Clarion in the Bower of Bliss: Poetry and Politics in Spenser’s “Muiopotmos”

This paper explores the often remarked analogy between Spenser’s “Muiopotmos” and the Bower of Bliss. It argues that by returning to the vexed problem of female authority, “Muiopotmos” challenges the epic poetics of the second book of the *Faerie Queene*. Both poems explore the relationship of gender and genre through analogies between aesthetic, erotic, and political control, commonly associated with Elizabeth’s strategies of maintaining authority. However, the generic and textual parallels between Clarion’s garden and Acrasia’s bower, both worlds of romance entrapment, suggest that Spenser identifies Elizabeth’s court with *mētis* or cunning intelligence, a distinctly female power that opposes the characteristic *bie* (martial valor) of epic action. With a series of striking gender inversions, Spenser rewrites Guyon’s flagrantly masculine display of epic strength as the destruction of the mock-epic hero of “Muiopotmos,” thereby raising a troubling question for the poetry and politics of the *Faerie Queene*: can epic—epic action, epic heroes and the writing of epic itself—thrive in a courtly world governed by the shifting illusions of *mētis*? A sobering answer emerges from the death of Clarion, the epic hero, in the feminine web of romance.

EVERY EPIC HERO LOVES a good romance.⁠¹ When Circe suggests seductively to Odysseus, “We two/ Shall mingle and make love upon our bed./ So mutual trust may come out of play and love,”

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⁠¹ Spenser Studies: A Renaissance Poetry Annual, Volume XX, Copyright © 2005 by AMS Press, Inc. All rights reserved.
the wily hero welcomes the challenge. In an encounter that resonates through the literary history of epic, Odysseus becomes the first (and last) epic hero to master the enchantress of romance as he says:

Now it is I myself you hold, enticing into your chamber, to your dangerous bed, to take my manhood when you have me stripped. I mount no bed of love with you upon it. Or swear me first a great oath, if I do, you'll work no more enchantment to my harm.

(X.382–87)

Confronting a sword against her throat and an epic hero fortified with moly, Circe has no choice. And Odysseus, Homer tells us, entered "Circe's flawless bed of love," inaugurating a tradition of erotic enjoyment that no subsequent epic hero will be able to resist. Odysseus, however, exerts control over the romance world in which he finds himself, converting its menace into pleasure and enlisting the assistance of the dangerous seductress for the completion of his epic task. From Vergil to Spenser, epic heroes succumb to the temptations of romance, but fail to establish the delicate balance that Odysseus achieves almost effortlessly—the balance between submission to and control of a powerful and alluring woman who offers great pleasure and great danger—a balance so difficult to acquire and maintain that it will prove to be the entrapment of several generations of wandering knights. Aeneas must be ordered to renounce Dido; Ziliante, Ruggiero, Corsamonte, and Rinaldo must be rescued from the clutches of Boiardo's Morgana, Ariosto's Alcina, Trissino's Acratia, and Tasso's Armida respectively. Spenser's Guyon, however, is an exception to the rule.

Warned of Acrasia's dangerous Circe-like enchantments, Guyon—the Spenserian Odysseus—takes adequate precautions. Armed with the Palmer and his own brute strength, he resists the luscious temptations on display and, in what is one of the great cruces of the Faerie Queene, proceeds rapidly to destroy the Bower of Bliss in the space of a single stanza. Nowhere else in the epic tradition does the hero systematically and brutally destroy the artistry of the romance bower, which stands, at least in part, for the art of the epic poet himself. But as Teresa Krier astutely observes, "the literary history of romance . . . becomes one of the burdens Guyon bears and has to fight against," even though Spenser "destroys the Bower with
considerable pain.” The glittering menace of Circe’s literary daughter must be triumphantly overcome, if epic is to march on with unswerving single-mindedness; and where Guyon cannot match Odysseus’ cunning, he makes up for it with armed might.

It is all the more surprising, then, that Spenser revisits the dangerous temptations of the romance bower, barely a year after the publication of the first installment of the Faerie Queene, in “Muiopotmos,” published in the Complaints volume of 1591. It has often been pointed out in passing that the butterfly Clarion “in his franke lustiness” seems to flit about a miniature bower of bliss with its mock-epic catalogue of flowers. But the analogy is more pervasive than casual resemblance: Spenser draws a systematic parallel between Clarion’s pleasure garden and Acrasia’s bower in Book II of the Faerie Queene, by describing the butterfly’s flowerbed as the locus amoenus of romance, complete with a malignant entrapping witch at the center (in this case, the spider Aragnoll). The competition between Nature and Art, so characteristic of the Bower of Bliss, reappears in “Muiopotmos” along with the suggestions of sensual excess and erotic abandon (Clarion, we are told, “pastures on the pleasures of each place” much like Verdant and Acrasia, and Tasso’s Rinaldo and Armida before them). More significantly, as James Nohrnberg has noted, the veil Acrasia wears is compared to the “subtile web” of Arachne, from whom Aragnoll descends. There is, however, a crucial difference between the fates of Guyon and Clarion: while Guyon catches Acrasia in a “subtile net,” Clarion, the hero of “Muiopotmos,” is caught in Aragnoll’s spiderweb. In the Faerie Queene, Guyon’s destruction of the Bower marks the triumph of the epic imperative over the seductions of romance; the entrapping garden of “Muiopotmos,” however, effectively negates and reverses that victory. By exploring these suggestive parallels and sharply contrasting conclusions, I want to suggest that “Muiopotmos” marks Spenser’s return to the problem of romance embodied by the Bower of Bliss. But why does Spenser revisit the romance bower which he destroyed “with considerable pain”? And what does the triumph of the bower signify for Spenser’s poetics? More important, perhaps, can the relationship between “Muiopotmos” and the Bower shed any light on the relationship between the Faerie Queene and the Complaints?

“Muiopotmos: or The Fate of the Butterflie,” is one of the enduring mysteries of the Spenserian corpus. Despite a range of inventive interpretations—it has been described as an epyllion, a mock-epic, an Aesopian fable, a parable, an allegory of the fall of man, a roman-à-clef of court intrigue, a statement of Spenser’s Protestant poetics, a satire on envy at court, a declaration of Spenserian aesthetics—the
poem’s genre and its central themes are still widely disputed. Sources have been identified in the mythography of Comnes, Cartari, and Ovid, in the emblem tradition of Alciati, Simeoni, and Corrozet, in mock-epic insect poems such as the Homeric Batrachomyomachia and Lucian’s Muia Encomion, in Chaucer’s Nun’s Priest Tale, and in moral fables such as John Heywood’s The Spider and the Flie and Spenser’s own “Virgil’s Gnat.” Epic allusions to the Iliad and the Aeneid have been discerned. However, by arguing that the most important source for “Muiopotmos” may be Spenser’s own epic, the Faerie Queene, I want to suggest that the poem does indeed encompass this entire range of sources and allegorical meanings, and does so quite intentionally.

