

# **The Serpentine Idol:**

**Worme Imagery in  
Book I of Spenser's  
*Faerie Queene* and  
John Donne's  
Funeral  
Sermons**

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“What does it mean to be a self-conscious animal? The idea is ludicrous, if it is not monstrous. It means to know that one is food for worms. This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, and excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression—and with all this yet to die. It seems like a hoax, which is why one type of cultural man rebels openly against the idea of God. What kind of a deity would create such a complex and fancy worm food?”

-Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*

## Introduction

In order to preface the upcoming argument concerning Book I of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and John Donne's funeral sermons, I must address two related themes. The first is the concept of holiness and the second is the relationship between the Edenic serpent and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. By addressing the first, I hope to arrive at the second.

In Debra Brown Schneider's essay on "holiness" in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, she states that "The sixteenth-century concept of holiness is faith in action" (373), and by this she means that holiness is faith manifesting itself in one's good works. She overtly associates the term "holiness" with sanctification and thus distinguishes it from righteousness, the sort of purity that results from justification (372).

In Reformation England (as in most of Europe) the way in which faith related to one's works was a matter of considerable debate. Reformed theologians continuously defended their understanding of the relation between faith and works against two opposite positions. The first of these positions was the predominant Catholic one in which both faith and works were indispensable for salvation. The second position against which reformed theologians struggled was what might be called a more permissive view, which maintained that since salvation was by faith alone, there was no pressing need to live a holy life. In order to combat both the Catholic and the permissive conceptions of holiness, reformed polemicists defined the role of holiness in the Christian life as one that was necessary, but not necessary for salvation. They defined the role of holiness by establishing a nuanced relationship between a salvific faith and a life of good works, which is a natural outpouring of gratitude for having received so great and so free a

salvation. Yet, in spite of being hard pressed by both Catholics and more permissive thinkers, reformed theologians found plenty of room for debate in the subtlety of this formulation.

As Book I of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* makes clear, preachers were not the only ones involved in these debates. Spenser entitles this book, "The Legende of the Knight of the Red Crosse, or of Holinesse" and one cannot discount the title's emphasis on holiness as just another place where Spenser misrepresents his own poem the way he does when he introduces Book IV as the legend of "Telamond" instead of the legend of "Triamond" (Burrow 28). Indeed, holiness plays a crucial role in Book I not only when Redcrosse stays at the House of Holiness (which was "Renowned throughout the world for sacred lore / And pure vnspotted life"), but also as he learns throughout the quest to add faith unto his force (I. x. 3; I. i. 19).

Nevertheless, the content of the books of Spenser's poem do not always exemplify the virtue named in the title in a singularly straight-forward way. To put it more precisely (and in Colin Burrow's words), Spenser's "knights often explore the virtue through negative, or testingly near negative, example" (55). Sir Guyon's "temperate" iconoclasm in the Bower of Bliss stands as one of the more obvious examples of this negative exemplification of virtue, and though some other examples may not be quite as obvious, their existence remains problematic for Spenser's audience.

One example which complicates Redcrosse's relation to the virtue of holiness resides in his climactic defeat of the Edenic dragon at the end of Book I. Though Redcrosse certainly exemplifies holiness in a positive way when he learns patience, humility, and dependence upon God's providence, his ultimate defeat of the dragon

problematizes his relationship to holiness because it invites both moral and typological readings<sup>1</sup>. When read morally, Redcrosse stands as a Christian everyman, whose eventual defeat of the dragon represents the defeat of sin in one's life through the power of the grace of God. That is, Redcrosse's victory is the end result of his faith put into action. However, when read typologically, Redcrosse stands as a Christ figure who has once and for all defeated the serpent which so beguiled Adam and Eve. In this context, the defeat of the serpent represents the perfect righteousness offered to sinners in Christ apart from any of their own strivings. That is to say, the typological reading defines holiness by depicting what it is not—the means of salvation. Christ's victory saves a sinner; a sinner's own faithful action does not.

According to a typological reading, Book I tells the Legend of Holiness not so much by demonstrating how Redcrosse's works contribute to his holiness, but by demonstrating how Christ has justified him apart from any of his own meritorious actions, and thus prepared him to be a vehicle for divine grace acting in the world. Indeed, even a moral reading of the scene stresses Christ's action over Redcrosse's action because Redcrosse triumphs only after he has fallen into the well of life and been healed by the power of God. Justification, or the saving power of God, thus dominates the depiction of holiness and thereby tends to define holiness in terms of what must precede it. Book I depicts the precursors to holiness even as it defers the full manifestation of holiness to later books.

In this thesis I focus on the typological more than I do the moral reading of Book I; therefore, the theme of salvation will overshadow the theme of holiness to an even

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<sup>1</sup> I am not suggesting that other passages do not invite multiple modes of reading—only that this is one place where such polysemy proves very troublesome for the representation of holiness.

greater degree than one might otherwise anticipate. Nevertheless, Adam and Eve's loss of holiness at the foot of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and through the subtle words of the serpent will play a central role in my argument.

Because reformers viewed sin not simply as a matter of acting badly but of being fatally flawed in Adam, the serpent's role in the Fall of Man and the resulting imposition of original sin is central to the debate concerning sanctification and justification. The struggle against sin (whether in a terms of the daily attempt to live a holy life or in the apocalyptical quest to destroy sin once and for all) involves overcoming the serpent that overcame Adam and Eve, and this involvement makes the serpent a powerful image for depicting the Christian life. Indeed, the first messianic prophesy in the Bible (that Adam's seed will crush the head of the serpent) is a crucial text for both Spenser and Donne as they attempt to render the Christian life for their audiences. Their attempts to cast the struggles and miracles of life, however, do not limit themselves to the typological view of Jesus as a second Adam who succeeds in defeating Adam's deadly foe. Instead, they deploy diverging sets of worm imagery which, for all their similarity, bring to light their different conceptualizations of the Christian life. As a way of approaching this difference, I will now turn my attention to the tension that exists between Spenser and Donne.

In his work *John Donne Life, Mind and Art* (1981), John Carey claims that John Donne disliked the chivalric romance of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. Indeed, Carey argues that when Donne was surveying the contemporary literature of his time he felt that:

The Elizabethan fashion for chivalric romance, which engendered Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, was absurd. In his "Essay of Valour" he makes comic capital out of an imaginary era "before this age of writ" when there was no known way of winning a lady "but by Tilting Turneying, and riding through Forrests." (10)

Carey goes on to add that:

It is tempting to speculate what English literature would have looked like if Donne had finished his poem [*The Progress of the Soul*], and if it, rather than Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, had come to be recognized as the great Elizabethan epic. In place of Spenser's dreamy conservatism, we should then have had (to inaugurate seventeenth century poetry, and provide a model for the coming poets) a work which was not only progressive and contentious in its intellectual cast, but also wedded to immediacy and the real world. (157)

In this Thesis, I will not speculate about what English literature would have looked like if Donne's poem had superseded *The Faerie Queene*, but I will investigate the topic of immediacy through an analysis of the worme imagery in Book I of *The Faerie Queen* and in Donne's funeral sermons. In the lines I have just quoted, Carey uses the term "immediacy" to express the contrast between Donne's writings and the imaginary aura of Spenser's poem, but I will use the term in a more temporal and spatial sense. In comparison with Donne's sermons, Spenser's poem exhibits a greater sense of deferral and distance. That is, the full manifestation or concretization of his message tends to recede further and further, deeper and deeper into the poem, and his stylized and



allegorized writing tends to distance the reality of the Redcrosse Knight from the everyday world of the audience.

By “worme imagery,” I mean any imagery of worms, maggots, snakes, serpents, or dragons. The OED defines worm as 1) “A serpent, snake, dragon. Now only *arch.*”; and 6) “A maggot, or, in popular belief, an earthworm, supposed to eat dead bodies in the grave.” When I speak generally to mean all of these creatures, or when I want to describe a snake, serpent, or dragon, I will use the term “worme;” but when I am talking about earthworms or maggots only, I will spell the word “worm.” Though the OED does not record either Spenser or Donne as having used the word “worme” with such a broad meaning, it does record that Tyndale (1526) and Shakespeare (1600, 1606) used the word in this way. Nevertheless, I do not need to rely upon the OED to demonstrate that this broad meaning of the word was current during Spenser and Donne’s time because Donne himself uses it that way. He says in one of his sermons:

Man carries the spawn and seed and eggs of affliction in his own flesh,  
and his own thoughts make haste to hatch them, and to bring them up. We  
make all our worms snakes, all our snakes vipers, all our vipers dragons,  
by our murmuring. (X. 9. 198)

Even though Donne is not speaking etymologically when he associates worms, snakes, vipers, and dragons with the same egg, he at least demonstrates the close relationship that these creatures have in his mind.

Yet, even if this passage does not formally spread the definition of the term “worme” to encompass a whole variety of serpentine animals, it does make a formal theological point. The excerpt comes in a sermon preached on Lamentations 3:1, which

reads, "I am the man, that hath seen affliction, by the rod of his wrath" (X. 9. 192). The sermon has two parts: "the *Burden* [of the affliction] and the *Ease* [from it]," and his description of dragons growing out of worm eggs illustrates the ubiquity of the burden. Donne's worme passage concludes a meditation on the four names of man used in the scripture. The word used in the passage is "*Gheber*," and of all the names it is the one that describes man in the most superlative terms--at the very pinnacle of his excellence. As Donne expounds it, *Gheber* "denotes Excellency in *virtue* [...] *wealth* [...] *power*, [...]and] *favour*" (X. 9. 198). Yet in spite of the excellence of this man's condition, he is a man of afflictions. The eggs which grow inside a man, and the ease with which they are turned into dragons (for "thoughts" and "murmurings" are not difficult things) signifies the generality of affliction. At least that is the gloss that Donne's *Divisio* would lead one to garner from the passage for it says that from the use of the name *Gheber* one learns that even "the strongest, the mightiest, they that thought themselves safest, and sorrowe-prooffe, are afflicted" (X. 9. 194). And so this passage which associates a broad range of wormes also expresses the pressing immediacy of the worme—not even the sorrow-proof can escape it. Donne's serpents are so immediately present, so ubiquitous, that he internalizes them inside of his audience's body so that she will carry them around wherever she goes.

This contrasts with Spenser's worme imagery which tends to distance wormes from his audience or at least imply that the audience should keep a healthy distance from serpents until the climactic moment has arrived. The Redcrosse Knight encounters Errorr down a wide path through a "far away" "shadie grove" that "at length" brings him to the serpent's cave (*FQ* I.i. 7, 11), and though he encounters this serpent very early in

the narrative, both Una and the dwarf suggest that he should steer clear of the serpent's cave. The episode emphasizes that Redcrosse should keep to the narrow road that leads to Eden and avoid superfluous encounters with non-Edenic serpents. In order to stress the point, the poem reiterates this warning by depicting how Redcrosse scarcely escapes a grisly death when he ignores Treusian's advice to stay away from Despaire (who creeps close as a "snake" (I. ix. 28). Indeed, Una has to save him from suicide, and she reprimands him for picking a fight with the wrong serpent.

The characteristic distance or deferredness of Spenser's wormes and the characteristic immediacy or internality of Donne's wormes suggest that these poets have radically different conceptions of the problem of original sin and the way in which that sin is absolved. To see how this difference diffuses itself through each author's work, one ought to begin by thinking of the difference in terms of genre.

Donne's genre, the sermon, generally seeks to distill the message of the Bible or to magnify a portion of the scripture so that it becomes more accessible, more applicable to one's life. Through exposition, the sermon attempts to focus the meaning of a passage into an organized series of insights. Hearing a sermon differs from the practice of reading the Bible in that the sermon clarifies the opaque passages that a protracted reading of scripture would ordinarily table for later interpretation. With respect to Donne's preaching Janel Mueller has argued that "The danger which preaching counteracts is that of losing oneself in intellectual vagaries instead of coming to the total response of being which is faith" (11). In a sense the sermon fights the original sin of Adam and Eve—that of speculating about what God *really* meant when he told them not to eat the forbidden fruit. Donne himself claims that the intent of his sermons is to evoke

an immediate response of faith in his audience. He preaches “Sermons unpracticed are threepiled sins” (X. 1. 62), and “practice makes any Sermon a good Sermon” (X. 5. 121). In Donne’s mind there should be no deferral of application, no endless re-interpretation of what a text means; instead one should grasp and promptly apply the meaning of the text expounded by the sermon.

But the clearest link between the expository aims of Donne’s sermons and the serpentine immediacy found therein manifests itself when Donne sets out the agenda for his sermon on Genesis 3:14. In this sermon concerning the condemnation of the Edenic serpent, Donne preaches, “in the punishment of the Serpent, we shall see, that his [God’s] Mercy and Justice are inseparable [....] As soon as I hear of a Judgement, I apprehend Mercy, no interposing of any dark or sad superstition, or diffidence, or distrust” (X. 8. 183). Donne immediately apprehends mercy out of the judgment of the serpent. That is (to use the OED’s first and third definitions of the word “apprehend”), he lays hold upon it, seizes it with his hands and teeth, and makes it his own.<sup>2</sup> All this is to say that Donne hearkens to immediate meanings and applications as much as Spenser’s epic shuns them.

