into the world of Faerie. No less surprising is their Petrarchan perception, the voluptuous description of Serena which it provides, and the sexually highly-charged nature of the action—the stripping, the gazing, the binding.

I think that Spenser wants to arrest us and to take us out of Faerie for a little while, in order to direct our attention to some contemporary Mannerist erotica from which he wishes to dissociate his work and his attitude to women. Most especially he seems to have in mind the poems of a number of sixteenth century French writers whose work subjected women’s bodies to a bizarrely particular and fragmentary inspection. Ultimately, the Serena episode directs us back to a reconsideration of the fisherman’s attempted rape of Florimel and to the changes which Spenser introduced, in 1596, to the original conclusion of Book III.

As to the inspiration for the cannibals, Williams is probably correct when he concludes that they are a combination of elements drawn from Hellenistic romances, travel writings, the cult of the noble savage, and observations of the contemporary Irish. Yet, as he notes, the link with the Irish is not at all strong. And while travellers certainly found cannibals, no recorded parallel with Serena’s situation suggests itself. Like Williams, Cheney sees some influence from travel literature in the depiction and adds that, ultimately, the cannibals are traceable to the wild men of classical and medieval literature. But, again, these characters are not very similar to the wild men of literature in any respect save merely cannibalism; whereas those remarkably few travellers who did claim to have seen wild men described creatures who were closely linked to the medieval tradition (either timid vegetarians, or solitaries with a penchant for stealing children). We are reminded of
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Montaigne's cannibals but, of course, Spenser's cannibals are creatures of a very different order. Cheney also notes C. S. Lewis's suggestion that the incident owes something to Boiardo's cannibals, but goes on to point out how much more complex are Spenser's cannibals.

Nothing in the poem leads us to expect the cannibals and, when we meet them, nothing is quite in accord with the Elizabethan world of reference. In part this is because they are not really savages at all. As Tonkin observes:

the Salvages form a whole nation of anti-poetic boobs who cannot understand even the fundamentals of Petrarchan language but insist on living it out as though it were real life. Serena, like Alice, strays into a world where the creatures of the literary imagination take on the embodiment of flesh and blood.  

Their fundamental error shows itself most obviously in that the notion of the lady as an object of love religion and the act of love as a sacrificial act is here translated into Serena's being actually sacrificed by savages who, but for their priest, would rather rape her. Originally, they had seen her as something akin to "a goodly table of pure yvory: / all spred with iuncats," and had decided that she was, indeed, good enough to eat.

These creatures of the wilderness are not gibbering savages or accursed cannibals from the New World. That they are to be associated with the world of fine houses and palaces, rather than with desert places, is declared not only by their perversion of Petrarchanism but also by the very material of the imagery used to describe Serena as she figures in their "lustful fantasies" (VI. viii. 41)—ivory, alabaster, silk pillows, an altar, a triumphal arch:

Her yuorie necke, her alabaster brest,
Her paps, which like white silken pillowes were,
For loue in soft delight theron to rest;
Her tender sides, her bellie white and clere,
Which like an Altar did it selfe vpre,
To offer sacrifice diuine thereon;
Her goodly thigges, whose glorie did appeare
Like a triumphal Arch, and thereupon
The spoiles of Princes hang'd, which were in battel won.  

(VI. viii. 42)
Commenting on the episode, Cheney argues that Spenser is reminding us of the danger of allowing language to run away with us and to confuse our understanding of levels of meaning. Suggesting sacramental reverence by calling a lady’s belly an ‘altar’ and love a ‘sacrifice’ does not license her being stabbed—metaphorically or otherwise. Of course, the whole episode draws our attention to such a confusion of meanings; but here, in the description, it is the likening of her legs to a triumphal arch which signals the dangers inherent in this use of language.

By his choice of image, Spenser is drawing our attention to the gap between symbolic value and physical resemblance: Cheney comments that “the incongruity and ambiguity of Spenser’s simile operate as a check against too easy a fusion of meanings.” Writing on Sidney’s sonnets 9 and 29, Traister observes a very similar technique at work in the blasons. According to Traister’s analysis, Sidney invites what would otherwise be over-reading; he invites a juxtaposing of the figuratively and “dully literal” meanings in order to suggest Astrophil’s ambiguous and disordered feelings about Stella.