“Muiopotmos” announces itself as an allegory by its very setting—a pleasure garden that conceals an unseen snare—and the heaping up of allusions to classical and vernacular texts, myths and emblems, only heightens this conviction. Accordingly, the critical tradition around the poem falls into three major camps based on distinct practices of allegoresis: political or topical allegory, theological or moral allegory, and finally, a kind of aesthetic allegory or an allegory of mimesis and poesis. Thus, the poem either becomes a reflection on life at court (envy, the triviality of courtiers, particular court intrigues), a cautionary tale of intemperate self-indulgence, the transitoriness of pleasure and the inevitability of mortality, or a commentary on the beauty and aspirations of Spenser’s own art. When read in conjunction with Book II of the Faerie Queene, however, this diversity of interpretation no longer seems strange or surprising; all three themes are of great significance for the story of Guyon, and engage moral, ethical, and aesthetic questions at the heart of a book which has been described as an “epic moralisé.”

In this context, the resemblance of “Muiopotmos” to the Bower of Bliss places it at the center of a complex web of relationships in the Faerie Queene involving Christian morality and classical ethics, the political effectiveness of a male hero under a female sovereign, and the competing aesthetic demands of epic and romance. Recognizing the threat of Acrasia to the autonomy and progress of the epic hero, Spenser presents Guyon’s raging destruction of the Bower of Bliss as an epic solution to the problems of erotic intemperance, ethical dissimulation, and rhetorical artifice associated with the romance world. But, in doing so, he also suppresses a figure of female authority and artistic genius whose political control is manifested in terms of erotic power—a figure reminiscent, as Patricia Parker and Louis Montrose have argued, of Elizabeth’s erotic and political control over her courtiers. The characteristic evocation of the romance
garden subject to a powerful female figure points repeatedly to the vexed relationship between art, politics, and erotic domination, typical of Elizabeth’s strategies of maintaining authority, a key concern of the Faerie Queene as a whole. The return to the bower in “Muiopotmos” thus becomes a reexamination of Guyon’s flagrantly masculine reassertion of epic supremacy; it is a reevaluation in which romance deviance and the deviousness of the woman at the center eventually win out.17

This essay examines the relationship between “Muiopotmos” and the Bower of Bliss in some detail, illustrating how “Muiopotmos” revises and challenges the epic poetics of Book II. It suggests that the rich parallels between the two poems derive from a troubling problem that haunted Spenser after his visit to Elizabeth’s court in 1590, following the publication of The Faerie Queene. Could epic—epic action, epic heroes, and the writing of epic itself—exist and thrive under the political conditions of the Elizabethan court? Or to put the question differently, could an early modern queen support (and did she even need) an epic hero?18 Robert Brinkley has identified the Ovidian politics of metamorphosis in the “Muiopotmos” as a revelation of the political codes of the Elizabethan world where “the fate of the butterfly offers an appropriate image for one of the fates at Gloriana’s court.”19 But the poem also argues that the reduction of would-be epic heroes to fluttering mock-heroic insects has a specific cause. By associating the Elizabethan court with the romance garden rather than the epic battlefield, Spenser reveals and redefines the power relations that are at stake: romance is the world of Circe’s bed, of Acrasia’s garden and Aragnoll’s web, a world where the artfulness of women, the duplicity and dissimulation associated with female power, prevails over single-minded epic might; it is a world in which the stark tableaux of epic poetics must give way to the intricately woven tapestries of romance.

I

It has long been noted that the final canto of Book II is closely modeled on books 10 and 12 of the Odyssey.20 Behind the Italian temptresses on whom Acrasia is most immediately modeled, stands Homer’s Circe: the sexual pleasure and erotic self-indulgence of the Bower, along with the risk of being turned into a beast, looks back to her dangerous and flawless bed of love. What distinguishes Spenser’s poem most clearly from its Homeric prototype, however, is the
way in which its hero responds to the challenge of the enchantress’s wiles: while Odysseus engages and enjoys the sorceress through a mixture of cunning and threatened force, Guyon firmly turns to ruthless violence. These contrasting responses represent a fundamental difference of genre: the clever tricks of Odyssean romance have no place in the sharply circumscribed ethical world of Vergilian and Spenserian epic. More importantly, the difference here between Odysseus and Guyon, between romance and epic, participates in a broader contest between two styles of establishing and maintaining authority, identified in the Homeric epics as métis (cunning intelligence) and bie (brute force).

In their classic study, Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant describe métis in terms that recall the generic turf of romance:

The many-coloured, shimmering nature of métis is a mark of its kinship with the divided, shifting world of multiplicity in the midst of which it operates. It is this way of conniving with reality which ensures its efficacy. Its suppleness and malleability give it the victory in domains where there are no ready-made rules for success, no established methods, but where each new trial demands the invention of new ploys, the discovery of a way out that is hidden... Métis is itself a power of cunning and deceit... In order to dupe its victim it assumes a form which masks, instead of revealing, its true being. In métis, appearance and reality no longer correspond to one another, but stand in contrast, producing an effect of illusion, apâtê, which beguiles the adversary in error and leaves him as bemused by his defeat as by the spells of a magician... Such is the “duplicity” of métis which, giving itself out to be other than it is, is like those misleading objects... the Trojan horse, the bed of love with its magic bonds, the fishing bait are all traps which conceal their inner deceit beneath a reassuring or seductive exterior.

The embodiment of métis is, of course, Odysseus “of the many ways,” an expert in tricks of all kinds, the most subtle and skillful rhetorician in Greek epic. It is precisely this elusive shiftiness, this ability to cope with multiplicity and a changing play of appearances that places Odysseus at the center of the romance world, enabling his conquest of the marvelous landscapes, unpredictable monsters, and seductive
enchantresses in the *Odyssey.* Yet subsequent audiences—whether Vergil, cinquecento commentators on the Homeric epics, or Spenser and Milton—have been troubled by this quality of cunning which defines the hero. As Detienne and Vernant acknowledge, there is something less than honorable about the use of *mētis,* particularly in cultures that valorize straightforward armed might, since certain aspects of this slippery wiliness resemble treachery and dissimulation, "the despised weapons of women and cowards." From its mythical origin, in fact, *mētis* is a female attribute, embodied in the shape-shifting goddess Metis, mother of Athena and first wife of Zeus, who was swallowed in the shape of a fly by the king of gods. A quality associated not merely with mental craftiness and duplicity, but with the physical crafts of weaving and metallurgy, and with the psychology of seduction (it is an attribute of Hermes, Athena, Hephaestos, Prometheus, and Aphrodite), it is central to all the arts of making, to the creation of any artifice. In other words, it is the element responsible for the kinship between poetic (or rhetorical) skill, political acumen, and erotic allure exemplified in romance temptresses from Circe to Acrasia; its subtle, elusive power underlies the danger and promise of the romance garden and the woman at its center.

This understanding of *mētis* as a defining characteristic of the romance world, and its long association with female crafts and craftiness, is of particular importance for analyses of Spenser’s Bower and “Muiopotmos.” The sly *mētis* with which the romance enchantress entraps her victims and establishes her erotic empire stands in sharp contrast to the clear martial valor with which the epic hero exerts and legitimates his authority. Thus, when the epic hero strays into a romance garden, he enters a realm where the rules of engagement are very different from the martial challenges in which he excels; unless he subjugates the enchantress, he enjoys the sensual pleasures on offer at his own peril. For Spenser, the alignment of these two distinct styles of enforcing authority (*mētis* and *bie*) with generic codes of romance and epic reflected two styles of political and aesthetic representation which had an immediate counterpart in the relations between the queen and her powerful aristocratic courtiers.