If the sermon tends to expound an idea by rendering it more definite and more applicable, then Spenser’s epic quest tends to expound an idea by broadening its scope. The very format of episode following episode, each a successive step toward some lofty goal, suggests that the manifestations of the central theme of the epic are manifold. Colin Burrow recognizes the centrality of this epic complexity in the *Faerie Queene* when he notes that “For all of Spenser’s knights the chief danger is that of reducing the complexity of their task—which is to realize the fullest and often the most ambiguous

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<sup>2</sup> 1) “To lay hold upon, seize, with hands, teeth;” 3) To seize upon for one’s own, take possession of. Both of these definitions were current during Donne’s ministry.

aspects of their virtues—to a simple formula” (47). That is to say, success for Spenser’s knights consists in deferring the absolute assignment of meaning to the terms “Holinesse,” “Temperaunce,” “Chastitie,” etc. to a later time. Instead of distinguishing one idea from another through persuasive arguments, Spenser’s epic blurs the boundaries between virtue and vice by allegorically depicting an idea rather than literally specifying it.

For example, when Redcrosse approaches Error’s cave, the poem suggests that the courage that he demonstrates is more folly than virtue. Yet, the narrative (rather than expository) nature of the scene generates only an ambiguous and permeable boundary between virtue and folly. It is not entirely clear where courage as a virtue ends and where foolhardiness begins. That is to say, the reason that Una objects to Redcrosse’s eagerness to do battle does not become clear until subsequent episodes modify the Error episode. These later episodes further identify Redcrosse’s fundamental lack of faith, but even as they clarify the Error episode, they complicate the extent and scope of virtue. As later episodes make clear, Una’s exhortation that Redcrosse add faith unto his force is not simply a request that he not give up hope of wriggling his way out of Error’s coils; instead, it is a statement which reverberates throughout Book I as he learns to have faith that God will provide a proper enemy for him and give him strength to defeat that enemy. By the end of the book, Redcrosse’s initial lesson in adding faith unto his force swells into an allegorical meditation on the relation of Holiness (faith manifesting itself in actions) and righteousness (the justification that precedes sanctification).

Book I stresses this epic structure by weaving a warning about premature conclusions into its narrative. That is, the plot of Book I reiterates the importance of

withholding final judgment by featuring misinterpretation as an almost constant threat to Redcrosse's quest. The catalogue of misinterpretations begins shortly after Redcrosse has departed from Gloriana's court. When the knight decides to follow the broad, well-trodden path rather than the narrow one, he focuses too closely on his worldly circumstances and thinks of the path's broadness as a worldly mark of popularity rather than a spiritual marker of the way that leads to destruction. His unfortunate misinterpretation continues when his eagerness to fight with Error leads him straight into Error's coils. His mistake here is at least partly attributable to his desire to win glory for himself before he ever makes it to Eden, and it thus emphasizes the importance of patience and deferral to the success of his quest. Redcrosse only escapes from Error's coils to promptly resume his precipitous decision making process for he abandons Una in the middle of the night after he confuses her with one of Archimago's lusty sprites. Though he does manage to defeat Sansfoy after he has ventured out on his own, his misinterpretations of Duessa and Fradubio land him in a perilous situation in the House of Pride. Meanwhile, Una suffers from her own misinterpretations when she mistakes Archimago for Redcrosse and thus falls into the hands of her disguised enemy. She only manages to escape from her predicament after Sansloy mistakenly assaults Archimago. Due to their penchant for misinterpreting their surroundings, Redcrosse and Una remain separated until Arthur defeats Orgoglio and frees Redcrosse from the giant's dungeon. Redcrosse's subsequent encounter with Despaire, again stresses that things are not always as they first appear because the knight nearly commits suicide after listening to Despaire's misinterpretation of the Bible. Una, however, saves him from his fallacious conclusion by reinterpreting the Biblical passages in their broader context, and she then

ushers him to the House of Holiness. After this respite, Redcrosse defeats the Edenic dragon, but even in his new state as a justified Christian he remains vulnerable to misinterpretation because Duessa attempts to truncate his betrothal to Una by arguing that the guilt of his past sins still weigh upon his head. Misinterpretation threatens Redcrosse's quest from beginning to end, and the emphasis on this point finally dissuades the reader from accepting immediately available meanings as absolutes.

In addition to shedding light upon their different literary modes and their distinct approaches to the danger of living in a post-lapsarian world, the role of worms in Book I of *The Faerie Queene* and Donne's sermons also reflect the authors' differing approaches to biblical interpretation. Spenser's worms tend to stress not only the importance of delaying final interpretation of the poem, but also final interpretation of the scripture. Just as Redcrosse most successfully fulfills his quest when he conceives of it in terms of its protracted nature, so too does the reader of the Bible meet with better interpretations of the scripture when he eschews the Error-riddled practice of precipitous interpretation. A more specific example comes in Redcrosse's encounter with Despaire. Until Una shows Redcrosse the broader context of the depressing Biblical passages that Despaire has cited, the knight remains on the verge of suicide.

While Spenser insists upon the importance of context—of seeing a verse with an eye to what comes before it and after it—Donne, revels in interpreting scripture word by word. Whole segments of his sermons will often expound a single word, even a single prefix or suffix of a word. Like the worms which start as eggs inside of his congregants and then grow into full scale dragons, Donne's sermons often nurture a minute semantic insight into a whole section of a sermon. Donne recognizes that the Edenic serpent

affects his audience where they are in their lives and not just when they reach the Edenic battlefield, so he sometimes disregards the Biblical context of a passage and provides one of his own which makes the passage more applicable to his congregants' lives. For instance, when he explicates the punishment of the Edenic serpent, he says, "it should rather have been said, *super pectus vestrum*, Hee shall creep upon your belly, then upon his owne" (X. 8. 184), and he then goes on to explain the image of the serpent creeping upon a belly in the new context.

Since a senior thesis cannot address all the extant Donnean and Spenserean texts that relate to their worme imagery, I will center my argument on Book I of *The Faerie Queene* and on Donne's funeral sermons. A comparison of *The Faerie Queene* and Donne's sermons is particularly appropriate because Spenser's "Letter to Raleigh" distinguishes *The Faerie Queene* from those discourses which are "sermoned at large." Though Spenser's use of the word "sermoned" does not explicitly denote preaching, it does form a meaningful contrast with that mode of discourse.

The OED lists four entries for the verb "sermon:" "1) To preach to (a person); 2) a) To preach (of a thing), b) To preach (at a thing); 3) To speak (of a thing); 4) To speak, utter, declare." The editors assign this fourth definition (To speak, utter, declare) to the way that Spenser uses the word in his "Letter." However, the editors also note that the definitions that mean "to preach" were in use both prior to and subsequent to the publication of the Letter. This suggests that the term "sermon" was polysemous while Spenser was writing the Letter, and his use of the term likely evoked images of actual preaching even as it evoked images of speaking, uttering, or declaring.



Indeed, even if “sermoned at large” does not specifically denote preaching from the pulpit, it does refer to a broader mode of address of which preaching formed a part. Spenser’s “Letter” may not specifically contrast itself with preaching *per se*, but it does distinguish itself from the discourse in which preaching played a dominant role. After all, Donne’s sermons were at that time primarily spoken rather than printed events. Only six of his sermons were printed during his lifetime in spite of his great popularity as a preacher (Potter and Simpson 1: 50). Richard Mallette has noted the “preeminence of preaching among the discourses of [Spenser’s] era” (22), and if his assessment is accurate, then it makes sense that Spenser would take the time in his brief “Letter” to distinguish his poem’s method of fashioning a gentleman from that of its most common rival—preaching.

Some may object to my use of Spenser’s “Letter” to justify a contrast between allegory and sermons on the grounds that the “Letter” is an unreliable description of the poem. Indeed, C.S. Lewis has noted that the Letter is untrue in at least four respects: 1) the poem does not tell the story of King Arthur; 2) the poem is not an epic in the way that the poems of Homer, Virgil, and Tasso are; 3) the values set forth in the “Letter” are not Aristotle’s; and 4) Guyon and the Palmer do not meet the babe with bloody hands until they are already in the field (137-8). More recently, Ronald Horton has catalogued some of the theories concerning the “Letter:”

The content of the Letter to Raleigh has been variously regarded as a valid, accurate statement of the plan being followed in the poem; an original but abandoned plan; a partially executed plan of revision; a reader’s guide to the first installment of a poem begun in *media res*, a

preliminary archetype after which Spenser was more or less faithfully modeling his poem; a historiographer's, as distinct from a poet's, account; and an unaccountable untruth. (8).

The inconsistencies of the "Letter" and the wide range of theories concerning its content would seem to marginalize an interpretation of the poem founded upon an analysis of the language of the "Letter." However, as Horton has pointed out:

The unresolvable contradictions exist within the Letter or within the poem or within both, but not between the Letter and the poem. Therefore it is not justifiable to discredit the Letter on the basis of its divergence from the poem. (10)

I will continue to address the "Letter" as a more or less valid description of the poem that equivocates from time to time.

Though the "Letter to Raleigh" has given birth to this thesis through its use of the word "sermon," my analysis of *The Faerie Queene* will center on Book I because its Saint George and the dragon narrative foregrounds the worme as central to its meaning. Likewise, I focus my examination of Donne's sermons on his funeral sermons because his worme imagery is central to his understanding of death and the Edenic curse. As Masood-Ul-Hasan has noted, Donne had an "obsession with worms and dead bodies [that] was indicative of the deeper sense of decay and corruption in the world" (59).

I use the term "funeral sermon" very liberally to include his five extant sermons which he preached *around* funerals (whether they be preached at funerals (vol. VII, no. 10), before funerals (vol. X no. 11; vol. VI no. 14), or after funerals at commemorations or anniversaries of the dead (vol. XIII no. 2; vol. X no.8). I will also utilize worme

imagery from a broader selection of sermons, and though this may seem like proof-texting, it is not because Donne was constantly using worme imagery when he talked about death. In spite of his obsession with worms and dead bodies, Donne refused to deploy earth-worm imagery over the lifeless bodies of his friends, parishioners, and benefactors. Indeed, he only used earth-worm imagery in one of the funeral sermons listed above—his own, “Death’s Duell.” Because of Donne’s propriety (that is, his reticence concerning worms when faced with the bodies of real humans) it is necessary to supplement the funeral-sermons-proper with the mini-funeral-sermons which he worked into sermons that were not preached to the mourning. Without this recourse, I would be limited to the serpent / dragon imagery that is present in his funeral-sermons and unable to supplement the earth-worm imagery so pivotal to “Death’s Duell.” A thesis based upon only five sermons would have a difficult time making any broadly applicable claims about an author from whom we have inherited 160 extant sermons (Potter and Simpson 1: 1).

By drawing evidence from Donne’s sermons in this way as well as from Book I of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, this thesis will argue that Donne’s worme imagery and Spenser’s worme imagery contrast profoundly in what they say about: 1) the danger of living in a fallen world and 2) the solution to that danger. Spenser’s wormes stress the danger of reductive thinking and precipitous interpretation, and they propose that one’s journey towards holiness depends upon faith in Gods timing and not in one’s own ability to expedite the process. That is to say that Spenser’s wormes cast the danger in terms of immediacy, and they cast the rescue from that danger in terms of deference to God’s providence. Donne’s wormes, however, eschew this hermeneutical distancing act and

insist that God's provision for living in a fallen world is not primarily rooted in patience. Instead, he sees that the worme threatens his congregation in their everyday lives and not simply in a dreamy, spiritual realm. Therefore, the greatest danger is that of delaying the application of God's scripture. Endless investigations into God's intention serve no purpose if they are not applied to the congregants' already imperiled situation. The solution to this danger comes in the form of a faith which does not focus on what God will do in his good time, but in what he is already doing in one's ordinary life.

The first chapter will argue that Spenser's worme imagery warns the reader about, or distances her from, the idolatry of absolutized meanings. The chapter will then contrast Spenser's warning about idolatry with the warning that Donne's worme imagery provides concerning overly extended interpretations that postpone application.

The second chapter will analyze what each author says about the role of faith in overcoming the chief dangers. An examination of Spenser's worme imagery will deliver insights into what it means to have an extended faith that ventures on the future, and an investigation of Donne's worme imagery will yield a picture of how an immediate faith applies to daily life.

The third and concluding chapter will apply the themes developed in the first to chapters to the topic of Biblical hermeneutics as it surveys the relative importance of context to each author.

## Chapter 1

In his "Letter to Sir Walter Raleigh," Spenser claims that the "general end" of his book "is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline," and he goes on to claim that this goal will be most feasible if his story is "coulored with an historical fiction" because "the most part of men delight to read" it (15). He further describes his chosen method for fashioning a gentleman when he admits, "To some I know this Methode will seeme displeasent, which had rather have good discipline delivered plainly in way of precepts, or sermoned at large, as they use, then thus clowdily enwrapped in Allegorical deuices," but he defends his use of allegory on the grounds that "doctrine by ensample" is "much more profitable and gracious" than doctrine "by rule" (16). In other words, Spenser chooses to fashion a gentleman through allegory because it will inspire and mentor his audience in the ways of virtuous discipline.

