

Lecture 13: *For Profit of the Ensample*

In his letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, Spenser says:

“In that Faery Queene I meane glory in my generall intention, but in my particular I conceiue the most excellent and glorious person of our soueraine the Queene, and her kingdome in Faery land.” (B717)

So, a single image or figure may have many meanings.

But also, one cluster of meanings generates many images:
“And yet in some places els **I do otherwise shadow** her.”

In Bk I, Elizabeth is “shadowed,” not only by
Una = England & the English Church
But also by Lucifera;
i.e., Elizabeth’s Court is The House of Pride
And by Duessa—the Double, Miss Duplicity.

Things seem to have gone out of control.

You begin to see, perhaps, why a literalist, or a strict constructionist, or a Puritan moralist (like Lord Burleigh, whom Spenser satirized in the Sixth Book of the poem) might take issue with what Spenser calls
“a continued Allegory, or darke conceit.” [1

Spenser goes on to explain WHY he writes *figuratively*:

“The generall end therefore of all the booke 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.**”

He seems to be making a concession to weakness, what he calls “the use of these days”:

“To some I know this Methode will seeme displeasaunt, which had rather haue good discipline deliuered plainly in way of precepts, or sermoned at large, as they vse, then thus **clowdily enrappd** in Allegoricall deuises. But such, me seeme, should be satisfide with the vse of these dayes seeing all things accounted by their showes, and nothing esteemed of, that is not delightfull and pleasing to commune sence. . . .”

But he has a little surprise for us. He concludes by saying that his way of teaching is BETTER than straightforward “sermoning at large”: “So much more **profitable and gracious** is doctrine **by ensample**, then by rule.”

Why is an *ensample* more profitable than a precept?

Experiential rather than theoretical: “Fierce warres and faithfull loves shall *moralize* my song.”

Citing Spenser, OED gives, as definition 2.a., “To supply (a narrative) with a moral or a subject for moralizing.” [2

For Spenser, as for his contemporary, Sir Philip Sidney, Poetry is a **Speaking Picture**: “A perfect picture . . . for [the poet] yeeldeth to the powers of the minde an image of that whereof the Philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description, which doth neither strike, pierce, nor possess, the sight of the soule so much, as that other doth.” (B 962)

The poet moves us by “coupl[ing] the generall notion [or abstract principle] with the particular example.”

So, we might say about “allegorical” teaching:

That the image is more vivid—more lively & more **lifelike**—than the mere precept. Instead of “Holiness,” we have the Adventures of Redcross.

“Speaking pictures” are also **moving** pictures, and when these dynamic images are linked in some sort of narrative arrangement, they tell a story.

When we think of Redcrosse in these terms—concretely, as a “character” in a story, rather than abstractly as a figure of Holiness—what is the story?

An inexperienced-frustrated-confused youth struggles to find/make his way in/through the world.

In this way, the conceptual meaning of the allegory—Everyone becoming (or failing to become) Holy. As a result of this narrative enactment, diverse figurative meanings (Everyman-St.George-Holiness-&ct.) become grounded in CONCRETE IMAGE of someone like us. (Or some of us. In Book III, Spenser tells the story of a young woman undergoing a similar experiential process.)

The idea of the story becomes in this way **memorable** and **accessible**, through its likeness to the **experience** of the reader. The allegorical fiction is, in one dimension, an externalized psychological narrative about falling from innocence (& cluelessness) into experience. It’s like the Eden story of the boy, the girl, & the snake all over again.

When I think of RC in these terms—concretely, as a story—I begin to notice that he succeeds by failing, time after time. He wins by losing. In a sense, like Sir Gawain (for example) he must fail in order to become human.

In theological terms, the story of success through failure is known as the “doctrine” of “The Fortunate Fall”: *O felix culpa! O felix peccatum Adae!*

The first book of *The Faerie Queene* shows us that failure may be necessary to success, that falling is, or may be, the prelude to rising.

Psychologically speaking, we learn by experience of the ensample, vicariously, that suffering is a necessary condition of growth.

Spiritually, we relive, in our imaginations, the story of death and rebirth: we have to die to be reborn:

So RC succumbs to the depths of Despair (9)
in order that he may ascend to the Heavenly City (10).

O felix culpa! O felix peccatum Adae!

NOTES

1] In thinking about Spenser's allegory, it may help to remember what I said about allegory in the lecture on *Piers Plowman & Everyman*:

ALLEGORY is extended metaphor. E.g.:

"God is my Shepherd" is a metaphor.

Psalm 23 can be read as an allegory,

in which some of the meanings of "Shepherd"

are spelled out: guide, governor, provider (feeder).

The corresponding meanings of Sheep are implied:

error-prone, unruly, dependent.

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2] <http://dictionary.oed.com/entrance.dtl>

(Note: if you are unable to access this site from the computer you are working on, try entering through the University Library's SABIO Gateway. Click on *Online Reference*, then *Dictionaries etc.*, then *English Language Dictionaries*, then *Oxford English Dictionary*.)