It is a commonplace now to observe that the presence of a powerful female sovereign in the rigidly patriarchal culture of early modern Europe generated male fears of being stripped of power, variously expressed as effeminization, castration, or seduction. The queen’s court, in these analyses, is a literal version of Circe’s dangerous bed, where even the wily Odysseus feared having his “manhood” taken away. Thus, Patricia Parker describes the menace of Acrasia—and the suspension of the lyric and romance modes more generally—as
stemming from a male courtier-poet’s fear of having his instruments (political, sexual, poetic) suspended by female authority. I want to suggest, however, that Spenser’s encoding of the romance garden as a dangerous place of female control does not only stem from the fact of subjection to a powerful female sovereign, but from her particular style of maintaining authority. The elaborately politicized Petrarchan games, the medieval tournaments that cast the queen as a lady of romance, the demand for political allegiance disguised as erotic devotion, the lavish entertainments in pastoral settings, all these Elizabethan strategies of exerting and consolidating power may be associated with the quality of mētis that characterizes the romance world. Indeed, as several scholars have suggested, the Bower of Bliss bears striking similarities to the language of romance which structured the queen’s relations with her courtiers.

From this perspective, the confrontation of Guyon and Acrasia dramatizes a conventional showdown between epic might and romance cunning, but in this case, the hero’s victory has potentially subversive implications. Guyon’s triumph asserts the epic values of armed strength, brute force, and the single-minded pursuit of a clear goal over the beguiling insinuations of romance with its hidden entrapments, shifting motives, and illusory pleasures. However, the similarities between the exercise of power in Elizabeth’s court and in the Bower suggest that Guyon’s triumph is also a demand for strong epic action in a political climate rife with the intrigues, deceptions, and elaborate masquerades characteristic of romance digression.

Against this complex backdrop of interwoven generic and political concerns, the return in “Muiopotmos” to a garden closely resembling the Bower of Bliss takes on considerable significance, particularly when the aspiring (mock) epic hero is ensnared in a web reminiscent of conventional romance entrapments. Far from presenting a superficial resemblance, the echoes of Book II in the later poem suggest that Spenser was quite deliberately revisiting and revising specific topos that made the garden so emblematic of Elizabethan court politics as he had pictured them in his epic. If Acrasia’s defeat by Guyon in the Faerie Queene marks the violent triumph of the epic imperative over the seductions of romance, in “Muiopotmos,” romance entraps, binds, and ultimately kills even the possibility of epic action. Indeed, we may think of “Muiopotmos” as a strategic rewriting of the action in the Bower where mētis now triumphs: the peculiar mixture of epic and romance tropes in a mocking key, the locus amoenus with its voyeuristic delight, erotic abandon, and evil creature at the center, the intimations of a moral and theological fall from grace, and the
final, cruel twist as the epic hero meets his fatal end. More important, and perhaps more insidiously, the focus on the power of métis in “Muiopotmos” creates an inversion of the gender hierarchy defended so decisively by Guyon by systematically effeminizing its protagonists. While the action of the poem seems to concern a male spider and male butterfly, the powerful inset mythological narratives suggest otherwise: the real control over the poem’s action lies in the hands of Venus and Minerva, powerful female figures distinguished by their artfulness.

In this respect, “Muiopotmos” offers a means of reexamining Harry Berger’s provocative claim that the demonization of Acrasia and “the gynophobic representation of woman is a target rather than a donnée” of Book II. Berger’s argument, which denies the historical specificity of Acrasia and returns her to the allegorical matrix of the Book of Temperance, insightfully demonstrates how the misogynistic representations of women typical of epic are an inevitable by-product of the rectilinear repressiveness of the discourse of temperance itself: “Romance and pleasure are its creations, its scapegoats, its necessary others.” However, while Berger’s understanding of Acrasia reveals her to be nothing other than a male fear of impotence and weakness, it also has the effect of stripping her (and the other female figures in Book II) of any genuine agency or ability distinct from their authors (whether Spenser, or the male characters of which they are allegorical displacements). The careful interest in female power and agency evident in “Muiopotmos,” however, suggests that, in addition to the allegorical texture of his plot in Book II of the Faerie Queene, Spenser may have been interested in the nature of female power on its own terms as well. Acrasia may be demonized not merely because she is a displacement of male akrasia, but because the epic world of the Faerie Queene valorizes strength (bie) rather than cunning intelligence (métis). In “Muiopotmos,” however, these values are crucially reversed.

II

The most striking similarity between the Bower of Bliss and Clarion’s pleasure garden is the description of the locus amoenus itself, which introduces the key themes of artistry and artifice through the characteristic interplay of Nature and Art. Spenser develops this theme at length in the final canto of Book II, and it is worth examining two representative stanzas:
A place pickt out by choice of best alyue,
That nature's worke by art can imitate:
In which what ever in this worldly state
Is sweet, and pleasing unto living sense,
Or that may daintiest fantasie aggrate,
Was poured forth with plentifull dispence,
And made there to abound with lavish affluence.

One would have thought, (so cunningly, the rude
And scorned partes were mingled with the fine,)
That nature had for wantonesse ensuede
Art, and that Art at nature did repine;
So striving each th'other to undermine,
Each did the others work more beautify;
So diff'ring both in willes, agreed in fine:
So all agreed through sweete diuersity,
This Gardin to adorne with all variety.

(FQ II.xii.42, 59)\(^{38}\)

Nohrnberg's description of the relationship between nature and art
in the Bower encapsulates the general critical consensus on these lines
succinctly, as he observes that the Bower suggests "a host of related
aesthetic issues, both in the area of artistic imitation and illusion, and
in the area of artistic balance and proportion."\(^{39}\) Excess, even an
excess of beauty, cannot be tolerated in the Book of Temperance,
and the garden's extravagant pleasures and delight in its own aesthetic
perfection are not to be celebrated but condemned for their lack of
decorum.\(^{40}\) Similarly, it has been argued that Clarion intemperately
enjoys his flowerbed, indulging his "glutton sense," and allowing his
"wavering wit" to luxuriate in sensuous satisfaction.\(^{41}\) However, the
recurrent trope of Nature and Art contending with each other to
produce an ideal *copia*—a favorite figure used by classical writers on
poetics to praise (rather than to condemn) extraordinary art-
istry—suggests that Spenser may be concerned with more than just
unseemly artistic striving.\(^{42}\)

If the romance world is characterized by *mētis*-mental craftiness
as well as physical craftsmanship—we must expect to find it mani-
ifested in the garden which metonymically stands for the genre. And
it is precisely in the contention of Nature and Art, in the shimmering
illusions of beautiful harmony, that we encounter the Spenserian ver-

cion of *mētis*. The artistry of the Bower reveals the basis of Acrasia's
power. Its subtle entwining of art and nature, which cannot be distinquished from each other, hints at an intelligence which asserts its supremacy by creating conditions in which "appearance and reality no longer correspond to one another, but stand in contrast, producing an effect of illusion." Significantly, métis, "the power of cunning and deceit," has both an aesthetic and political function in the Bower. Spenser describes the production of the wondrous aesthetic effects of the garden in terms that are distinctly political—"nature had for wantonesse ensude/ Art, and Art at nature did repine;/ So striving each th’other to undermine/ Each did the others work more beautify." The image recalls the courtiers gathered at the court of Philotime, where "everyone did strive his fellow downe to throw" (II.vii.47) and at the court of Lucifera where "a noble crew/ Of Lordes and Ladies stood on every side,/ Which with their presence faire, the place much beautified" (I.iv.7). These descriptions serve as a useful gloss on activities of nature and art and suggest that the Bower is itself a court where the appearance of beauty masks a constant struggle to capture the attention of the queen/enchantress and gain political/sexual advancement.