Though Spenser's decision to write an allegorical poem has important implications for how he wants his reader to become a gentleman, I will not discuss these implications in detail until Chapter II. Instead, I will start with a prior assumption of his allegory: what it implies about the obstacles that keep one from becoming a gentleman. Because Spenser's allegory continually thwarts the reader's attempts to assign meanings to characters and events in the poem, and because the allegory repeatedly maligns Redcrosse's attempts to fulfill his quest before he actually gets to Eden, the allegory opposes itself to premature assumptions. Indeed, it is my contention that Spenser's allegory opposes precipitous conclusions and capricious applications by identifying these actions as the chief danger of living in a fallen world. The first part of this chapter will define this chief danger. After analyzing what Colin Burrow and David Norbrook have

to say on the topic, I will pursue my argument 1) by examining the distance that Redcrosse ought to keep between himself and Error, 2) the Allegorical distance (i.e. the name "Error") that Spenser imposes between Redcrosse and his foe, the worme, and 3) the distance that Error's spawn fail to maintain between signifier and signified.

Yet if Spenser chose to write an allegory to counteract the danger of intellectual capriciousness, John Donne expected his sermons to counteract the opposite danger: that of intellectual dilettantism. Rather than admonish his audience to avoid hasty conclusion and reductive interpretations, Donne emphasizes the danger of continued intellectual inquiry when it comes at the expense of application. Indeed, he seems less concerned with the exact content of a sermon than he is with his audience's application of it. Emphatically, he claims that "practice makes any sermon a good sermon" (X 5 121). Whereas Spenser defers the fulfillment of his knights' quest in order to complicate the definitions of their virtues, Donne acts as if the application of reductive virtue is far more valuable than the most perfect conception of a virtue left unapplied. The second portion of this chapter will analyze the way Donne's sermons define the danger of intellectual dilettantism through an analysis of how God punishes the Edenic serpent, how Donne explicates Isaiah's heavenly serpent, and how a creeping serpent can become the flying serpent that tempts our nobler faculties.

### **Spenser's Allegory**

Colin Burrow emphatically defines the primary danger that Spenser's knights face when he argues, "For all Spenser's knights the chief danger is that of reducing the complexity of their task—which is to realize the fullest and often most ambiguous

aspects of their virtues—to a simple formula” (16). This is a particularly emphatic definition because it defines the problem that Spenser’s knights face in a nested, reiterative way. On the most obvious level, Burrows defines the knights’ chief danger as that of over-simplifying their task, but then he amplifies the threat of reductive thinking by claiming that the task itself is to avoid simplistic conceptions. Simplistic thinking is thus an obstacle that a knight must overcome in both discerning his task and in completing his task.

Burrow goes on to characterize the degree to which Spenser’s allegory opposes the danger of over-simplification when he argues:

To become a personification—a simple, flat representation of an unambiguous state of mind—is in Spenser’s world quite possible. But it is a desperate horror, not the goal, the enemy of his kind of complicating allegory. (47)

Malbecco is one character who literally shrivels into the personification of “Gealosie” (III. X. 60), and by making an example out of Malbecco Spenser’s allegory warns about the dangers of possessing an unambiguous state of mind. David Norbrook, however, explains that this warning is not limited to certain characters and episodes when he argues that Spenser’s allegory as a whole mimics the reductive faults of its antagonists. Indeed, Norbrook describes the poem at large as an attempt to dissuade its audience from settling for reductive accounts of any kind when he writes:

Spenser [through his allegory] problematizes the act of reading, discouraging his audience from taking the interpretations they are offered immediately on trust. It is the idolatrous magicians Archimago and

Acrasia who encourage readers to take sign for reality, representation for the thing represented; the alert reader is reminded by a series of what amount to alienation effects, to keep experience under constant rational scrutiny (99).

The allegory defines straightforward, reductive interpretations as its enemy by actively undermining them—by making them difficult for the reader to maintain. Norbrook's invocation of Archimago is particularly appropriate in this analysis of Book I because he does indeed tempt Redcrosse to take sign for reality (not to mention the fact that the narrator once describes him as a "hissing snake" (I. ii. 9)). Archimago aims to thwart Redcrosse's quest by persuading him to think of a conjured representation of Una as the lady herself rather than the complex trap that it really is. Redcrosse remains unaware of the late night travels that Archimago's trick requires, and he does not grasp the subtlety of the magician's various attempts to make him mistake image for reality. Like the allegorical structure which tends to thwart over-simplified interpretations of the poem, the idolatrous magician motif maligns reductive thinking as a grave danger.

Nevertheless, the image which most overtly defines reductive interpretation as the chief danger is the imagery surrounding the serpent Error, especially when one analyzes it with respect to immediacy and distance. The immediacy, or foregroundedness, of the Error episode suggests the severity of the danger, but the distance that Spenser generates between the worme and his knight of virtue actually defines the problem. This distance manifests itself in two forms: 1) the distance that Redcrosse should have kept between himself and the worme, and 2) the distance that the allegorical name "Error" imposes between the Knight of Holinesse and his foe.



Because Redcrosse has scarcely entered the field before Errour endangers his life, the reader can be sure that Errour is one of the principal enemies in Spenser's poem. Indeed, Redcrosse's arrival at Errour's den via "pathes and allies wide, / with footing worne" (I. i. 7) implies that many besides Redcrosse face this same danger. Both Redcrosse and Arthur face many worme-like foes, and the repetitiveness of these encounters with malevolent wormes suggests that their paths lead them to face many different types of Errour whether they are literally in the wandering wood or not. Indeed, though the Edenic dragon is certainly distinct from Errour, it does not represent an entirely different variety of danger. In this sense, Errour prefaces, pre-figures, and sets a precedent for many of the later dangers of Book I. Errour represents not only the first danger of Spenser's poem but also one of the chief dangers because she opposes many, opposes them shortly after they have left the presence of Gloriana's court, and opposes the knights in many different manifestations throughout the book.

Spenser begins to define the danger of Errour as that of over-simplified interpretation when he indicates that Redcrosse should have kept his distance from her. The first clue that Redcrosse should not have gone near to the cave comes in the evidence cited above about his choice of the broad well-traveled path that was "leading [them] inward farre" (I. i. 7). When one unpacks the allegory of this description, one realizes that Redcrosse should not have been on the wide path that leads to destruction at all, much less ventured on it for his "farre" distant travels. Una reemphasizes this warning when she admonishes Redcrosse to "stay the steppe, ere forced to retreat" (I. i. 13), and the Dwarfe reiterates the conviction that Redcrosse should keep his distance from the beast when he exclaims "Fly fly" (I. i. 13).

Una converts the emphatic warning about wandering too far in the wrong direction into a more pointed critique when she advises Redcrosse that he should “Be well aware [...] / Least suddaine mischief ye too rash prouoke” (I. i.12). Her words implicate the knight’s rashness in leading him near to Errour’s den. He sees no signs of danger and therefore trudges on, but danger cannot always be foreseen—or to put it in Una’s terms, “Oft fire is without smoke” (I. i. 12). Redcrosse’s conclusion that he knows what he is doing causes him to disregard the advice of his companions and takes him closer and closer to Errour’s dangerous coils.

In addition to signifying the danger of his simplemindedness, Redcrosse’s rashness suggests that he is too eager to win glory and it thus leads him to underestimate the complexity of his task. Redcrosse is an astonishingly inexperienced knight who has never fought with weapons for, though his armor displays “cruell markes of many a bloody fielde,” “armes till that time did he never wield” (I. i. 1). The Letter to Raleigh highlights Redcrosse’s lack of chivalric experience saying that he is a “clownishe young man”<sup>3</sup> who has to sit on the floor in the Queen’s court because he is “unfitted through his rusticity for a better place” (17). Yet “that clownish person” jumps at the chance to take on Una’s adventure (17), because he wants to win fame and royal grace. In the words of the first Canto:

Vpon a great adventure he was bond,

.....

To winne him worship, and her [Gloriana’s] grace to have,

Which of all earthly things he most did crave;

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<sup>3</sup> “Clownishe” here refers to Redcrosse’s rusticity, to his ignorance, and perhaps to his ill mannered nature (OED).

And ever as he rode, his hart did earne  
 To prove his puissance in battell braue  
 Vpon his foe, and his new force to learne;  
 Vpon his foe, a Dragon horrible and stearne. (I. i. 3)

Winning worship and grace are the things for which Redcrosse most longs, and as if in mimicry of this yearning, or longing, Spenser tells us about it with two enjammed lines in a stanza otherwise full of end-stopped ones. (“And ever as he rode, his hart did earne / To prove his puissance in battell braue/ Vpon his foe”). But apparently, Redcrosse could not put off his desire for long because, he is so “full of fire and greedy hardiment” that “The youthful knight could not for ought be staide” (I. i. 14). His desire for glory and grace are so strong that they lead him ever closer to Error’s cave and to a misunderstanding of how Gloriana expects him to win her favor. Redcrosse hopes to win glory and royal grace by attacking the first foe with which he comes into contact, but he should win them by becoming Holy and by defeating the dragon on the appointed Edenic battlefield. This, after all, is the task to which Gloriana has assigned him and the task to which Una has him “compeld” (I. i. 5). Because Redcrosse let his rash desire for grace and worship press him onward without regard for the complexity of his situation, Redcrosse misunderstands his task and falls prey to the chief danger of Spenser’s poem.

Thus, the ever diminishing distance between Redcrosse and Error reflects the chief danger of over-simplification in three ways: 1) it illustrates the how the knight’s simple minded resolve to pursue the beaten path leads him closer and closer to Error, 2) the diminishing distance demonstrates the peril he runs when he rejects the dissenting advice of his companions, and 3) the shrinking distance represents the waywardness of

his conception of how he ought to fulfill his task. He thinks his adventure is about winning worship and grace the quickest way possible, but it is actually about becoming Holy and winning an epic battle.

Yet, this physical distance is not the only distance which defines the chief danger for Redcrosse. The allegorical distance between Redcrosse and the worme makes a further contribution. By "allegorical distance" I mean the fact that Spenser distances Redcrosse from the worme by separating them with the name "Errorr." Redcrosse does not so much fight a worme as he does an Errorr, and this allegorized battle has important implications for the nature of the danger which Spenser defines in Book I. The allegorical distance that Spenser imposes between Redcrosse and the worme defines the danger by associating it with a simplistic salvation by works theology and more generally, by associating it with a closed epistemological system.

Spenser' use of the name "Errorr" to separate Redcrosse from the worme he is trying to fight is significant because he does not distance Redcrosse from the Edenic serpent in this fashion. Indeed, Spenser emphasizes the fact that Errorr is not the Edenic serpent by stressing that she is only "Halfe like a serpent" (I. i. 14). As I have already mentioned, Redcrosse cannot fulfill his quest by rashly attacking the first worme which crosses his path, and the first of two reasons for this consists in the first worme's non-identity with the Edenic serpent (original sin) that Gloriana commissioned him to fight. The second and more significant reason consists in the theologically fallacious way in which the knight attempts to fulfill his quest. In order to successfully complete his quest, Redcrosse must demonstrate true Holinesse and defeat the dragon which holds Adam and Eve in bondage. Redcrosse cannot defeat this original sin by his own merit; instead his

quest is to overcome it through grace—a task which, in the context of the Protestant / Catholic polemic of the time, involves conquering (through Una’s inspiration) the error of salvation by works. Indeed, the fact that Redcrosse overcomes this “Errour” by adding *faith* unto his force suggest that the foe against which he struggles is that of salvation by works. At the very least, Redcrosse’s own error in the episode remains closely linked to an attempt to achieve mighty works and his lack of faith. Spenser’s distancing of Redcrosse from the worme through the name “Errour” signifies that Redcrosse’s main danger is not the Edenic serpent of original sin (for that is a battle that Christ’s merit wins for him); instead his chief danger is succumbing to the doctrine of salvation by works and thereby refusing the righteousness offered to him in Christ.

Nevertheless, I do not equate Errour with salvation by works in a strict sense. I am only arguing that Spenser’s allegorical distancing of Redcrosse from the worme defines Redcrosse’s chief danger as heretical doctrine rather than a more general culpability for sin. In the sense in which I have been arguing, the heretical doctrine is salvation by works, which in Spenser’s mind represents a reductive system of reasoning when compared to the doctrine of salvation by grace. Salvation by works is reductive in the sense that it operates on the principles of arithmetic. It subtracts one’s sins from one’s good deeds, and if there are ultimately more good deeds than sins, then the person attains salvation. Because of this reductive, arithmetical structure, this system fatally avoids the complicated mystery of God’s grace.

Thus, the allegorical layer “Errour” functions to distance Redcrosse from his quest’s true foe (the Edenic serpent) by pointing out the inefficacy of his own merit for the completion of his quest. In addition to this theological definition of Redcrosse’s chief

danger, the allegory of “Errour” defines the chief danger in terms as a closed system of meaning. Read epistemically, as the worme’s name suggests that one should, Error represents a closed system of meaning that refuses to face complication or reinterpretation. Error’s “huge long taile her den overspread” yet it “was in knots” (I. i. 15. 2-3). Though it encompasses her whole realm of dwelling, Error’s system of meaning is tied up and knotted. Error is not open to adjustment or reinterpretation; she has already made up her mind. Her “mortall sting” threatens to destroy with a single blow any theories that raise their unwelcome heads. To perpetuate her closed system of meaning, she “daily fed” “a thousand young ones,” and to equate this education with propaganda or brain washing, Spenser notes that they feed from her “poisonous duggs.” Error’s spawn do not think for themselves; they take their nourishment from their mother without maturing. Indeed, when the light from Redcrosse’s armor shines upon them, “Into her mouth they crept, and suddain all were gone” (I. i. 15. 2-9). Like their mother, who “wont in desert darknesse to remaine,” the spawn avoid situations in which the fallacy of their beliefs come to light (I. i. 16. 8).