Spenser’s description of Serena works—works poetically—until the image that describes her thighs and pubic region. The simile he uses seems attractive but, in the context of disordered Petrarchanism and the attentiveness to images which it invites, the attractiveness dissipates. A triumphal arch is the wrong shape for a woman’s thighs and pelvis. Also, it is either too hard (if a permanent structure is meant), or too nightmarishly skeletal (if it is meant to be imagined as the normal wood and painted canvas structure erected for entries into cities). A prince passes under an arch but a lover does not want to pass under his lady’s legs; he wants to stay between them. The suggestion is that the center of the arch is decorated with the battle honors which the victor has won from other princes. Surely a lover is not supposed to see the lady’s pubic hair as a reminder of the rivals whom he has ousted. The alternative reading, that the arch is decorated with the honors of several different victors, is even less satisfactory.

Now, I would suggest that there is a further element in the scene which invites such an ‘over-reading’ and that that is the association of the cannibals’ mode of perception with that of certain Mannerist poets. The cannibals might have “sordid” eyes and their appetites might be confused, but this does not prevent their displaying a concerned discrimination about which bit of Serena’s anatomy most catches their fancy: “Some with their eyes the daintiest morsels chose; / Some praise her paps, some praise her lips and nose” (VI. viii. 39). The
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fragmentary nature of their perception is underscored when they strip her; for her clothes are torn in pieces and “each one a part doth beare” (VI. viii. 41). When she is completely naked, they do not simply gaze and drool, or hug themselves in rare delight; they continue to peer and inspect with expert eyes—motivated, by now, lasciviously rather than gastronomically:

Those daintie parts, the dearelings of delight,
Which mote not be profan’d of common eyes,
Those vileneis vew’d with loose lasciuious sight,
And closely tempted with their craftie spyes;

(VI. viii. 43)

Their curious decadence, or decadent curiosity, is reminiscent of those sixteenth century French poets who directed their aesthetic attention to isolated bits and pieces of women’s bodies. As Bousquet informs us:

The French, especially, both painters and poets, seemed possessed by a positive obsession for the female body. Clement Marot wrote a poem in honor of the Lovely Breast...which served as a model for Vauzelle’s The Hair; Maurice Sceve’s The Brown, The Eyebrow and The Throat; Albert le Grand’s The Ear; Antoine Heret’s The Eye and Mellin de Saint-Gelais’s poem on the same theme; Eustorg de Beaulieu’s appreciations of The Nose, The Cheek, The Tongue and The Teeth; Victor Brodeau’s The Mouth; Claude Chappuy’s The Hand; Gilles de’Aurigny’s The Fingernail; Bonaventure Des Periers’ The Navel; and Jacques Le Lieur’s The Thigh; Lancelot Carle’s The Knee; Francois Sagon’s The Foot. An anonymous versifier permitted himself to eulogize the “bien supreme” (the phrase by which a woman’s sex was delicately alluded to at the time), and Eustorg de Beaulieu—though a priest—ventured on such descriptions in even more intimate detail.9

What is initially striking about these blasons is that they are insincere: the poets have nothing to convey about their subjects. In “Blaston Du Ventre,” Chapuys give us: “Oh round belly, pretty belly; / Slekest of all bellies, / Belly whiter than alabaster.”10 To Chapuys’s fatuousness, LeLieur adds coy knowingness. In “Blason De La Cuisse,” he takes time off to describe a woman’s pubes:

Thigh which supports the ball
I dare not say the mound
John Rooks

Which is adorned by nature
With that fleece that is not golden,
It is not gold, velvet or satín,
but a little silvery beard
Finer than the finest silk.11

(79-80:7-13)

If he is too embarrassed to name what he wants to write about, he is not too embarrassed to present us with a euphemism that is both preposterous and of a coyness wholly inappropriate in its childishness. Nor is he too embarrassed to write about the lady’s pubic hair, although he has little to tell us about it. We do not learn why he bothers to mention it. The image of a “little silvery beard” has promise but is not developed: As it stands, it suggests a teasing, irreverent familiarity completely at odds with his general demeanor of embarrassed, wondering adoration.

The ultimate impression left by these blasons is not one of insincerity but of huge insensitivity. The poets have nothing to say but say it at great length, oblivious of the folly into which they have wandered. Marot produces thirty four lines on the lovely breast and forty two lines on the ugly breast. Le Lieur writes fifty eight lines about the thigh; so it is little wonder that after a seven line digression on the pubes, pausing only for a one line apostrophe, “Cuisse mon bien, cuisse ma joye!” he can find room for four lines on the vulva.12

Spenser reminds us of this relentless compounding of tastelessness with tastelessness very succinctly. Having concluded st. 42 with pubic hair, he begins st. 43 with the genitals, “Those daintie parts, the dearlings of delight, / Which mote not be prophan’d of common eyes.” Indeed, common eyes would not prophan genitals. The prophanity comes from “craftie” and “lasciuious” close inspection which results in pointless display under the transparent shift of coy reverence.