This identification of Bower-as-Court is in fact hinted at as early as the third canto, where Braggadocchio catalogues the joys of court-life for Belpheobe:

But what art thou, O Ladie, which doest raunge
In this wilde forest, where no pleasure is,
And doest not it for joyous court exchaunge,
Emongst thine equall peres, where happie blis
And all delight does raigne, and dearly loued bee,
There thou maist love, and dearly loved be,
And swim in pleasure, which thou here doest mis;
There maist thou best be seene, and best maist see:
The wood is fit for beasts, the court is fit for thee.

(FQ II.iii.39)

There is perhaps no more obvious counterpart to the "wilde forest" than the elaborately cultivated Bower with its specular delights. Braggadocchio uses the language of sexual pleasure to describe the political world of the court, a metaphor that will be literalized in the sensual excesses of the Acrasia’s garden. Indeed, the episode is striking because it explicitly directs anti-court satire against places like the Bower, where courtesans lure knights away from the pursuit of honor only to enmesh them in the "happie blis" of "court exchaunge."
Moreover, by using Belphoebe—the figure explicitly associated with Elizabeth in the *Letter to Raleigh*—to condemn the excesses of courtly life, Spenser slyly implies that the court in question (and by extension, the Bower of Bliss as well) is that of Elizabeth herself. The nightmarish version of court politics is thus displaced onto Acrasia, while Belphoebe maintains the queen's moral integrity for the purposes of the poem.

The careful evocation of the political relationship between art and nature in the Bower also suggests that Spenser may well have been thinking of the central, well-established importance of the garden in Elizabethan iconography. The image of such a garden, with its temptations to wealth, ease, and the good life of privilege, comfort, and sexual enjoyment, bore an obvious resemblance to the court itself, populated by languishing courtiers seeking to gain favors both political and personal in the language of romantic courtship. The extent to which this analogy between the garden, the queen, and her court, was embedded in Elizabethan culture is further revealed by the actual spectacles of power that took place in the great English Renaissance gardens at Kenilworth, Hampton Court, Nonsuch, Theobalds, and Pymms. Not only were lavish entertainments and recreations of idyllic pastoral or romance settings staged in these gardens, literally combining elaborate artifice and natural splendor, but the plan of the garden itself served as a monument in praise of the queen.

Consequently, the evocation of a garden in "Muiopotmos," characterized by the identical tropes of variety, excess, and cunning artistry in the interweaving of nature and art, cannot possibly avoid the burden of romance invested in that other garden, the Bower of Bliss, with its strongly charged fabric of literary and political significance:

And all the champion he soared light,  
And all the country he did possesse,  
Feeding upon their pleasures bounteouslie,  
That none gainsaid, nor none did him envie.

The woods, the rivers the meadows green,  
With his aire-cutting wings he measured wide,  
Ne did he leave the mountains bare unseeene,  
Nor the ranke grassie fennes delights untride.

To the gay gardens his unstaid desire
Him wholly carried, to refresh his sprights:
There lavish Nature in her best attire,
Powres forth sweete odors, and alluring sights;
And Arte with her contending, doth aspire
T'excell the naturall, with made delights:
And all that faire or pleasant may be found,
In riotous excess doth there abound.

("Muiopotmos," 149–56; 161–168)⁴⁹

Clarion’s “journey” to the “gay gardins” is a mock-epic quest, and his wandering, adventurous journey, which culminates in the fatal garden, resembles the careers of the many epic heroes lost in the digressive pleasures of romance. But if Clarion’s progress is modeled on a distinguished literary tradition, it also has unmistakable political overtones: he is heir to a throne and his long flight across a vast landscape is akin to a sovereign’s survey of his possessions; his entry into the garden simultaneously suggests the epic hero’s delighted discovery of a locus amoenus, and a political trespassing on another’s territory. Subtle as these gestures are, they gain weight by the associative relation of “Muiopotmos” to the other poems in the Complaints volume. “Muiopotmos” belongs to the central set of beast fables including “Virgils Gnat” and “Prosopopoia, or Mother Hubberds Tale,” which are explicitly concerned with court politics; moreover, the poem itself is set off from the other two fables by two lyric sequences ("Ruines of Rome" and "Visions of the Worlds Vanitie") that mourn the decaying grandeur of civilization, for which the court is a particularly appropriate emblem. In the immediate context of the Complaints poems that refer to court life and politics in allegorical or emblematic style, we cannot avoid the iconographic and literary implications of Clarion, a well-armed (mock) epic hero journeying through a vast landscape and entering an enchanting garden, reminiscent of Elizabeth and her court.

Clarion, in fact, seems to be beautifully dressed, much in the manner of a courtier. Here again, the analogy with Braggadocchio is revealing:

Lastly his shinie wings as silver bright,
Painted with a thousand colours, passing farre
All Painters skill, he did about him dight:
Not half so manie sundrie colours are
In Iris bowe . . .
Nor *Innoes* Bird in her ey-spotted traine  
So manie goodly colours doth containe.

("Muiopotmos," 89–95)

But for in court gay portaunce he perceiud,  
And gallant shew to be in greatest gree,  
Eftsoones to court he ast t'auaunce his first degree.

And by the way he chaunced to espy  
One sitting idle on a sunny bancke,  
To whom auanting in great brauery,  
As Peacocke, that his painted plumes doth prankke . . .

(FQ II.iii.5–6)

The repeated peacock simile suggests that Clarion, for all his elaborate arming, may be a vaunting courtier like Braggadocchio, one who has appropriately put on “gay portaunce” in preparation to visit the “gay gardins.” The artistry of Clarion’s wings, whose variety and subtlety of color rival the greatest painters’ skill, parallels the artistry of the gardens that he will visit, where Art aspires “t’excel the naturall, with made delights.” But it is precisely this similarity which condemns Clarion almost before he has even ventured forth. Like Braggadocchio, he is taken in by the appearance of “gallant shew” and is easily seduced by the gleaming illusions of métis. His gorgeous wings are, after all, envied and desired by ladies at court who will be gratified if their loves will “steale them privily away.”