Redcrosse’s struggle with Error further demonstrates her identity as a closed system. The knight’s sword cannot pierce Error’s head; instead, “The stroke down from her head vnto her shoulder glaunst” (I. i. 17. 9). Error’s organ of interpretation is impenetrable to opposition, and she also attempts to defeat her opponent by eliminating the means for arguing against her: “her huge traine / All suddenly about his body wound, / That hand or foot to stirre he strove in vaine” (I. i. 18. 5-8). She constricts Redcrosse’s faculties so that he has nothing—not even a hand or foot—with which to challenge her. As the narrator notes, being enwrapped in these circular arguments is a dire situation,

“God helpe the man so wrapt in Errours endless traine” (I. i. 18. 9). Spenser indicates that the way to defeat Error’s strangle hold is to “Add faith unto your force, and be not faint” (I.i.19.3). In other words, do not succumb to Error’s seemingly irrefutable system of meaning, struggle against it, reinterpreting, and repositioning its circular arguments until you get “one hand free” (I.i.19.7). Have faith that there is a meaning beyond the one immediately apparent in Error’s coils.

The images that accompany Error’s demise justify such an epistemic reading because they explicitly link her with information. She “spewed out of her filthy maw / A floud of poyson horrible and blacke” and this “vomit” is “full of bookes and papers” and eyeless frogs (I.i.20.1-2, 6,7). The books and papers suggest doctrine (especially Catholic doctrine when viewed in light of the Book I’s anti-catholic imagery), and the eyeless frogs suggest that it is blind doctrine. But it is also more than blind doctrine, because She “poured forth out of her hellish sinke / her fruitful cursed spawn of serpents small, / Deformed monsters, fowle, and blacke as ink” (I.i.22.5-7). Her spawn resemble ink, but they are really serpents. Woe to the knight who mistakes them for the words and letters they resemble instead of for the wormes that they really are.

The Error episode defines Redcrosse’s chief danger as the error of closed interpretations and meanings, and this can best be seen when Error’s spawn idolatrize her as a heretical manifestation of the Brazen Serpent which Moses lifted up in the wilderness. Kenneth Gross explains the background of the Brazen Serpent when he says that:

The Brazen Serpent, which stood by the altar of Yaweh in the first temple, remained for both Jewish and Christian authors the focus of many

troubling questions about the nature of sacred representation. Reputed to be a magical relic of the Exodus, the serpent seems to have fallen over time from a momentary miracle to a fixed cultic symbol and finally to an object of idolatrous worship and sacrifice in its own right—which is not to say that the serpent was taken as an autonomous god but that it appeared idolatrous insofar as it led to the worship and address of Yaweh under the forms of mythological religion, dangerously muddling the difference between the false and the true. As such it was ‘broken in pieces’ during the reign of King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18.4) in a reformation that also swept away high places, images, and ‘groves.’ (Gross 46)

According to Gross, the Brazen Serpent played a crucial role in a miracle (saving the Israelites from snake bites), but when the Israelites wrested it from that context (as a miraculous *sign* from God) and began to see it as a sort of magical talisman that saved through its own properties rather than through the power of God who had utilized it, it became an idol. The Brazen Serpent once stood for a mysterious miracle that suggested that God had a plan for the continued life of the nation of Israel, but the Israelites got tired of waiting to see how that plan would unfold. Instead of waiting to see the meaning of the Brazen Serpent as a type of the crucified Christ, they saw it in terms of its immediate significance as a talisman that had saved them from death. The Brazen Serpent became an idol when the Israelites quit deferring its mysterious meaning until the future consummation of their nation’s history, and when they located its meaning within the sign itself. Or, as Gross says:



even a divinely instituted form of sacred figuration (e.g. the Brazen Serpent) can collapse into the condition of an idol if it is taken as final or complete, as sacred in and of itself, or if it binds revelation within delusively stable or merely anterior forms” (Gross 30).

Spenser’s Error represents the idolized Brazen Serpent not only because her interpretations have collapsed upon themselves in the circular arguments of her coils and because her light-fearing spawn have taken her meanings as final and complete, but also because she facilitates the Roman Catholic idolatry of the second serpent who was lifted up (i.e. Jesus). One can see Error’s role in the transubstantiatory Mass by unpacking the allegorical behavior of her spawn. While their mother lives, the spawn drink milk (albeit poisonous) from her breasts, and in doing so they take part in the miracle of life. However, when Error dies, her spawn can no longer drink her milk and so they drink her blood instead. They wrest the power of the life giving milk from the milk itself, and assign it to the vehicle of the milk, its liquid form. They look for the power of the miracle of life in the vehicle of the miracle (liquid), and their reductive conception destroys them. Redcrosse sees this perverted practice and:

That detestable sight him much amazed,  
 To see th’vncindly Impes of heaven accurst,  
 Devoure their dam; on whom while so he gazd,  
 Having satisfied their bloody thirst,  
 Their bellies swolne he saw with fulnesse burst,  
 And bowels gushing forth: well worthy end  
 Of such as drunke her life, the which them nurst. (I.i.26.1-7)

The words “Devoure their Dam” and “bloody thirst” evoke strong associations with transubstantiation and the practice of eating Jesus’ real flesh and blood. The phrase “drank her life” continues this Eucharistic trope, but the rhyme between “burst” and “nurst” emphasizes the irony of the spawn’s perversion of this sacrament.

The connection with the Brazen Serpent becomes more obvious when viewed in light of Spenser’s anti-Catholic<sup>4</sup> polemic. When the spawn drink the blood, they represent the Catholic Mass in which, as the narrator sees it, Catholics drink the blood of Christ because it literally gives life. In the error of Catholic theology the sacrament is not representative of some other miracle; rather it is the procedure which gives the communicant eternal life. The signifier (the wine / blood) was taken for the signified (Jesus’ shedding of blood on the cross) just as Errour’s spawn mistake the miracle of life for the liquid vehicle which carries it. The spawn of the Catholic Church have excerpted the signifier out of its context as meaning something other than itself, and they have assigned it a complete, final meaning within itself. The lifted up Serpent has ceased to point to God’s saving work, and it has begun to point toward its own power. It no longer points forward to the Son of Man who was lifted up, but it points toward itself as both signifier and signified: a god who is immediate and available with no distance separating the Divine Significance from the sordid world of material signs.

Thus, Spenser’s allegory, through the Errour episode, defines the chief problem for Redcrosse in four forms. First, the decreasing distance between Redcrosse and Errour demonstrates his reductive assumptions about how to win glory. Second, the allegorical distance between Redcrosse and the worme defines his problem as adherence to the

simplistic doctrine of salvation by works—which certainly is simplistic in the way that Spenser portrays it because Redcrosse apprehends the salvation by works almost as soon as he enters the field, but it takes him the greater part of his quest to learn salvation by grace. Third, the substance of Errour’s allegory defines error as closed interpretation, which takes its meanings as final or complete. Fourth, the way in which Errour and her spawn allegorize the Catholic Mass via idolatry of the Brazen Serpent defines the danger in terms of reductive interpretation.

A more synthetic way of formulating Errour’s implication for the chief danger consists in seeing its implications for thought, theology and action. Errour resists the light of further inquiry. This closed minded system of thought works its way into one’s theology by encouraging one to eschew mystery and embrace the most apparent system of belief (no matter how reductive it may be). Finally, these epistemological and theological attitudes work their way into one’s actions when he rejects the cautionary advice of companions and makes fallacious assumptions about the relative merits of one’s chosen path through life.

### **Donne’s Sermons**

Unlike Spenser, who defines the chief danger for his knights and audience as that of reductive meanings too hastily assigned, Donne defines the chief danger for his audience as that of delaying interpretation and application for too long. For Donne, the great enemy is not the Error of reductive meaning; instead, it is the human penchant for avoiding the application of the meanings that matter most. Though Donne’s sermons,

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<sup>4</sup> Though it is true that only the Catholic clergy communicated in both kinds, the association of this the Eucharist of Errour’s spawn and transubstantiatory theology remains appropriate. We are, after all,

like Spenser's poem, deploy much metaphor, typology, and imagery, his sermons also allow him to speak in a relatively literal or straight-forward way. Thus, before I explain how his worme imagery describes the chief danger that threatens his congregation, I will first demonstrate how he states that danger in more literal terms. When I turn to the worm imagery, I will focus on how the immediacy of that imagery defines the chief danger of living in a fallen world. The first worm image I examine is the Edenic serpent as God judges it; the second is Isaiah's heavenly serpent, and the third is the flying serpent that tempts our nobler faculties.

In his last sermon, which was "by Sacred Authority, stiled the Author's owne funeral Sermon" (X. 11. 229), the theme of preaching applicably was paramount. Not only (as we shall see) does Donne warn his readers repetitively about the danger of frivolous religious inquiry, but the topic which Donne chose for his final sermon could not have been more applicable. As he preached on Psalm 68: 20 ("And unto God the Lord belong the issues of death") his words were as pertinent to his own gravely ill situation as they possibly could have been, and the context in which he preached these words about facing death boldly could not have been more persuasive to his congregation. For when is a man's exhortation to face death courageously more authoritative and more likely to move its audience to application than when the speaker himself is boldly staring death in the face? As Donne preached about the deliverance "*from death, in death, and by death*" (X. 11. 231), his words were absolutely applicable to everyone involved.

In the text of the sermon, Donne announces the importance of the applicability of this (and any) religious inquiry when he declares that "*Discourses of Religion* should not

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discussing "Error" whose name emphasizes the conceptual rather actual practice.

be *out of curiosity*, but to *edification*” (X. 11. 245). He again instructs his audience to avoid the frivolous pursuit of religious knowledge when he says, “We looke no further for *causes* or *reasons* in the *mysteries of religion*, but to the *will* and pleasure of God: *Christ* himselfe limited his *inquisition* in that *ita est, even so Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight*” (X. 11. 237). In the first quotation, Donne’s asymmetrical opposition of “curiosity” and “edification” stresses that one should conduct religious inquiry not as a matter of entertainment but to derive a benefit. In the second quotation, Donne subjugates curious inquiries to the will of God—arguing that even Jesus did not demand explanations from God but simply submitted himself to faithfully carrying out his Father’s will.

Upon further analysis, Donne’s quotation of Jesus’ words from Matthew 11:26 (“even so Father, for it seemed good in thy sight”) reiterates the priority of application because his method of quotation privileges the application of the passage over a more scrupulous explication of it. The quote prioritizes application because of the way Donne rips the quote from its Biblical context and deploys it to persuade his audience. The verse that Donne quotes comes not from Jesus’ own exposition about why he *himself* does not possess all knowledge as Donne indicates that it does; instead, it comes from Jesus’ gloss on the knowledge of other people. Indeed, in the very next verse (27) Jesus claims that the Father has given him all things (including knowledge of the Father). He is not explaining why he has satisfied himself with a limited knowledge of religious matters! Verses 25-27 read as follows:

<sup>25</sup>At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and

prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. <sup>26</sup>Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight. <sup>27</sup>All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him.

Though it is true that the verse that Donne excerpts from this passage suggests that human knowledge has its limits, it does not suggest that ““Christ himself limited his inquisition” in the way that Donne claims. Donne’s decontextualization of this passage of scripture stresses edification over curiosity because he applies it to his audience without ensuring that they know where it comes from or what the words actually refer to. He simply uses it to make his point.

Because Donne stresses edification over curiosity so emphatically, Janel Mueller is right when she notes that the “danger which [Donne’s] preaching counteracts is that of losing oneself in intellectual vagaries instead of coming to the total response of being which is faith” (11). Though Spenser too aims for application—for a total response in faith—he does not aim for it as expediently as Donne does. For Donne, “Practice makes any sermon a good Sermon” (X. 5. 121), but for Spenser, not all of Redcrosse’s attempts to apply what he has learned turn his lessons into good ones. Donne does not stress, like Spenser does, the complexity of what his audience is supposed to be learning. Instead, he exhorts them to employ in faith what learning they have. He entreats that they not postpone this application until their minds have resolved all the confusing subtleties. Donne distrusts extended inquiry far more than he distrusts precipitous applications because inquiry can turn into the curiosity and intellectual vagaries that turn questions of practical living into a purely hypothetically exploit. According to Mueller, Donne’s

“contribution to Anglican principles of Biblical interpretation is to make explicit the adjustment from writing controversy to preaching sermons, the shift from questions of logic to questions of living” (29). Donne asks not, what is Holiness? What is Temperance? Instead, he asks how Holiness applies to his audience<sup>5</sup>.