The cannibals’ inclination to see women as objects the nature of which can be discovered through the close analysis of their constituent parts is suggested by the crazy particularity which the savages show about Serena’s breasts, lips and nose. And the image of anatomical dissection is brought out by the description of those who whet their knives while they wait. But what is amiss with the cannibals’ mode of perception is even more sharply apparent if we read the description of Serena’s body in reverse order—as it would present itself to an approaching lover. The strained fascination is with the genitals and the pubic hair in isolation; indeed the genitals are isolated from the
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description of the rest of the body. As we move up the body the description becomes less and less incongruous.

The link between this episode and Mannerist erotica extends well beyond the recollection of poems like "Blason De La Cuisse." The whole scene is rich in material for voyeuristic, sadistic and rape fantasies—the elements which Bousquet finds typical of Mannerist erotica.\(^\text{13}\) In her sleep, the beautiful blonde Serena is surrounded by a gang of (presumably) black men who gloat over her. She wakes to find the heartless savages who scream with joy while she tears her hair and scratches her breasts in a frenzy. Bit by bit they strip her—first her jewellery, then her clothes which they rip in shreds. She is left completely naked to their coolly assessing eyes: thoroughly aroused, some think to rape her. The priest intervenes; she is led to the altar; at some point, her hands are tied; she is laid down; the priest approaches with his knife; to their delight, she howls in helpless terror. Calepine rushes in, slaughters the savages—and the fantasy comes to an abrupt halt:

From them returning to the Lady backe,
Whom by the Altar he doth sitting find,
Yet fearing death, and next to death the lacke
Of clothes to couer, what they ought by kind,
He first her hands beginneth to vnbind;
And then to question of her present woe;
And afterwards to cheare with speaches kind.
But she for nought that he could say or doe,
One word durst speake, or answere him a whit thereto.

So inward shame of her vncomely case
She did conceive, through care of womanhood,
That though the night did couer her in disgrace,
Yet she in so vnwomanly a mood,
Would not bewray the state in which she stood.
So all that night to him vnknown he past.
But dya, that doth discouer bad and good;
Ensewing, made her knowne to him at last:
The end whereo\'f Ile keep vntill another cast.

(VI. viii. 50-51)

There is no mention of Serena's blushing charmingly; she does not stutter out her endless gratitude. The fantasy ends, as most fantasies would if translated into reality, in acute mute embarrassment for the participants. The reader is let down gently with humor. Of course
there is the obvious joke about how much women like to talk, and there is the absurdity of the characters’ exaggerated mortification which will be deepened and broadened when each discovers who the other is. But the real joke, and it is a serious one, lies elsewhere. To be naked when you should, like everyone else, be clothed is a nonsense that belongs to the topsy turvey world of dreams, or an indignity that belongs to the improbable world of fantasy and indecent humor. The naked human body, except in certain special contexts, is not an object of desire—be it as beautiful as it may. The fantasy is wrenched back to mundane reality to remind us that bodies (women’s and men’s) cannot be divorced from their humanity. Their raw nakedness is not something to be spied at, bound and beaten, to be put on canvas or written about in poems; it is something to be clothed in dignity and looked at with tenderness.

This worthy point would hardly have needed to be made had it not been for the flood of erotic art produced in the last seventy years of the sixteenth century. According to Sypher:

The renaissance used nudity without much self-consciousness—witness Giorgione’s Venuses or Shakespeare’s early erotic Venus and Adonis. But mannerism discovered the more insidious pleasure of nakedness—which is self-conscious nudity; and it used nakedness insolently, provokingly, with intent to shock or mock.\(^{14}\)

And, having “discovered” nakedness, the artists also discovered a market for it. Pictures of naked women proliferated. Marianne Haraszti-Takacs notes the popularity of depicting feasts and observes:

The real purpose was the painting of groups of nudes—no matter what the professed subject of the picture might be.\(^{15}\)

Much of this might be described, to use the jargon of today, as “soft porn.” The concern is to display sensually appealing female bodies, but the appeal is to a very normal appetite. The sensuality is bland; the bodies, with their elegant lines and unreal proportions, belong on canvas rather than in anyone’s bed.