III

Though the Bower’s extended *paragone* of nature and art is limited to a single stanza early in “Muiopotmos,” it contains all the characteristic elements of the earlier garden: the “riotous excess” of flowers, the cunning artistry which produces an ideal harmony and *copia* of sensual pleasure, a catalogue of flowers. These early intimations of a hidden métis are developed pointedly in the tapestry contest between Arachne and Minerva, which, in an extraordinary twist, depends on the image of a butterfly in a garden. Spenser creates a moment of dizzying meta-poetic insight as the poem collapses in on itself at this point:
Enmest those leaves she made a Butterflie,
With excellent device and wondrous slight,
Fluttering among the Olives wantonly,
That seem’d to live, so like it was in sight:
The velvet nap on which his wings doth lie,
The silken downe with which his back is dight,
His broad outstretched horns, his hayrie thies,
His glorious colours and his glistening eies.

(329–36)

Minerva’s handiwork with its “excellent device and wondrous slight” slyly alludes to the earlier stanza describing the mimetic contention of art and nature within Clarion’s flowerbed, and, in fact, her image of the butterfly is exactly how Clarion has last appeared in the poem, resting in the warm sun in “riotous suffisance” (ll.207). Here, the ostensibly “real” (or “natural”) plot of butterfly and spider merges into its mythic (“artificial” or artistic) parallel. In effect, Minerva’s portrayal of a butterfly in her web-like tapestry is proleptic: it foreshadows the fate of another butterfly, Clarion, who also will end the poem caught in a web. The tapestry thus reveals the fate of Clarion and its cause; it becomes a sophisticated gloss on the main plot of the poem as it offers a glimpse into the métis, the subtle, exquisite craft that will entrap the guileless butterfly.

Not surprisingly, much criticism has focused on the Ovidian tapestry contest, as readers instinctively sense that its action contains the key to the poem’s significance. However, the importance of the contest may lie less in its etiological power as a myth, than in its celebration of the triumphant craftsmanship which becomes the cause of Clarion’s entrapment. If the mimetic complicity of nature and art in the Bower reveals the métis behind Acrasia’s power, then the tapestry contest in “Muiopotmos,” as an extension of the nature/art theme, shows how Clarion’s death is due to the same métis, manifested first in Minerva’s tapestry and then in Aragnoll’s web. In both cases, questions of aesthetic representation allude to problems of political representation, and this is made explicit by Minerva’s victory. While Arachne sets out an image of successful male sexual domination emphasizing brute force, Minerva weaves a tale of female political domination emphasizing strategic natural bounty, with obvious parallels to Elizabeth’s reign. Significantly, the contest of Neptune and Minerva stages the showdown between violent military force and the civilizing, peace-making arts symbolized by the olive, pointedly depicting the goddess’s mastery of the arts of making rather than
commemorating her martial valor. In effect, the tapestry dramatizes the collision of battlefield (Neptune's "warlike steed") and garden (Minerva's "fruitfull Olive tree" and "wreathe of Olyves hoarie"), of epic might and romance craft. It celebrates Minerva as the embodiment of métis in both aesthetic and political terms as she weaves her tapestry with a subtle artistry analogous to her astute defeat of Neptune.

Indeed, Arachne's recognition of Minerva's superior skill, which constitutes Spenser's main departure from his Ovidian source, may also owe something to the fact that Minerva was the daughter of Metis and thus the embodiment of supreme handicraft and craftiness. It is only fitting then that Arachne is transfixed by the sight of the woven butterfly "that seem'd to live"—the artist is herself outwitted by the power of mimetic illusion crafted with a métis greater than her own. More importantly, by conceding defeat through her silence and subsequent metamorphosis, she dooms her descendent to reproduce endlessly this original image of supreme artistic skill. Arachne's defeat, which is also implicitly a defeat of the male force and sexual domination depicted in her tapestry, reinforces Minerva's style of maintaining authority, a style associated with romance cunning and the political acumen of the queen. By replicating Minerva's artistry (both political and aesthetic) in the natural world every time a spider entraps a butterfly in its web, Arachne's metamorphosis symbolically brings us back to the story of Clarion and the action of the Bower of Bliss.

The opposition of armed force (synonymous with epic) versus cunning artistry (characteristic of romance) in Minerva's tapestry thus both frames and explains the main plot of Clarion, whose image is, after all, woven into the border of olive leaves. As a (mock) epic hero equipped for battle, with arms compared to those of Achilles and Hercules, Clarion is doomed to be trapped and outwitted in the romance garden with its hidden, tapestry-like webs. Aragnoll's web, a by-product (in mythological terms) of Minerva's artistry, is also an image of art in nature (or, quite literally, of "natural art") and thus becomes an imitation in malo of an ideal métis; in this, it functions as an emblematic parallel to the Bower itself. The entrapping web points back to Acrasia, another predator who also lurks at the center of a romance garden:

And was arrayd, or rather disarrayd,
All in a vele of silke and silver thin,
That hid no whit of her alabaster skin,
But rather shewd more white, if more might bee:
More subtile web Arachne cannot spin,
Nor the fine nets, which oft we woven see
Of scorched deaw, do not in th'aire more lightly flee.

(FQ II.xii.77)

The “subtile web” of Arachne has the extraordinary effect of referring to both her tapestry and subsequent spiderweb with the same associative logic that we see at work in “Muiopotmos”: the comparison of the veil to exquisitely woven fabric (Arachne’s “web”) leads the narrator to think of Arachne’s fate and the resultant spiderwebs (“fine nets”). In a deft gesture, Acrasia’s cunning becomes associated with the subtle artistry of weaving and the malignant snares of the spider; like Aragnoll, she is rapacious in her artistry. The stanza also emphasizes the extent to which the tapestry contest in “Muiopotmos” may be read as an extended gloss on Acrasia’s entrapping tactics in the Bower: the shining butterfly locked in Minerva’s tapestry and the dying Clarion caught in Aragnoll’s web parody the condition of Verdant entangled in the titillating charms of Acrasia’s veil.

More interestingly, Louis Montrose suggests that the identification of Acrasia with a spider may have been prompted by Elizabeth’s own courtly self-presentation. A description of the queen by Johann Jacob Breuning von Buchenbach in 1595 suggests that she may have seen herself as an Aragnoll-figure: “Over her breast, which was bare, she wore a long filigree lace shawl, on which sat a hideous large black spider that looked as if it were natural and alive. Many might have been deceived by it.” This unforgettable image of the queen embodies all the key themes of “Muiopotmos” and the Bower with unmistakable clarity: the association of artifice (particularly weaving) with political control through the symbol of the spider, the invocation of mimetic illusion (the trick spider), the sexualized presentation of political control (the bare breast) that marks the sovereign’s authority as distinctly female. The cunning artistry of the Bower thus finds a powerfully revisionist counterpart in “Muiopotmos” as Spenser interrogates Elizabethan strategies of enforcing political control through strategies of aesthetic representation.