In “An Anniversary Sermon preached at St. Dunstan’s, upon the commemoration of a Parishioner,” Donne makes an overt connection between the danger of curious inquiry and his serpent imagery. The entire text for the sermon comes from God’s condemnation of the Edenic serpent, “and dust thou shalt eat all the dayes of thy life” (Genesis 3:14). When Donne notes that “in all Moses his Books, God never spoke so long, so much together, as here upon this occasion [...] the arraignment of all the world,” he emphasizes the importance of the lessons he is about to extract from the text (X. 8. 178-9). Donne’s main objective in the sermon is to demonstrate, “What the Serpent lost, by this judgement inflicted upon him; and secondly, What man gained by it;” which is to say that his main objective is not to define the chief danger that humans face. However, he goes on to say that “these two considerations [the loss of the serpent and the gain of man] embrace much, [and] involve much,” and one of the things they involve the most is an examination of the danger of intellectual dilettantism.

Donne begins the body of his sermon by observing that “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (X. 8. 180), and he then begins a discourse about the nature of sin. He moves rapidly through a catalogue of Biblical characters and their sins, and then he turns his attention more directly toward the Serpent’s sin and asks “What had

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<sup>5</sup> Another quotation in which Donne discourages intellectual vagaries occurs in a non-funeral sermon: “God calls not upon us, to be consider’d as God in himself, but as God towards us; not as he is in heaven, but as he works upon earth: And here, not in the School, but in the Pulpit; not in Disputation, but in Application” (I. 4. 234)

this Serpent done?" (X. 8. 181). The audience does not have to wait long for the answer for in the very next line Donne answers, "The Serpent was more subtile then any other beast" (X. 8. 181). He goes on to add that "It is a dangerous thing, to have a capacity to do evill. God would do a great work; and he used the simplicitie of the Asse; he made Balaams Asse speake; But the Devill makes use of subtilty, of the craft of the Serpent" (X. 8. 181). Here, in the opening pages of Donne's sermon about the arraignment of the world, about the one occasion at which God speaks the most, Donne says that the Serpent's subtlety lays the foundation for his future sin—indeed, the birth of sin on the earth. Donne does not say that the subtlety was a sin but that subtlety made the Serpent more prone to Satan's devices. In response to the disastrous results of the Serpent's excellence in craft, Donne exhorts his audience, "Content thy self with such a mediocrity [...] be not ambitious of extraordinary excellency in any kinde; It is a dangerous thing, to have a capacity to do evil" (X. 8. 181). Though Donne, here, generalizes the danger of the Serpent's excellence in craft to any excellence broadly conceived (an excellency which grants one the capacity to do evil), he portrays the subtlety of the Serpent as an archetypal expression of this dangerous excellence. Subtlety is not a sin, but it is a grave "danger": a word which Donne uses four times in the first eight lines of the paragraph.

Donne goes on to highlight the danger of the serpent's subtlety when he draws attention to the immediacy with which the serpent receives his sentence from God.

Donne argues perceptively:

*Adam* and *Eve* both, God interrogated, and gave them time, to meditate  
and to deprecate; To *Adam*, he says, *Where art thou*, and *who told thee*

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*that thou wast naked? And to Eve, What is this that thou hast done? But to the Serpent no such breathing; The first word is Quia fecisti; no calling for evidence whether he had done it or no, but “Because thou hast done it, thou art accursed. (X. 8. 182)*

The serpent's subtle instrumentality in Satan's scheme exposes him to the wrath of God. As I have discussed above, Satan chose the serpent to be his instrument because of his subtlety, yet this subtlety, which would appear to be an asset, led him to a state in which no evidence, no meditation, no deprecation could shield him from God's curse. He had to face the penalty with a terrifying immediacy. Though one might think that the serpent receives more severe treatment than Adam and Eve because the serpent is not human, this is not the reading that Donne deploys in the sermon. Instead he says that though the serpent was just an accessory to the sin of Adam and Eve, that sin was treason and “in Treason there is no Accessory; The instrument is the Principall” (X. 8. 182). The implication is clear: Be simple like Balaam's ass; “content thyself with a mediocrity,” and “be not ambitious of extraordinary excellency of any kinde” (X. 8. 181).

Up to this point in the sermon, Donne has not overtly defined the chief danger as that of intellectual dilettantism, overly curious investigations, or postponed applications. He has thus far defined it as subtlety and a more general capacity to perpetrate evil (“It is a dangerous thing, to have a capacity to do evil”). Nevertheless, when he progresses to the next example of immediacy, he begins to define that danger as a mode of interpretation. Donne preaches:

in the punishment of the Serpent, we shall see, that his Mercy, and Justice are inseparable [...] As soon as I hear of a Judgement, I apprehend

Mercy, no interposing of any dark or sad suspicion, or diffidence, or distrust in God, and his mercy; and to that purpose we consider the Serpents punishment, and especially as it is heightened, and aggravated in this Text, *Dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life.* (X. 8. 183)

Though one might explicate this passage with respect to what it says about distrusting God, I will explicate it with an eye to what it says about the interpretation of the Edenic serpent because Donne takes this opportunity to explain the mechanics of his interpretative process. By generating a binary opposition between apprehension on the one hand, and interposition on the other, Donne transforms the Serpent, that dangerously subtle beast, into a primer on interpretation. The punishment of that Serpent becomes the object of interpretation, and one possible interpretation perpetuates the condemnation through subtlety; the other interpretation finds salvation from that penalty. The first mode of interpretation involves the interposition of a strenuous hermeneutic of suspicion, and the second mode of interpretation involves an apprehension of mercy. According to the OED's first definition, to "interpose" is "To place between (in space or time); to put or set between or in an intermediate position; to cause to intervene. Often with implication of obstruction or delay." Indeed, when Donne talks of "the interposing of any dark or sad suspicion, or diffidence, or distrust" the term "interpose" reiterates the function of deferral which suspicion, diffidence, and distrust play in the interpretive process. All three of these attitudes delay the process of conclusion making, subjecting it to the rigors of the intellect in much the same way that Donne's use of three terms where one would do (suspicion, diffidence, distrust) delays the progress of his sermon. Donne's alliteration further emphasizes the process of delay. When he adds the word "sad" before

“suspition” in order to generate a double alliteration “sad suspition, or diffidence, or distrust,” Donne mimics the sort of redundant, measured, and double-checked process of the hermeneutic that he describes. The style of the prose models the values of the hermeneutic of suspicion in literary form. The repetition of sound and meaning emphasizes the exactitude of the paradigm which rejects a prompt application of God’s mercy.

In contrast to the term “interposition,” Donne’s words “I apprehend Mercy” demonstrate an expedient interpretation. According to the OED, to “apprehend” is: 1) “To lay hold upon, seize, with hands, teeth, etc.” and 3) “To seize upon for one’s own, take possession of.” When Donne apprehends mercy from the serpent’s punishment, he deploys an interpretation that favors the immediate possession and application of God’s mercy.

When he delivers the above passage, Donne is transitioning from the first to the second part of his sermon —from the discussion of judgment to the discussion of mercy, and the location of this serpent image suggests how it contributes to the definition of the chief danger. Unlike Spenser’s Errour, who embodies the definition of the chief danger as Spenser envisions it, Donne’s serpent applies to the chief danger in a more tangential way. Donne’s serpent image serves as a reference point which helps to distinguish two interpretive modes even as it helps to distinguish the two parts of the sermon which it separates. The first mode is one that postpones the laying off of judgment and the second is one that hurries to apprehend mercy. The first mode of interpretation postpones because it generates a critical distance between the serpent and the interpreter, but the second mode of interpretation hastens to apply mercy because it apprehends (sinks its

teeth into) the serpent that it finds. This is to say that Donne's spatial dynamic contrasts with Spenser's when it comes to serpents. Redcrosse must be careful not to rush up to a serpent unless he knows it is the one that Gloriana has commissioned him to fight. Donne's audience on the other hand, ought to rush up to this serpent and apprehend mercy out of its judgment. For Donne then, the chief danger lies not in deploying interpretations too rashly, but in rejecting God's mercy on account of too much suspicion.

Donne's serpent further facilitates his definition of the chief danger by providing a medium upon which he can demonstrate what that chief danger is. The serpent does not itself stand for a mode of interpretation (like *Errour* does), but Donne renders it the object of interpretation and then endorses one interpretation of it and rejects the other. Thus, Donne defines the chief danger as a hermeneutical activity without ever describing the serpent as a hermeneutical phenomenon.

As a precursor to explicating Donne's image of the flying serpent which tempts our nobler faculties, I will now turn my attention to the next serpent that Donne addresses in his sermon, the one that appears in the last section of the body of the sermon. This portion of the sermon aims to explicate the longevity of the punishment of the Edenic serpent—that it has to creep on its belly all the days of its life. Donne begins by explicating the heavenly prophecy of Isaiah 65:25, which reads (in The King James Version), "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock: and dust shall be the serpent's meat. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the LORD." When Donne glosses this passage he adds insights provided by Saint Jerome, and he also injects (without really informing his audience that he is doing so) a quotation from Genesis 3:14 ("all the days of thy life")—a phrase that

does not occur in Isaiah 65:25 or its surrounding verses. This intertextuality (especially Jerome's comments) highlights the fact that the passage from Isaiah discusses the state of heaven, and Donne uses this opportunity to point out that there will be no curious interpretations of scripture in that paradise. In the passage which I am about to quote, Donne blends the words of the book of Isaiah with the words of Jerome and the words from the book of Genesis ("*Tota vita, all his life*") in order to create a set of intertwining metaphors. I will argue that this series of metaphors emphasizes the danger of curious interpretation of the Bible by describing heaven for his audience and by subsequently snapping the audience's attention back to the serpent and the fact that his audience has not yet reached heaven. By incorporating his audience into a general view of heaven and by then truncating that chain of pleasant thought with the serpent image, Donne reminds his audience that they must strive for heaven, or at least be on the look out for non-heavenly practices like engaging in curious investigations into the scripture. Since the passage is so long, and so complex, I will pause in the middle of it to gloss the description of heaven. The first portion of the passage reads as follows:

So then, the Prophecy of *Esay* fulfills it self, That when Christ shall reign powerfully over us, *The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, (Saul and Ananias shall meet in a house, (as S. Hierome expounds that) and Ananias not be afraid of a Persecutor.) The Lion shall eate straw like the Bullock,* says that Prophet in the place, *Tradent se rusticitati Scripturarum,* says the same Father, The strongest understandings shall content themselves with the homeliness of the Scriptures, and feed upon plain places, and not study new dishes, by subtilties, and perplexities, and then, *Dust shall be*

*the Serpents meat*, says the Prophet there, The power of Satan shall reach but to the body, and not touch a soul wrapt up in Christ.

Donne begins by drawing his audiences attention to a description of heaven. In heaven there is first and foremost, peace between wolf and lamb. There will be peace between persecutor and persecuted as there was peace between Saul (soon to be Paul) and Ananias. The second mark of the heavenly kingdom also consists in peace, but Jerome distinguish the peace between the lion and the bull from the peace between the wolf and the lamb by focusing on the strange diet of the heavenly lion. No longer will he devour flesh, but he will eat straw like the bull; he will content himself with homely understandings of the scripture. Both the strong and the weak minded, will read the scripture plainly by avoiding curious interpretations. This second illustration of the peace of heaven places strange emphasis on the sin of curious interpretation. Donne (through Jerome) associates this mode of interpretation with the murderous persecution of the church, and by noting its absence from the heavenly community, he implies that it is a practice that plagues the church in the fallen world. The third attribute of heaven, which Donne describes, consists in the serpent's inability to feed upon human souls. God has limited the scope of the serpent's influence and just as his "subtities and perplexities" will not induce residents of the second paradise (heaven) to manipulate the word of God in the way that Adam and Eve did when they speculatively disobeyed God's commands, so too the serpent's appetite for dust has no power in heaven. In general these illustrations give an impression of how sublime heaven will be, but as the sermon continues to explicate this serpent image, the passage shifts its focus profoundly. Yes, heaven will be sublime,

but the parishioners have not yet made it to heaven as evidenced by the continued pestilence of the Edenic serpent. Donne continues:

But then, it is *Tota vita, all his* [the serpent's] *life*. His diet is impaired, but it is not taken away; He eats but dust, but he shall not lack that, as long as he lives. And how long lives the Serpent, this Serpent? The life of this Serpent is to seduce man, to practice upon man, to prevaile upon man, as farre, and as long as man is dust. And therefore wee are not onely his dust, whilst we live (all which time we serve our carnall affections, for him to feed upon) but when we are dead, we are his dust still. Man was made in that state, as that he should not resolve to dust, but should have passed from this world to the next, without corruption, or resolution of the body. That which God said to *Adam, Dust thou art*, belonged to all, from the beginning, he, and all we were to be of dust, in his best integrity; but that which God adds there, *et in terram reverteris, (dust thou art, and to it thou shalt returne)* that the Serpent brought in, that was induced upon man by him, and his tentation. So that when we are living dust here he eats us, and when we are dead dust too, in the grave, he feeds upon us, because it proceeds from him both that we die, and that we are detained in the state of exinanition, and ingloriousnesse, in the dust of the earth, and not translated immediately to the joyes of heaven, as but for him, we should have been. (X. 8. 187-8)

After he describes what heaven will be like, Donne deploys a serpent image in order to transform this heavenly prophecy into an admonition about the chief danger of curious

interpretation. When he introduces this change of direction with the words, “But then, it is *Tota vita, all his life*. His diet is impaired but it is not taken away. He eats but dust, but he shall not lack that, as long as hee lives,” Donne literally begins to explicate another passage. He shifts his focus from Isaiah 65:25 to Genesis 3:14. He interrupts his explication of how the serpent will have no influence in heaven with the observation that he still has influence in the present state of affairs. Donne converts what would have been an exposition of the serpent far away in the perfection of heaven into a serpent that is immediate, a serpent that is in the world as it is now—a serpent from which we cannot escape.