However, not surprisingly, the matter did not stop there. In the work of one artist, Bartholomeus Spranger, Arnold Hauser finds an appeal to paedophilia, transvestism, homosexuality and to heterosexual sadism.\(^{16}\) Women, whether as figures from mythology, the Bible, the
calendar of saints or popular romances, are presented as objects to look at, spy on, gloat over, chase, tie up, punish, torture and rape. Illustrating his case with regard to romances, Bousquet cites the fate of Angelica in *Orlando Furioso* always one step ahead of a rapist; of Angelica bound and exposed naked to the monster and to Rogero’s shameless appreciation; of Sophronia, in *Jerusalem Delivered*, tied to the stake, her clothes torn off. The *Faerie Queene* is associated with *Jerusalem Delivered*, *Orlando Furioso*, Sannazaro’s *Arcadia* and Giovanni Battista Marini’s *Adonis* as being “filled with the thrill of desire. The woman of Mannerism is not the Lady of Medieval courtly romance. She is always either a seductress or a quarry.” One thinks immediately of Florimel—her fate so similar to Angelica’s. And, of course, particularly in the light of Bousquet’s remarks about sadism and bondage, one thinks of Serena, and of Amoret in the House of Busirane. There, bare breasted, a bleeding wound in her chest, her heart transfixed by an arrow, her hands bound, her waist hooped with iron and shackled to a pillar, we find her being tortured in the interests of love.

However, if Spenser invites us to share in the cannibals’ fantasies and sadism, he most certainly undercuts that response time and again. And if Florimel’s headlong dash invites “the thrill of desire,” her encounter with the fisherman demands that we question that response. The picture of the attempted rape is painted enthusiastically: we are led on with bawdy jokes about the “cock-bote” and the “withered stocke” (III. viii. 24-25); we are not spared what Davies calls “the unpleasantly arousing details” as the fisherman gropes at her body and throws her down in the bottom of his boat; the disapproval, “Beastly he threw her downe, ne car’d to spill/Her garments gay with scales of fish” (III. viii. 26), is merely prim; and the apostrophe to the absent knights, “O ye brave knights, that boast this Ladies loue/Where be ye now, when she is nigh defild” (III. viii. 27) is, in the circumstances, resoundingly insincere.

Commenting on Renaissance paintings of the rape of Lucrece, Donaldson notes the gap between the ostensible moral purpose and the invitation to enjoy the scene. Of the typical depiction by the unfortunate Artemesia Gentileschi (who alleged rape by her art master) he writes, “A brutal experience is again ameliorated through art, and is transformed into an experience aesthetically pleasing to the beholder.” Such a judgement on Spenser’s depiction is also possible—but only until we reach st. 32. Proteus beats the fisherman:

The whiles the pitteous Ladie vp did ryse,
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Ruffled and fowly raid with filthy soyle,
And blubbred face with teares of her faire eyes:
Her heart nigh broken was with weary toyle,
To saue her selfe from that outrageous spoyle,
But when she looked vp, to weet, what wight
Had her from so infamous fact assoyld,
For shame, but more for feare of his grim sight,
Downe in her lap she hid her face, and loudly shrigh.

(III. viii. 32)

What we are left with from the assault is Florimel's pain, humiliation, and guilt. If Florimel's experience is compared with the hermit's and Rogero's attempt to rape Angelica in Orlando Furioso, we see immediately how utterly different is the tone and the ultimate effect. The hermit starts to fondle her: "But she that much disdaind this homly fashion/Doth staine her cheeks with red for verie shame."22 Angelica then upbraids him, and that is the extent to which she is disordered. The hermit puts her to sleep with a potion, kisses and fondles her at his leisure, but does not rape her because he cannot get an erection. Later, having rescued her from the monster, Rogero takes her on his horse and rides away. She is stark naked, he keeps kissing her, but she evinces neither embarrassment nor distress, nor, indeed, physical discomfort. They stop in a grove; he hastens to take off his armor so that he can rape her; she waits calmly. The only indication that she is not happy about, or at least indifferent to, her fate is her reaction when she realizes that she is wearing the magic ring:

Now when she saw this ring was on her hand
She was so strooke with marvell and with joy
That scarce she could discerne and understand
If she were wake or if she dreamd some toy;23

Neither experience leaves her miserable, dirty and shocked. Angelica's reaction to her fate and the fact of her easy escape licences our enjoyment of her predicament without any guilty second thoughts. She and Rogero figure here as characters drawn from the endlessly unreal world inhabited by the protagonists of sexual fantasies and bawdy jokes. When dealing with Florimel, Spenser introduces into that world the consequences of physical and mental distress to make us reflect upon our reactions. With Serena, he gives us a naked woman: not one who can cheerfully ride on a horse, but one who feels the want of clothing.
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In the 1590 edition of Books I-III, there is nothing to give us pause in our enjoyment (if such is our inclination) of Amoret's suffering. The fantasy runs along smoothly to its self-justifying conclusion. The girl is bound and tortured; rescued, she falls before her savior and offers herself as a vassal:

Before faire Britomart, she fell prostrate,
    Saying, Ah noble knight, what worthy meed
Can wretched Lady, quit from wofull state,
    Yield you in liew of this your gratious deed?
Your vertue selfe her owne reward shall breed,
    Even imortal praise, and glory wyde,
Which I your vassall, by your prowesse freed,
    Shall I through the world make to be notifyde,
And goodly well advance, that goodly well was tryde.

(III. xii. 39)

Britomart hands her over to Scudamor, and the perfection of their union is signalled by their being likened to a hermaphrodite. But the pain is not forgotten; it is indeed a part of Amoret's pleasure:

Lightly he clipt her twixt his armes twaine,
    And streightly did embrace her body bright,
Her body, late the prison of sad paine,
    Now the sweet lodge of loue and deare delight:
But she faire Lady overcommen quight
    Of hugh affection, did in pleasure melt,

(III. xii. 45. 1590 edn.)

It is the experience of pain before the loving embrace that causes her to flood with pleasure—the one replaces the other—and one might consider that fact with sadistic satisfaction.

No such response is possible to the 1596 version. Amoret's ordeal leads not to comfort and pleasure, but to disappointment and fresh fear (III. xii. 44). Indeed, after the further trauma of being carried off by the wild man, she is even frightened of Arthur:

But now in feare of shame she more did stond,
    Seeing her selfe all soly succourlesse,
Left in the victors powre, like vassall bond;
    Whose will her weakenessse could no way represse,
In case his burning lust should breake into excesse.

(IV. ix. 18)
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Of course, her baseless fear of this paragon indicates a fault in herself. But she has at least learned that the notion of being her rescuer's vassal, which she embraced enthusiastically earlier, is perhaps not such a good idea after all.

Writing on Book III, Alpers notes that Spenser "consciously and conspicuously revises not only a literary and cultural view of love but also a literary and cultural view of woman....he sets himself the task of realizing the otherness and complex reality of woman by seeing life from the feminine point of view." 24 In Serena's encounter with the cannibals, Spenser looks at an extreme tendency in the cultural denial of that complex reality and ultimately counters it, ironically, by showing us a naked woman. Against the cannibals' fantastical and fragmented perception he sets ordinary, naked flesh and blood.

To relate the episode to the Book's theme of courtesy and defamation, Parker suggests that we see the savages as scandalmongers who cannibalize reputation. 25 Along similar lines, we might see them as purveyors and consumers of pornography: as such they pose a threat to the good name not only of Serena but of womankind in general. One of the most poignant moments in The Faerie Queen occurs at the tournament to find a successor to Florimel. All the women try to wear Florimel's girdle, fail and are revealed to be unchaste. Their knights are not embarrassed, depressed or even angered; they merely laugh. Women have become a bawdy joke to be sniggered at by their boorish loves. The knights are not interested in their ladies, but in the gaudy, animated doll, False Florimel. The cannibals are both a symptom and a cause of this tendency, not to dehumanize women, but to belittle their humanity.

NOTES


3 The clearest of the very few examples is Decades of the Newe Worlde or West India, Pietro Martirop d'Anghiera. Trans. Richard Eden (London, 1555; Ann Arbor Microfilms, 1966), pp. 134-134v.
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5 Edmund Spenser, "Amoretti" 77. This and all further references to Spenser are from the *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. Smith and E. De Selincourt (London, 1912; rpt. 1969).

6 Cheney, p. 116.

7 Daniel Traister, "‘To Portrait That Which In This World Is Best’: Stella in Perspective." *SP*, 81 (1984), 419-437.

8 Traister, p. 424.


11 Jacques Le Lieur, "Blason De La Cuisse" in Meon, *Blasons*, pp. 79-80, ll. 7-13, "Cuisse qui soustiens la pelotte/Je n’oseroy dire la motte/Quir par nature est decoree/D’autre toyson que le doree,/Ce n’est d’or, velours, ne satin,/Mais d’un petit poil argentin/Plus delye que fine soye."

12 Le Lieur, p. 80, ll. 15-18.

13 Bousquet, pp. 190-212.


17 Bousquet, p. 212.

18 Bousquet, p. 187.


23 Orlando Furioso, 11:6, ll. 1-4.

24 Alpers, pp. 397-398.