In this context, the gender inversions in “Muiopotmos” are of particular interest. While the aesthetic, sexual, and finally political control in the Bower of Bliss is retained by a powerful woman whose resemblance to Elizabeth is primarily based on her gender, the spider Aragnoll in “Muiopotmos” is identified as male, and his function as a political predator is more fully symbolic. That this change of gender
is far from incidental becomes evident in the peculiar but pointed
gender segregation at work in the poem: all the amplifying mytholog-
ical action (the inset tales of Venus/ Astery and Minerva/ Arachne)
is controlled by and enacted upon female figures, so that the main
characters, Clarion and Aragnoll, are reduced to male inversions and
extensions of a cosmic battle played out among powerful female
forces. There is, in fact, some doubt about the gender of Clarion. In
a crucial slip at the end of the Astery tale, the metamorphosed butter-
fly, clearly identified with Clarion, is still distinctly gendered female:
“She turn’d into a winged Butterflie,/ In the wide aire to make her
wandering flight;/ And all those flowers . . . / that bred her spight,/She
placed in her wings, for memorie” (138–42; my emphases). 53
The effects of this segregation are quite striking. As generations of
readers attest, the poetic power of “Muiopotmos” seems to reside
most fully in the inset tales which, though incidental to the ostensible
plot of the poem, seem to be more central to its meaning. This
suggests that Spenser may have deliberately set up an apparent aes-
thetic imbalance within the poem in order to demonstrate poetically
the kinds of political effects induced by the queen’s covert exercise
of power. Thus, the actual power of the poem (aesthetically and in
terms of plot-action) lies in the seemingly incidental female myths,
and not in the ostensible main plot between the male actors; the
inverse relationship between the parts of the poem itself becomes a
sophisticated demonstration of the idea of métis, where appearance
repeatedly belies reality.

IV

The relationship between the two poems and the drama of court
politics on which they comment is further underscored by Clarion’s
resemblance to the many would-be epic heroes seduced by the de-
lights of the Bower. Like Mortdant, Cymochles, and Verdant before
him, Clarion, too, succumbs to “the pleasures of that Paradise” with
sensual, unrestrained glee:

There he arriving, round about doth flie,
From bed to bed, from one to other border,
And takes survey with curious busie eye,
Of everie flower and herbe there set in order;
Now this, now that he tasteth tenderly,
Yet none of them he rudely doth disorder,
Ne with his feete their silken leaves deface;
But pastures on the pleasures of each place.

Of everie one he takes, and tastes at will,
And on their pleasures greedily doth pray.
And when he hath both plaied, and fed his fill,
In the warm Sunne he doth himselfe embay,
And there him rests in riotous suffisaunce
Of all his gladfulnes, and kingly joyaunce.

(169–76, 203–08)

The ubiquitous underlying image of a young woman as a flower
infuses this scene with a comic eroticism, but it also recalls Cymoch-les's voyeuristic enjoyment in the Bower of Bliss:54

His wandring thought in deepe desire does steepe,
And his fraile eye with spoyle of beautie feedes;
Sometimes he falsely faines himself to sleepe,
While through their lids his wanton eies do peepe,
To steale a snatch of amorous conceipt . . .

(FQ II.v.34)

Cymochles's "wandring thought" and "wanton eies" find their equivalents in Clarion's "wavering wit" and "curious busie eye," suggesting that the gorgeous butterfly is an image for the knight in the grip of concupiscent passions, wandering through the romance bower with amazed enjoyment. However, the sexualized image of feeding ("pastures on the pleasures of each place"), appropriate to a butterfly sucking on the nectar of flowers, also recalls the insatiable sexual hunger of Acrasia who feeds on Verdant:

And all that while, right over him she hong,
With her false eyes fast fixed in his sight,
As seeking medicine, whence she was stong,
Or greedily depasturing delight:

(FQ II.xii.73)

The image of pasturing or depasturing locates Clarion within a long tradition of epic heroes detained in the lap of a romance enchantress. It is a direct translation of a similar moment in Tasso's Gerusalemme
liberata where Rinaldo is described as feeding or pasturing avidly on Armida’s face: “i famelici sguardi avidamente/ in lei pascendo si consuma e strugge” (“and avidly feeding on her his ravenous gaze, [he] is consumed and destroyed”). Narcissistic and self-indulgent, such self-consuming erotic feasting occurs when the hero submits to the instant gratification of the romance world without seeking to control or understand it. It is in this moment of unbridled sensual indulgence that the epic hero becomes most fully enmeshed in the web of romance. But such an effacement of epic selfhood in the erotic excesses of the romance world is also a covert gesture back toward to complex erotic-political games of courtship in which Elizabeth engaged her courtiers, as she offered the illusion of success even when she may have stripped them of effective power. The erotic action in the gardens of both poems is in fact only another aspect of the métis which informs their exterior aesthetic appearance and hidden political style.

Clarion, like the legions of unfortunate knights before him, also gets enmeshed precisely when he has fully surrendered himself to erotic enjoyment. Significantly, his fate hovers between that of Mortdant and Verdant, the two knights whose capitulation to Acrasia frame Guyon’s quest, and links “Muiopotmos” to the showdown between epic and romance in the Bower. In the second book of the Faerie Queene, the book closest to classical epic, Acrasia represents both romance digression and epic telos. This is an important and unique innovation in the convention of contrasting the conflicting impulses of epic and romance: Spenser makes the conflict between the genres itself the focus of his plot. Acrasia is responsible for the erotic deviance and deaths of Mortdant and Amavia, whose suicide, in turn, precipitates Guyon’s epic quest. The menace of the romance world thus frames the second book of the Faerie Queene, and the lament of Amavia, a hapless victim of romance intrigue, also echoes in “Muiopotmos” where it is her vision of the world, rather than that of Guyon, which comes to fruition. Amavia’s lament in the first canto of Book II is usually interpreted in the context of despair:

But if that carelessse hevens (quoth she) despise
The doome of just revenge, and take delight
To see sad pageants of mens miseries,
As bound by them to live in lives despight,
Yet can they not warne death from wretched wight.

(FQ II.i.36)

In the context of the Complaints, however, these lines are simply
typical—a lament for the mutability and mortality of the sentient world. Indeed, while Clarion happily “rests in riotous suffisance,” the narrator reflects on his fate in language strikingly reminiscent of Amavia and the fate of Mortdant:

And whatso heavens in their secret doome
   Ordained have, how can fraile fleshly wight
   Forecast, but it must needs to issue come?

(225–27)

Both moments have been associated with laments for the condition of fallen man and the loss of Eden (the original locus amoenus), but the parallels between Amavia’s lament for Mortdant’s death at the hands of Acrasia, and the narrator’s lament for Clarion’s impending death at the hands of Aragnoll, suggests a link between sexual excess, romance entrapment, and the destruction of the would-be epic hero in a world where the female power of métis reigns supreme. At the end of Book II, Guyon’s brutal triumph powerfully eliminates the menace of romance with its labyrinthine sexual politics, avenges the death of Amavia, and reclaims its imaginative power for decidedly masculine epic action. In the gardens of “Muiopotmos,” however, romance consistently entraps and destroys pretensions to epic success as Aragnoll, the descendent of Arachne, destroys Clarion in his web; female dissimulation trumps martial male valor.