The serpent that Donne wants to talk about is the one which is with us all our lives the one that will “prevaile upon man, as farre, and as long as man is dust.” As Donne goes on to argue, we are made of dust, and we die as dust, and there is not a time before the resurrection at which the serpent is not upon us. By stressing that we are not yet in heaven, not yet safe from the diet of the serpent, Donne reveals that we our bodies are not yet free from the consequences of the Serpent’s subtlety and perplexity. The serpent brought the curse of death upon the heads of Adam and Eve by inviting them to wonder about the meaning of what God had told them about the forbidden fruit. The serpent’s subtle questioning of the word of God, his seemingly innocuous invitation that Adam and Eve be curious about what God really meant, brought the curse of returning to dust upon them. As Donne terms it, “(*dust thou art, and to it thou shalt returne*), that the Serpent brought in, that was induced upon man by him, and his tentation.” Thus, Donne views the prevalence of curious interpretation of the scripture not only as a sign that his



congregation has not yet made it to heaven, but also as a key component in the Fall of man. In this sense, intellectual dilettantism is the chief danger.

Nevertheless, the worme imagery in the conclusion of the sermon generates the closest association between the serpent and the danger of intellectual dilettantism when it describes the flying serpent that tempts our nobler faculties. In the long passage that follows, Donne warns about the danger of the flying serpent and contrasts it with the salvation offered in the brazen serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness. Though Donne does not address textual hermeneutics in this passage in the way he deals with it when he explicates Isaiah 65:25, intellectual dilettantism still features importantly in his argument. Here, he argues not about the actual interpretation of a text, but about the intellectual vagaries of applying what the Bible says to one's daily life. He thus associates intellectual dilettantism with practical cunning—the wriggling one's way out of doing what one knows he or she ought to do. Donne worries less about how one actually interprets the Bible and more about whether or not he actually applies what he learns. With this framework of presuppositions, Donne preaches:

So, if he who is *Serpens serpens humi*, the Serpent condemned to creep upon the ground, doe transforme himselfe into a flying Serpent, and attempt our nobler faculties, there is *Serpens exaltatus*, a Serpent lifted up in the wilderness to recover all them that are stung, and feel that they are stung with this Serpent, this flying Serpent, that is, these high and continued sinnes. The creeping Serpent, the groveling Serpent, is Craft; the exalted Serpent, the crucified Serpent, is Wisdome. All your worldly cares, all your crafty bargaines, all your subtile matches, all your diggings

into other mens estates, all your hedgings in of debts, all your planting of children in great alliances; all these diggings, and hedgings and plantings savour of the earth: But crucifie this craft of yours, bring all your worldly subtilty under the Crosse of Christ Jesus, husband your farmes so, as you may give a good account to him, presse your debts so, as you would be pressed by him [...] A truce with that Serpent [the creeping serpent that flies], is too near a peace; to condition with your conscience for a time, that you may continue in such a sin, till you have paid for such a purchase, married such a daughter, bought such an annuity, undermined and eaten out such an unthrift, this truce, (though you mean to end it before you die) is too near a peace with that Serpent [...] to dispute and debate in the behalf and favour of sin, to palliate, to disguise, to extenuate that sin, this is too near a peace with this Serpent. (X. 8. 189)

In the sermon as a whole Donne has demonstrated how the first sin in the Garden of Eden resulted from subtlety, and in this climactic passage Donne demonstrates that high and continued sins are the end result of subtlety. He begins the passage, “if he who is *Serpens serpens humi*, the Serpent condemned to creep upon the ground do transforme himself into a flying Serpent.” The flying serpent then is really just another manifestation of the subtle creeping serpent, and Donne demonstrates this by describing the works of this transforming serpent in terms of their subtlety. Those who have been stung by the serpent make “subtill matches” and engage in “worldly subtilty.” The apparent wisdom of the serpent is really “craft,” and it results in “crafty bargaines.”

Donne extends this theme into his agricultural metaphors, and by doing so he describes the typical actions that result from overly-subtle analysis. The phrases “diggings into other mens estates,” “hedgings in of debts,” “plantings of children in great alliances” evoke a sense of subtlety, of being too clever by half. This agricultural representation of subtlety reminds his audience of the penalty which intellectual dexterity inflicted upon humans by evoking God’s words to Adam, “cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee” (KJV Genesis 3:17-18). The plantings, hedgings, and diggings are thus the children of the Edenic serpent’s original subtlety even as they are the result of his parishioners’ craft. In Donne’s sermon, those who labor under the serpent’s sting are those who dig, hedge, and plant.

In contrast to this subtle strife, those who look to the crucified serpent, the “Serpent lifted up in the wilderness” live simple and plain lives. They crucify their worldly subtlety, husband their farms so that they can give a good account, and press their debts according to the golden rule. Crucifixion involves reduction, a purging, an elimination. The term “husband” lacks the connotation of hard labor that the previous agricultural terms suggest; it connotes honesty, trustworthiness, and a sense of stewardship, which diggings, hedgings, and plantings lack. Those that would be saved are to press their debts in an honest way, without extortions or exaggerations. Donne’s congregation ought to avoid such complications at all times. Donne does not grant them license “to dispute and debate in behalf and favour of sin” even if they mean to quit that sin before they die.

Of course, Spenser is like Donne in that he does not condone any of the short-lived sins into which Redcrosse falls (his bout with despair stands as one example), but this final observation concerning disputation and debate in favor of sin helps to illustrate the contrast between the two authors. The contrast resides in Donne's distrust of prolonged mental processes which postpone the application of relevant insight and Spenser's distrust of precipitous assumptions which sacrifice a fuller conception of what is good to the expediency of what is currently possible. Donne's point of view is thus concerned with his present circumstances, the world that immediately surrounds him rather than some future world. Here, one should remember the way in which he describes heaven to emphasize the point that his congregation is in the world and emphatically not in heaven. They are still suffering the consequences of the Edenic serpent's subtle religious inquiries. Donne's congregants emulate the serpent's subtlety in their own diggings, plantings, and hedgings, as they try to turn their non-heavenly surroundings into a sort of paradise, but the whole endeavor is doomed to failure because subtlety is the very attribute that Satan utilized to condemn the world. How then can any degree of subtle interpretation of scripture or any crafty analysis of one's surroundings undo what subtlety itself has brought about? What Donne's audience needs is not a fuller, more complex understanding of God's intentions (for wondering about that is what got Adam and Eve in trouble in the first place) but a simple faith that the cross of Christ has made amends for all the diggings and hedgings that have come before. Indeed, Donne stresses that the subtleties of religious doctrine matter less than some would think, for while Book I of *The Faerie Queene* takes issue with Catholic transubstantiatory theology through the Errour episode, Donne claims that though his mother was Catholic,

“I suck’d *Christian* blood, in my Mother’s wombe, and *Christian* milke at my Nurses breast” (VIII. 2. 77). Whereas Errour’s spawn perverted the Eucharist when they drank their mother’s blood, Donne claims that drinking his mother’s blood was a distinctly Christian act—in spite of the fact that she was Catholic.

In another sermon Donne explains his relative open-mindedness with respect to doctrine when he explains that both the Catholic and Protestant churches are riddled with errors and that switching in either direction (Catholic to Protestant or vice versa) can be cause for lament. Donne, the former Catholic turned Anglican priest, confesses that one should remain in the church in which he was born, saying:

I may finde after [I have changed churches], that there are more true errors in the Church I goe to, then there were imaginary in that that I left. Truly I have been sorry to see some persons converted from the Roman Church, to ours; because I have known that onely *temporall respects* have moved them, and they have lived in a *nullity*, or *indifferency to either* religion, then in a true and established zeale. (X. 7. 161)

By occupying a religiously plural stance, Donne stresses faithful action rather than doctrinal scrupulosity. This passage demonstrates the close tie between Donne’s distrust of the quest for perfect understanding and his fear that one will fall into an indifference and fail to apply what he has learned. His religious pluralism means not only that he sees that God is working in a person’s life in whichever church He has seen fit to place that person, but also that his diagnosis of the chief danger in a fallen world is not as concerned with complex details as Spenser’s is. For Donne, the way one thinks about Christ is not as important as the way that those thoughts filter their way into one’s life.

Spenser, however, defines the chief danger in terms of complexity because he draws such a close connection between the pattern of one's thought and the way one acts. I concluded the Spenser section of this chapter by arguing that one could see Spenser's definition of the chief danger in terms of the effects of epistemology on the spawn's theology and on Redcrosse's rash action. The closed system of thought which Errour teaches to her spawn compels them to collapse signifier into signified and drink their mother's blood in a Catholic perversion of the sacrament. Likewise, Redcrosse's rash desire to win glory through his works and his subsequent entanglement with the Error of salvation by works stems from his own closed minded refusal to listen to the advice of his companions. It is the pattern of thought itself which is the "Error" and subsequent actions are only manifestations of that corrupt foundation. Thus, Spenser's solution to the chief danger of reductive thinking is not a simple and immediate application but an extended faith which compels one to continue investigation and withhold conclusion.

## Chapter II

Since Donne and Spenser define the chief danger of living in a fallen world in such distinct ways, one would expect that they recommend incongruous strategies for defending against that danger. Though divergent approaches to Biblical interpretation figure largely in each author's strategy, I will postpone that discussion until chapter III. In the present chapter, I will examine how each author advocates a unique variety of faith in order to defend against the chief danger. Spenser tends to describe his variety of faith in terms of its extendedness and its dependence upon future providential action. This faith is extended in the sense that it demands a willingness to venture oneself far away from familiar territory, and it focuses on the future because it stresses destiny, climax, and providence. The archetypal example of this faith in Book I resides in the impression that Redcrosse exhibits true faith when he defeats the dragon on the Edenic battleground through God's merciful provision and not when he attempts to slay Error through his own puissance earlier in his quest. Spenser's St. George and the dragon motif describes Redcrosse's pursuit of holiness as if it were a quest, and such a format highlights the extended, climactic, and pre-destined aspects of Spenser's variety of faith. Pursuing such a quest in faith defends against the danger of over-simplification by forcing one to move out away from Error's constricting coils.

In contrast to this fantastic portrayal of faith as a quest, Donne describes his variety of faith in terms of sordidly realistic worm imagery. In place of Spenser's imaginary images, Donne provides images which his audience might see in the course of their everyday lives. Whether he paints a picture of maggot-infested flesh or crops ruined by worms, his imagery localizes the battle with the Edenic serpent in the daily lives of his

congregants. The faith to which he calls them rests not upon the climactic defeat of the Edenic serpent in some far away Garden of Eden, but rather focuses on the way that God subverts the evil intentions of the worme before their very eyes. This variety of faith calls them to apply their everyday surroundings to their Christian lives, and by focusing his audience's attention on the lives to which God has called them, Donne counteracts the human penchant for intellectual dilettantism. At the center of his faith rests not a high-flying winged worme that tempts the nobler faculties, but a series of wormes burrowed deeply into his congregants' existence as creatures of flesh and blood. Indeed, he calls them away from a faith rooted in what John Carey describes as "an imaginary era 'before this age of writ' when there was no known way of winning a lady 'but by Tilting Turneyng, and riding through Forrests'" (10), and calls them to a faith rooted in their homes, churches, and businesses.

However, before this chapter explores Donne's local faith, it will analyze Spenser's extended faith. Spenser recommends this extended variety of faith through four dragon encounters. First, the encounter between Una and the dragon on Arthur's helmet stresses the faith as a movement away from the familiar and toward the unknown. Second, Arthur's own relation to the dragon on his helmet highlights the role of destiny in faith. Third, the role of Arthur's shield in the battle with Duessa's beast reveals faith's dependence upon unforeseen providential action. And finally, Redcrosse's battle with the Edenic dragon expresses faith's relation to climax.

C.S. Lewis has noted that in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, "Dragons (or serpents) can have a great variety of meanings" (22), and since I explained Spenser's depiction of the chief danger in terms of the malicious serpent named "Errour," I will begin this chapter



with what Carol V. Kaske has termed “Spenser’s one good dragon:” the one on Arthur’s helmet. Kaske is correct when she says that the dragon on Arthur’s helmet is a good dragon in so far as that image represents the beginnings of the antidote to the chief danger of over-simplified interpretation.

Before I address how Una interacts with this dragon in order to demonstrate the forward venturing aspect of Spenser’s faith, some prefatory words concerning Arthur’s helmet are in order. More specifically, I need to contextualize the helmet’s brightness and horridness as it contrasts with Error’s own horridness and hatred of light.

Shortly after Una has received news that Orgoglio has imprisoned Redcrosse, she spies Arthur and his “glitterand armour” from “farre away” (I. vii. 29), and Spenser describes the appearance of Arthur and his squire at length, devoting an entire stanza to the dragon image:

His haughtie helmet, horrid all with gold,  
 Both glorious brightnesse, and great terrour bred;  
 For all the crest a Dragon did enfold  
 With greedie pawes, and ouer all did spred  
 His golden wings: his dreadful hideous hed  
 Close couched on the beuer, seem’d to throw  
 From flaming mouth bright sparkles fierie red,  
 That suddaine horror to faint harts did show;  
 And scaly taylor was stretcht adowne his backe full low. (I. vii. 31)

In stark contrast with Error, who “wont in desert darknesse to remaine” and who recoils from the “little glooming light, much like a shade” that Redcrosse casts into her den (I. i.

16, 14), the dragon on Arthur's helmet blows "bright sparkles fierie red" from his "flaming mouth." This image of light combines with the "gold" and "glorious brightness" of the helmet to suggest a commitment to illumination rather than a closed-minded opposition to the light of Redcrosse's investigation. In this sense, the dragon on Arthur's helmet is a good dragon when compared to Error—at the very least, the dragon on Arthur's helmet plays a role in releasing Redcrosse from Orgoglio's dungeon whereas Error sought to bind him in her coils. Given Book I's epistemological motif in which evil-doers like Duessa and Archimago work their malice by convincing Redcrosse to jump to conclusions and take sign for reality, Arthur's dragon image stands out as distinctly illuminating image. Arthur's helmet certainly signals his strength as a warrior in a traditional manner, but the bright dragon emblazoned upon it further suggests a relation between this prowess and an open, inquisitive attitude.

It is important to note, however, that Arthur's dragon-laden helmet breeds "Both glorious brightness, and great terrour," because this conjunction of brightness and terror clarifies the distinction between this dragon image and the serpent named Error. Though the description of the "haughtie helmet" foregrounds and alliterates its "horrid" nature, this despotic attribute does not parallel Error's own dogmatic tyranny. Whereas Error terrifies those who boldly attempt to illuminate her dark den, Arthur's dragon horrifies those with "faint harts." Arthur's dragon "Both glorious brightness, and great terrour bred," and one way to decode this is to say that the dragon breeds an illuminating light which terrifies those who are too cowardly to face the truth in faith—those who are unwilling, like Error's spawn, to pursue the truth outside of their familiar boundaries and who retreat to the old dogmas that they have learned at their mother's side. Arthur's

helmet, then, represents a pursuit of truth that is emphatically not “Errorr” because it insists on a movement away from presupposition (dogma) and toward discovery.

One can be sure that the conjunction of terror and light on Arthur’s helmet should be read in this way because of the effect that the helmet has on Una when she comes face to face with it. The helmet does not frighten Una because her heart is strong and she does not fear the truth. Her very name “Una” stands for monadic truth, and the words of comfort that Arthur directs to her after he hears her sad story imply that she has a stout heart. When he says, “Certes, Madame, ye haue great cause of plaint, / That stoutest heart, I weene, could cause to quake” (I. vii. 52), he spells out the fact that whatever distress she is in as she stands before him can be accounted for in terms of the arduous journey she has undertaken since leaving Gloriana’s court. Thus, when the reader sees Una standing before the helmet immediately after Spenser has described its terrifying aspect, he knows that its terrible aspect opposes only those individuals who do not possess the same characteristics as Una—a firm resolve and a commitment to the truth.

Yet, in spite of her resolve and commitment, Una does not at first want to explain the truth of her story to Arthur. After Arthur addresses her by speaking through the dragon image embossed on his beaver, he does, however, convince her to tell him why she is grieving; and what is important for our purposes here is that he convinces her to speak the truth by urging her to faith. Una initially suppresses the truth about her plight by arguing that her secrets are “better hidden [to] keepe,” that “griefe does greater grow [when it is] displaid,” and that grief unrelieved can breed “despaire” (I. vii. 39). Arthur, however, overcomes Una’s objections when he responds that “Despaire breedes not where faith is staid” and that though flesh may “empaie” any faith, “reason can repaire”

it (I.vii.41). Spenser signals that Arthur's words (and not a random mood swing) convince Una to speak the truth when he writes that:

[Arthur's] goodly reason, and well guided speach  
 So deepe did settle in her [Una's] gracious thought,  
 That her perswaded to disclose the breach,  
 Which loue and fortune in her heart had wrought. (I. vii. 42)

In other words, Arthur's "goodly reason," the exhortation to faith that literally passes through the dragon's lips, draws the truth out of Una. I said before that this dragon represents a commitment to pursuing the truth, and here one can see that commitment in action as it persuades Una to "disclose" (i.e. open) the truth about her situation.

This dragon also represents a forward-looking faith because, unlike Error who squelches the light of inquiry in her coils, this dragon opens the truth through faith. Though Una generally exemplifies this type of faith on her own, her present concern for Redcrosse as well as her traumatic journey from Archimago's house have hampered her usually exemplary frame of mind. (As Una herself confesses, her heart is "plung'd in sea of sorrowes deepe, / And heaped with [...] huge misfortunes" (I. vii. 39)). Thus, when Arthur invites Una to disclose her secrets and venture out of her sorrowful frame of mind, he asks her to trust that he will not betray her with his future actions. He invites her to have faith in his continued good-will toward her. Or, to reframe the point in more epistemological terms: when Arthur evokes the truth from Una by telling her that faith repels despair and that reason will bolster this faith, he invites Una to trust in the restorative power of reason that she has not tested or evaluated. (After all, the reader gets the impression that Una is not a character accustomed to despair or suppression of the

truth). Though the result of the forward-looking faith to which Arthur calls Una is just the disclosure of facts that Una already knows, the act of disclosure demands trust in Arthur's reasoning, which is beyond the scope of Una's previous experience. In this sense, the words spoken through the dragon on Arthur's helmet call Una to venture into unknown ideas. Reason, whether deductive or inductive, involves a movement away from its presuppositions and towards a conclusion that differs from the ideas assumed at the outset. In Book I, a faith that does not involve this outward movement, this departure from sure knowledge, is not faith at all, but rather an idolatrous substitute for faith—the very image of Error's spawn retreating into the darkness of their mother's mouth.

The faith recommended through the dragon on Arthur's helmet terrifies as it insists on its movement outwards because it demands that one leave behind the familiar beginning. If one doubts that this anti-circular movement is an adequately terrifying allegorical analog for the dragon's horrid description, he or she need only look to Error's "scattered brood" and their frantic behavior when (after their mother's death) they were "weening their wonted entrance to have found" (I. i. 25). They are too terrified to confront the light of Redcrosse's armor and choose to drink their mother's blood instead. Thus, Spenser's defense against the chief danger of over-simplification is the outward movement of faith, a dependence upon that which is not yet fully realized.

Nevertheless, the dragon on Arthur's helmet does not only recommend forward-looking faith to Una; it also symbolizes Arthur's own faithful pursuit of his destiny. Kaske argues that the helmet "hints at Arthur's lineage and destiny, as yet unknown to him, in that it symbolizes the position he is to inherit, the title of his father, 'Pendragon' (alluded to in FQ II.x.68)" (38). Thus, the helmet represents the fact that Arthur hazards

himself in the field even as he works towards a destiny with which he is not familiar. However, this vague expression of faith becomes more concrete when one views Arthur's destiny within the context of his quest to find Gloriana, a destiny that Book I addresses in more overt terms than an enigmatic heraldic symbol.

Arthur's quest for the Faerie Queene begins one night when he uses his "helmet faire displayd" as a "pillow" (I. ix. 13). With his head propped on the dragon image, he dreams that a "royall Mayd" is by his side, and when he awakes and finds only matted grass where the queen had been, he "cast[s] in carfull mind, / to seeke her out with labour" (I. ix. 15). Arthur demonstrates his commitment to his pledge when, even after nine months of unsuccessful searching, he will not "that vow vnbind" (I. ix. 15), and this persistence illustrates Arthur's willingness to act in an extended faith, accepting the deferral of his destiny's fruition.

Thus, the good dragon image on Arthur's helmet recommends faith to Una and symbolizes Arthur's own faithful quest, and in so doing it lays the ground work for Spenser's solution to the chief danger of reductive interpretation. If Redcrosse's over-hasty approach to Errour's cave represents an oversimplification of his quest, and if Errour and her spawn represent a closed system of interpretation which ultimately collapses into an idolatrous confusion of signifier and signified, then faith, as expressed through the dragon on Arthur's helmet, represents the defense against these dangers. Faith not only recognizes that the solution to the quest lies beyond the first available serpent, but it also requires one to look beyond the immediately available signifier to a reason that may not make itself known until the time is right (just as Una must rely on the restorative power of reason though she has not yet experienced it herself).

In Arthur's battle with Duessa's beast, "that reknowmed Snake" (I. vii. 17), Spenser further explicates his understanding of faith as the defense against the chief danger. Though Arthur's "goodly reason" and "well-guided speech," help to revive Una from her sorrow by empowering her to speak the truth in faith, this reason and this speech are not the substance of faith. Faith, as Arthur's sword and shield demonstrate in his battle with Duessa's beast, is not the result of human talent but the result of divine providence.

In *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, Michael Leslie's entry on "armour" notes that "The description of Arthur's 'glitterand armour' seems to gather to itself the symbolism of Ephesians 6," and this Biblical passage exhorts its reader to "Above all, take the shield of faith, wherewith ye may quench all the fyrie dartes of the wicked, And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of y Spirit, which is the worde of God" (Ephesians 6.16-17 (1560 Geneva)). The shield of faith's identity as the instrument appropriate for quenching the fiery darts of the wicked, strengthens my argument that Spenser's defense against the chief danger lies in the variety of faith he advocates. Nevertheless, since the passage exhorts its audience to "above all" take the shield, the helmet, and the sword, these latter two pieces of armor should also play an important role in defeating the serpent. I have already addressed the helmet at length, but I will now argue that the failure of Arthur's sword to quickly dispatch the beast demonstrates that Arthur's saintly word and reason<sup>6</sup> are not the true nemesis of the chief danger (they can only prevail once faith had been deployed), and that the unmerited manner in which his shield blazes the

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur frequently represents a type of Christ, and that is particularly true in this scene where he is fighting on behalf of a fallen knight. Thus, interpreting his word and reason as an analogue for the word of God is appropriate.

way to victory illustrates that the true essence of the faith lies in its providential and deferred revelation.

Spenser emphasizes the initially limited power of Arthur's sword when he narrates that, though Arthur made a mighty attempt to decapitate the seven-headed beast, his exemplary swordsmanship fails to fully accomplish its task—indeed, Arthur's skills only make the beast seem more beastly. Spenser emphasizes both the superb nature of Arthur's swordsmanship as well as its utter ineffectiveness when he describes Arthur's approach the beast:

[Arthur] high advancing his bloud-thirstie blade,  
 Stroke one of those deformed heads so sore,  
 That of his puissance proud ensample made;  
 His monstrous scalpe downe to his teeth it tore,  
 And that misformed shape mis-shaped more (I. viii. 16).

The skill and power of Arthur's stroke is clear enough in this passage, but what is not quite so obvious is the way in which it communicates the failure of the stroke to achieve its purpose. When compared to the sword-stroke that Redcrosse directs at Error's head, Arthur's stroke seems like a great success. Redcrosse delivers a "stroke [which] down from her [Error's] head vnto her shoulder glaunst" (I. i. 17), but Arthur's stroke tears through his enemy's head. However, such a positive reading does not take into account the pattern of danger that Spenser has established in Book I.

Though Arthur's blow achieves more penetration than Redcrosse's sword stroke, its revelation of greater deformity ("that misformed shape mis-shaped more") illuminates not a dangerous situation already resolved but a dangerous situation only now fully



realized. In Book I, evil frequently appropriates elegant appearances<sup>7</sup> which, when penetrated, reveal that great danger is at hand. Fraudubio establishes this motif when he confesses that though he takes beautifully disguised Duessa to be his lady, he only realizes the great “danger” he is in after he sees that she is really “a filthy foule old woman” (I. ii. 41, 40). When Duessa turns him into a tree, it is clear that his discovery of Duessa’s hideous nether parts does not ameliorate the danger he faces. The discovery only reveals the previously unforeseen magnitude of the danger.

This motif of danger hiding behind false exteriors reappears in the House of Pride. In this episode, the revelation that the House’s opulent façade hides a menacing threat resonates with Fraudubio’s experience. The primary difference between Fraudubio’s encounter with Duessa, and Redcrosse and the dwarf’s experience in the House of Pride consists in the fact that Redcrosse and his companion manage to escape from the danger they uncover whereas Fraudubio does not. Otherwise, the dwarf’s discovery that the House’s façade disguises a gruesome dungeon full of knights mirror’s Fraudubio’s discovery of Duessa’s hideous nether-parts. Both episodes highlight the uncovering of the grotesque as a revelation of a hidden danger and not the mitigation of that danger because it is only when Redcrosse and his companion see beyond the opulent exterior of the House of Pride that they realize that they “dwell in peril of [...] painefull plight” and try to escape as quickly as they can.

Thus, the exposure of the House’s grotesque dungeons only serves as a first step towards evading the incipient danger—not as a full solution to their imperiled situation. Likewise, Arthur’s deformity-revealing sword-stroke serves primarily to elucidate the

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<sup>7</sup> Though the monster is not exactly “elegant” before Arthur strikes it with his sword, the monster is relatively less gruesome before the blow as compared to after the blow.

gravity of the opponent which he faces. After Arthur's sword blow unveils an even more perverted beast, Arthur's situation is, like the situation of those characters who have previously uncovered great deformity, one of impending danger realized, but not yet resolved. His use of the sword of the spirit, the word of God, does not dispatch the monster nor rescue him from his embattled circumstance.