Both The Faerie Queene and “Muiopotmos” are eventually concerned with investigating the nature of female authority—its fascination, its menace, its pleasure. Both portray the relations of power within the Elizabethan court as the challenges of the romance world, ruled by powerful enchantresses who threaten the epic hero with emasculation and destruction. But their dramatically different conclusions suggest equally different answers to a central question: does the epic hero and the epic poem have a place in a world where only the rules of romance apply? Is there a place for heroic action in the court of an early modern queen? To have a chance of survival, the unsuspecting epic hero must encounter these shifting, changing, ultimately female worlds with either the métis of Odysseus or the exterminating drive of Guyon. But Spenser also seems to suggest that these two responses are no longer adequate, and perhaps, no longer possible.

The pointed rewriting of Acrasia’s defeat in Clarion’s death suggests an unsettling response to the fate of epic poetics and politics. If the final canto of Book II is framed by allusions to Odyssean
temptations which must be overcome, Spenser returns once again to the same poem at the end of “Muiopotmos,” but this time, he signals a decisive shift of focus away from the epic action of the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*. This change is all the more striking because “Muiopotmos,” unlike Book II, is framed not by the danger of romance deviance, but by allusions to epic battles. The opening lines of the poem (“I sing of deadly dolorous debate/... Betwixt two mightie ones of great estate”) clearly allude to the invocation of the *Iliad* (“Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus’ son Achilles/... since that time when first there stood in division of conflict/ Atreus’ son the lord of men and brilliant Achilles”), and suggest a poem of epic amplitude. There are, of course, many requisite epic conventions in the course of the poem—the arming of the hero, the cosmic politics of gods and mortals, the intimations of a great battle—but these gestures remain poetic decorations and never crystallize into the grandeur of epic action, even mock-epic action. As if to acknowledge this failure of epic purpose, the poem turns to another unmistakable epic allusion at its end: Clarion’s death (“his deepe groaning spright/ In bloodie streames fowrth fled into the aire/ His bodie left the spectacle of care”) mimics the death of Turnus in the *Aeneid* (“Then all the body slackened in death’s chill,/ And with a groan for that indignity/ His spirit fled into the gloom below”). Ironically, if Aeneas’s triumph over Turnus crystallizes the imperial tone of Vergilian epic, then Spenser’s transformation of his hero (Clarion) into the epic adversary (Turnus), who is inevitably destroyed, marks a decisive moment of revision. Epic is no longer the genre defining the politics of empire; it is no match for the guile of romance intrigue.

In a final twist that reasserts the relationship between the Bower of Bliss and “Muiopotmos,” Spenser folds into both poems an allusion to the famous golden net of Vulcan: in Book II, the Palmer’s “subtile net” recalls Vulcan’s capture of Mars and Venus, while in “Muiopotmos,” Vulcan’s net becomes Aragnoll’s web:

The noble Elfe, and carefull Palmer drew
So nigh them, minding nought, but lustfull game,
That suddein forth they on them rusht, and threw
A subtile net, which only for that same
The skilful Palmer formally did frame.

(FQ II.xii.81)

Ne doo I thinke, that that same subtil gin,
The which the Lenman God framed craftily,
Mars sleeping with his wife to compass in,
That all the Gods with common mockerie
Might laugh at them, and scorne their shamefull sin,
Was like to this.

(“Muiopotmos,” 369–74)

The echoes of “subtile net” in “subtile gin” and the emphasis on
the skilful workmanship of the device highlight the relationship be-
tween the two texts, as well as their source. Significantly, the allusion
is drawn from the two major classical texts that stand against the
totalizing voice of martial epic—Homer’s *Odyssey* and Ovid’s *Meta-
morphoses*—and in both texts, the net symbolizes the triumph of métis
(the artistic craft of the net itself and the craftiness of the ploy):

Those shackles fashioned hot in wrath Hephaistos
climbed to the bower and the bed of love . . .
light as a cobweb even gods in bliss
could not perceive, so wonderful his cunning.
Seeing his bed now made a snare, he feigned . . .

* (Odyssey, VIII. 292–98)

And Vulcan dropped whatever he was doing,
And made a net, with such fine links of bronze
No eye could see the mesh: no woolen thread
Was ever so delicate, no spider ever
Spun filament so frail from any rafter.

* (Metamorphoses, IV. 175–79)*

By inverting the original comparison of Vulcan’s net to a spider’s web
in both his poems, Spenser aligns the god’s trick with the cunning of
Acrasia and Aragnoll, and reveals his Bower and flowerbed for what
they are—romance worlds where even the golden war god Mars is
entangled and unmanned. We can now recognize Guyon’s destruc-
tion of the Bower of Bliss as an epic mask for the real, rather unheroic
and sly triumph of the Palmer, who catches the dangerous enchantress
with a net symbolic of her own craftiness; it is the Palmer who
manifests the necessary Odyssean métis which Guyon lacks. Clarion,
on the other hand, has no such guide, and with the weight of this
literary tradition bearing down upon him, has no chance of survival:
his Iliadic epic future is ruthlessly annihilated in the Odyssean web
of romance.

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1. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Spenser at Kalamazoo sessions of the International Congress for Medieval Studies, May 2004. I would like to thank William Oram, Anne Prescott, and David Quint for their invaluable help with transforming earlier thoughts into the present essay.


4. Guyon most closely resembles Vergil’s Aeneas for most of Book II, but in Spenser’s imitation of the Odyssey in the final cantos, Guyon is more akin to Odysseus. Of course, Vergil too draws on Homer’s Odysseus for Aeneas’s interlude in Carthage (the so-called “odyssean” half of the *Aeneid*). On the models for Guyon in classical epic, see Theresa M. Krier, *Gazing on Secret Sight: Spenser, Classical Initiation, and the Decorums of Vision* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 99–112; and Quint, “The Anatomy of Epic.”

5. In previous epics, it is the enchantress—rather than then epic hero—who destroys either herself or the bower. Dido commits suicide, Alcina would commit suicide if she could but destroys her army instead, and Armida dissolves her island after Rinaldo leaves and tries (rather half-heartedly) to commit suicide at the end of the poem.


7. On the dating of “Muiopotmos” and the *Complaints*, see the classic studies by Francis Johnson, *A Critical Bibliography of the Works of Edmund Spenser Printed before 1700* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1933; facsim. rpt. 1966), 24–28, and Harold Leo Stein, *Studies in Spenser’s Complaints* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1934), especially 1–33, 65–67. In a recent essay, Jean Brink has called attention to dating problems with the *Daphnaida* and the *Complaints* volume, because of the discrepancies between dates of entries, dedications, and imprints in the Stationer’s Register. The crux of these questions rests on whether the 1591 date refers to the Old Style or New Style Julian Calendar and Brink argues that New Style dating should be applied consistently, a practice which raises problems given the “1590” imprint of “Muiopotmos” and the “1591” imprint of other poems in the *Complaints* volume (see Jean R. Brink, “Dating Spenser’s Letter to Ralegh,” *The Library: Transactions of the Bibliographical Society* 16:3 [1994]). This problem seems to be resolved by Adrian Weiss who uses watermark evidence to argue that the imprint is indeed in the New Style, which means that the *Complaints* volume can be dated as being published in 1591; see “Watermark Evidence and Inference: New Style Dates of...


13. The interpretations of the political allegory in ""Mupsipotmos"" range from an attempt to identify Clarion and Aragnoll with various court figures to more sophisticated analyses of the poem in terms of court politics more generally. For representative examples of the former, see C. W. Lemmi, ""The Allegorical Meaning of Spenser's Mupsipotmos,"" *PMLA* 45, no. 3 (1930) and Elizabeth Mazzola, ""Spenser, Sidney, and Second Thoughts: Mythology and Misgiving in Mupsipotmos,"" *Sidney Journal* 18, no. 1 (2000). Court, 1–3, notes 9–16, offers a concise survey of the various ""identifications."" Ronald Bond, ""Invidia and the Allegory of Spenser's 'Mupsipotmos',"" *English Studies in Canada* 2 (1976) discusses the poem as an allegory of envy and the desire for fame, while Robert A. Brinkley, ""Spenser's Mupsipotmos and the Politics of Metamorphosis,"" *English Literary History* 48, no. 4 (1981) presents an illuminating reading of the poem in terms of court politics. For representative theological and moral analyses see Allen, 20–41, Eric Brown and Court. Analyses


15. For a concise and useful discussion of the danger and attraction of the romance world, particularly as it was theorized in sixteenth-century Italian treatises, see Melinda Gough, “Tasso’s Enchantress, Tasso’s Captive Woman,” Renaissance Quarterly 54, no. 2 (2001): 526–29.


18. It is worth noting that this is a common problem for male poets with female patrons, particularly in the sixteenth century where women were powerful patrons of the arts; epic poetry was usually written in the (ostensible) praise of a male patron, while erotic poetry was typically written to celebrate a woman. There are several examples of this phenomenon: Castiglione’s Il libro del cortegiano is concerned with the question of female rule and influence over men (it is set in the court of Urbino ruled by Elisabetta Gonzaga); patronage at the French court was often the province of women, and artists such as Marot, Cellini, and Ronsard both profited and chafed under the patronage of Renée de France, the Duchesse d’Estampes, and Catherine de’ Medici. The situation of English poets under Elizabeth was thus not unique. I am grateful to Anne Prescott for bringing this point to my attention.


22. On the contrast of force and cunning in the Homeric epics see Marcel Detienne and Jean Pierre Vernant, Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1978), 11–23. In writing of force and fraud as the two great organizing principles of imaginative literature, Northrop Frye locates

23. Detienne and Vernant, 21, 23.


25. The *Odyssey* has long been identified as the “beginning” of romance; see for instance, Northrop Frye, 68. Writing in defense of the *romanzo* in the sixteenth century, Giraldi Cinzio argues that “one should realize that in make-up Romances are much more like Homer’s *Odyssey* than the *Iliad*” (Giraldi Cinzio on Romances: *Being a Translation of the Discorso intorno al comporre dei romanzi*, trans. Henry L. Snuggs [Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1968], 57). Of the Homeric poems, the *Odyssey* contains elements of both epic and romance, as the teleological progress of the hero’s homecoming coexists with the adventure and marvelous typical of romance. On Odysseus as a romance hero, see Pucci, 56. On the association of guile and craft with the genre of romance, particularly in the context of the *Odyssey* see Northrop Frye, 67–70, and Pucci, 98–109.


28. The concept of *mètis*, and the distinction between the gods in the Greek pantheon who are distinguished by *mètis* and those who are not, are discussed in Norman Oliver Brown, *Hermes the Thief: The Evolution of a Myth* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1947), 62–65 and in Detienne and Vernant, 1–23, 279–318.

29. The relationship between the queen and the literature of the late sixteenth century, particularly Spenser’s poetry, is variously and influentially discussed by

30. Parker, 60.


32. See especially Parker and Montrose, “Spenser and the Elizabethan Political Imaginary,” 927–33.


37. On the characteristics of romance gardens see Giamatti and Nohrnberg, 490–519.


39. Nohrnberg, 507. For a thorough treatment of the *paragone* of art and nature, along with the problem of mimetic illusion, see Dundas, *The Spider and the Bee*, 34–63.

40. Condemnations of the aesthetic excess in the Bower of Bliss are traditional: see for instance Giamatti, 258–90; Lewis, 324–33; and Nohrnberg, 504–12. More recently, scholars have been inclined to acknowledge Spenser’s uneasiness in destroying his aesthetically gorgeous Bower; see for instance Krier, 112 and Madelon Sprengnether Gohlke, “Embattles Allegory: Book II of *The Faerie Queene*,” *English Literary Renaissance* 8 (1978).

41. Allen, 32–35; Eric Brown, 262–63; and Court, 7–8.

42. The striving of human art to imitate and surpass nature is a commonplace of classical poetics—see for instance, Horace’s *Ars poetica* lines 408–11; in the *Ars Amatoria*, Ovid famously writes, “ars est celare artem” (II.313), a concept that will find its courtly analogue in Castiglione’s ideal of *sprezzatura*, also an attempt to make art look natural.
43. Detienne and Vernant, 21.
44. Montrose comments on Belphoebe’s critique of the court, which he argues, is a critique of Elizabeth’s court—see “Spenser and the Elizabethan Political Imaginary,” pp. 924, 927; for the argument that the Bower of Bliss is a representation of Elizabeth’s court see pp. 927–29. More interestingly, he also notes Timaeus’s reference to Belphoebe’s “bowre of blis” in Book III.v (927), which retrospectively links Belphoebe with Acrasia.
50. In Ovid’s Metamorphoses, the tapestry contest between Minerva and Arachne is also a political allegory: Arachne depicts the crimes of the gods, while Minerva shows the gods punishing mortals who overreach themselves. On the parallels for Elizabethan politics see Brinkley, 670–74.
52. Victor Klarwill, ed., Queen Elizabeth and Some Foreigners Being a Series of Hitherto Unpublished Letters from the Archives of the Hapsburg Family (London: John Lane, 1928), 394. Montrose discusses this passage in the context of Acrasia; see note 51 above.
53. I am grateful to David Quint for bringing this point to my attention. Significantly, there is no such slippage in the transition from Arachne’s metamorphosis into a spider to Aragorn’s rage (see lines 353–55).
54. The sexualized analogy between flowers and women is underlined by the inset myth of Astery who has been collecting flowers when she is transformed into a butterfly by Venus on the suspicion that Cupid “did lend her secret aid.”
57. Such an analysis of the conflicting pressures of epic and romance as they are parodied in “Muiopotmos” suggests a deliberate inversion of traditional epic practice, where epic teleology overcomes romance deviance; on the political uses of epic and romance, see Quint, Epic and Empire, especially pp. 9–10, 248–53, 302–08.
59. Within the Odyssey itself, the entrapping bed of Aphrodite overlaid with the golden net is emblematic of the many dangerous beds in the poem—those of Calypso, Circe, Helen and finally the test of the bed with which Penelope will satisfactorily establish the identity of Odysseus. On the symbol of the bed in the Odyssey, see Zeitlin, 19–52.