Like Redcrosse, whose sword is unable to kill Errour, Arthur must rely upon faith to dispatch his foe. When Una helps Redcrosse to overcome the inefficacy of his sword by exhorting him to add faith unto his force, her injunction possesses authority because she is his lady and also a symbol of unified truth. However, when the reader finds Arthur in a similar (if not more grievous) situation, Una's injunction seems less legitimate. When she saves Redcrosse from Errour's coils, she is a figure of integrity, but by the time of Arthur's battle, Una has demonstrated her own need for someone to exhort her to have faith. Since Arthur is the one who provides that exhortation, it scarcely seems fitting for Una to turn around and urge Arthur to deploy faith in his own battle<sup>8</sup>. Una's diminished authority, then, poses a problem for the reader in that it exposes her paradigm of faith to the same circularity which dooms Errour and her spawn. If Una has saved Redcrosse by exhorting him to faith, and then requires an exhortation from Arthur in order to sustain her own faith, who in turn finds himself lacking the faith to defeat Duessa's beast: is faith just as circular a system of language as Errour's dogma? Is faith just the result of an exhortation carried from vector to vector and passed on without any solid foundation outside of the language of exhortation? The role of Arthur's shield in his battle with

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<sup>8</sup> If Una and Arthur represent mere members of the church then such a mutual exchange of exhortations would be un-problematic (even ideal), but since they both represent arch-typical figures a question of authority accompanies their relationship.

Duessa's beast demonstrates that faith does indeed have a foundation beyond the power of words to evoke it. That foundation is providence, not dogma.

As Spenser shifts attention from Arthur's sword to his shield of faith, he describes a stark contrast in the effects of the two weapons on Duessa's beast. Upon seeing the shield for the first time,

[...] the fruitfull-headed beast, amaz'd  
 At flashing beames of that sunshiny shield,  
 Became starke blind, and all his senses daz'd  
 That downe he tumbled on the durtie field,  
 And seem'd himselfe as conquered to yield. (I. viii. 20)

Whereas the sword made the beast writhe and rage so terribly that Orgoglio had to pluck Duessa from the beast's head in order to keep the beast from flinging her to the ground (I. viii. 17), the beast's yielding reaction to the shield of faith highlights its profound power. The image portrays a star-struck, subservient beast rather than a beast made more beastly. The shield has a comparable effect on Orgoglio who "read[s] his end / In that bright shield" and has "no power to hurt, nor to defend" after he sees it<sup>9</sup> (I. viii. 21). Once the shield incapacitates him, Arthur quickly finishes him off with his sword, but this sword-stroke (now enabled by faith) need not make proud example of Arthur's swordsmanship.

Indeed, the power of the shield comes to bear on Arthur's enemies not by his own merit, but through his own failing. Before he has dispatched either Duessa's beast or Orgoglio, the giant forces him to "retyre" and strikes him with a club with such great

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<sup>9</sup> The terrified reaction of Orgoglio in the face of the shield of faith provides supplemental evidence that the faith that Arthur's armor embodies can indeed account for the terrifying aspect of the helmet.

force that “to the ground it doubleth him full low” (I. viii. 17,18). However, Arthur’s embarrassing failure to out-maneuver Orgoglio turns into a great success when

in his fall his shield that covered was,  
 Did loose his vele by chance, and open flew:  
 The light whereof, that heauens light did pas,  
 Such blazing brightnesse through the aier threw,  
 That eye mote not the same endure to vew. (I. viii. 19)

The cloth covering of Arthur’s shield falls off, not through his own enterprise but through his fall. Through Arthur’s weakness, rather than through his effort, the shield releases its power, and in this “chance” occurrence one witnesses a foundation for faith which transcends the infinite regress of exhortation.

I have already noted the contrast between the “little glooming light, much like a shade” (I. i. 14) which Redcrosse’s armour casts into Errour’s den, and Errour’s own affinity for darkness, but in Arthur’s shield that contrast becomes even more significant. Errour’s abhorrence of light stems primarily from her resistance to probing inquiries into her closed system of belief, and her constricting coils re-illustrate her own (and her spawn’s) recoiling from the light of inquiry. That is, the primary movement is not one of outward inquiry but one of circular affirmation or even inward retreat. Spenser’s description of Arthur’s shield of faith, however, emphasizes its throwing of light outward. The shield (after the cover “flew” open) “threw” its light “through” the air. The image focuses on the projection of this light of faith, and like the faith which Arthur encourages Una to have, and the destiny which Arthur himself faithfully pursues, the faith illustrated by his shield depends upon an extendedness, an outward motion. This

extendedness signifies a confidence in something not yet attained: a dependence not upon a merit or a capability already carried inside oneself but a future event which will reconcile grievous circumstances. Una must depend upon Arthur's continued good-will towards her to fend off her sorrow, Arthur must depend upon his dream of Gloriana in order to pursue his destiny, and in the defeat of Orgoglio and Duessa's serpent-like beast, Arthur must depend upon his impending defeat in order to unleash the power of his shield.

In other words, Spenser's characters must resist the conclusions that are immediately available to them, and this in itself is the exercise of faith. Una must eschew her pessimistic perception of her state of affairs, Arthur must not give up on his destiny though he has pursued it for nine months without success, and the reader must not assume that all is lost when Orgoglio smites Arthur with a blow that is beyond the power of mortals to withstand. Because faith manifests itself "by chance" (read Providence)<sup>10</sup>, faith is intrinsically the force which counters reductive interpretations. Faith is an opening rather than a closing, a process of illumination rather than one of retreat, and in this sense it is the antidote to the danger of over-simplified meanings. Faith is not something which one summons up from within oneself in order to apply it, rather it is a gift that comes from God, and thus, something that comes from outside, from a distance, at an appointed time. Spenser illustrates the climactic, predestined element of faith most clearly in Redcrosse's battle with the Edenic Dragon—where Redcrosse is saved by grace through faith.

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<sup>10</sup> In I. xi. 45 Spenser describes Redcrosse's slipping under the tree of life in the following terms, "It chaunst (eternall God that chaunce did guide), / As he recoiled backward, in the mire / His nigh forwearied feeble feet did slide." Due to the similarity between the chance that prompted Redcrosse's fall and the unveiling of Arthur's shield, one should interpret chance occurrences as providential acts of God.

Though the account of Redcrosse's battle with the Edenic dragon involves much more than Redcrosse's own encounter with faith, Spenser brings attention to the role of faith in the battle by continuing some of the same tropes that we have already seen associated with Arthur and Una's faith. Just as Arthur's shield of faith led to the demise of his enemies when "by chance" he fell and dislodged the veil from his shield, so too do the prospects of Redcrosse's battle improve when he fortuitously falls into the well of life. As it reads in the text:

It fortun'd (as faire it then befell)

Behind his back vnweeting, where he stood,

Of auncient time there was a springing well,

.....

Into that same [well] the knight back ouerthrowen, fell. (I. xi. 29-30)

Not only does Redcrosse's experience mirror Arthur's in that it happens to him unexpectedly in the midst of defeat (for the dragon has just scorched Redcrosse with his fiery breath), but it also resembles Una's in that his salvation comes from a source of which he was "vnweeting." Una did not know the reasonable arguments that would overcome her sorrowful despaire, but she like Redcrosse finds strength in them even though they were not yet known, concretized, or fully realized.

In Redcrosse's second experience of grace, a more overt connection with faith replaces the stylistic connection with faith that I have just explicated in his baptism in the well. After his baptism, Redcrosse is a "new-bourne knight" (I. xi. 34), and the description of the continued battle takes the form of a direct attack on the faith of a born-again Christian. Indeed, the dragon shoots his mortal stinger "Quite through his

[Redcrosse's] shield" of faith<sup>11</sup> and into his shoulder (I. xi. 38). The dragon continues to attack Redcrosse's faith when he latches onto his shield with one of his claws. The poem mentions at the outset of the battle that "Dead was it sure, as sure as death in deed, / What euer thing does touch his [the dragon's] ravenous pawes" (I. xi. 12); thus, the dragon's grasping of the shield is an attempt to destroy Redcrosse's faith. At the level of the language itself, the connotation is that faith without works ("deeds") is dead, and Spenser affirms this truth by having Redcrosse hack the claw off the dragon's leg with his sword—thus putting the word of God into practice. However, Spenser's emphasis on faith as an unmerited consequence of grace quickly supercedes the importance of Redcrosse's works because even after he has severed claw from limb, the claw "hong still on the shield" (I. xi. 43), and Redcrosse finds no respite from the dragon's onslaught until he falls under the tree of life. As if to secure in the reader's mind the connection between fortuitous events and the sustenance of faith, Spenser notes that the recovery from the dragon's attack on faith begins when:

It chaunst (eternall God that chaunce did guide)

As he [Redcrosse] recoiled backward, in the mire

His nigh forwearied feeble feet did slide,

And downe he fell, with dread of shame sore terrified. (I. xi. 45)

Redcrosse's feeble fall, guided by chance, lead to his miraculous recovery and his ability to "freshly" rise again.

We have already glimpsed the juxtaposition of faith and despair in Arthur's conversation with Una ("Despaire breeds not [...] where faith is staid"), and in the battle

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<sup>11</sup> In the Letter to Raleigh, Spenser identifies Redcrosse's armour as the "of a Christian man specified by Saint Paul" (17), so when the dragon's assaults shield he assaults Redcrosse's faith.

with the Edenic serpent Spenser revisits the theme with a climactic emphasis. While Redcrosse springs up with renewed faith, the dragon “woxe dismayd, and gan his fate to feare” (I. xi. 52). The dragon has pursued a hasty course of action throughout the battle: in the beginning he approaches “Halfe flying, and halfe footing in his hast” (I. xi. 8), and at the end of the battle he “rusht vpon him [Redcrosse] with outrageous pride” with his mouth “gaping wide” intending “attonce him to have swallowed quite” (I. xi. 53). The dragon’s prideful haste reminds one of Redcrosse’s approach to Error, but now that Redcrosse has followed his quest to its proper end in Eden, he demonstrates not a hasty and reckless approach that seeks a premature end to his quest, but rather a measured and patient approach which results in an appropriately climactic end to his quest.

In stark contrast to the dragon which launches a full frontal assault in spite of his foreboding premonition, Redcrosse engages his foe by “Taking advantage of his open jaw” (I. xi. 53). In this final stroke, Redcrosse demonstrates that he has learned from his earlier battle with Error because he assails the dragon when the opportunity presents itself (and not in a situation where his companions have warned him repeatedly to stay his step). Indeed, when he kills the Edenic dragon, Redcrosse demonstrates that he has assimilated Una’s injunction to add faith unto his force, for shortly after he runs his sword through the dragon’s mouth he “back retyrd” and the dragon’s “life blood forth with all did draw” (I. xi. 53). He employs no flurry of sword-strokes, no prolongation of striving in the battle of attrition, no further attempt to ram the sword down the dragon’s throat. He simply retires and the dragon “his life did breath, / That vanisht into smoke and cloudes swift” (I. xi. 54). By waiting for the appointed and opportune time to make his decisive blow and by retiring shortly after he makes it, Redcrosse exercises a faith



which depends not upon his own resources but the providential timing of God and a faith which looks expectantly forward to an anticipated event—the death of the dragon. Redcrosse has learned not to make over-hasty conclusions (like the ones made by his defeated foe in attempting to swallow Redcrosse all at once), and he has also learned to provisionally accept the climactic ones. He has slipped (multiple times) into fortuitous situations that exceeded the scope of his previous consciousness, and through this process he becomes less willing to jump to absolute conclusions. His prompt withdrawal of his sword from the dragon's mouth suggests that his sudden burst of confident action is a provisional one—appropriate for a particular instant but not appropriate as a universal course of action. The process of slipping and rising, of advancing and retiring which Redcrosse undergoes during the battle mirrors the process of interpretive play involved in reading Spenser's allegory. Redcrosse jabs his sword in and then pulls it back out, and he accomplishes the fulfillment of his quest through an act of interpretive play in which he sees a solution and reaches for it but then retreats from it as the moment passes. He does not seek to absolutize it, and in this act of faith, he kills the dragon who has kept Adam and Eve locked in a tower because they attempted to be like God and possess absolute knowledge of good and evil.

Indeed, in the House of Holiness, where Redcrosse receives his formal religious instruction, faith stresses this variety of provisional application. After Fidelia ("Faith") preaches a sermon that convicts Redcrosse of his sin to such a great degree that "he desired, to end his wretched dayes" (I. x. 21), he remains on the brink of suicide until Speranza "Made him forget all that Fidelia told" (I. x. 22). The House of Holiness thus deploys Fidelia's words in a manner consistent with Redcrosse's final defeat of the

Edenic dragon: first the thrust, then the retreat. Fidelity's power "to kill" the heart "And raise [it] again to life," functions through the provisional interpretation of her words (I. x. 19). Like Redcrosse's slaying of the dragon of original sin and restoring of life to the kingdom of Eden, Fidelity's power resides in the appropriate application of her "puissance great" (I. x. 20). To apply her convicting words to one's heart at all times would lead to destruction. In order to successfully combat the guilt of sin, one must strike sin strategically with Fidelity's words and then remove that sharp rebuke with words of hope—words of salvation to replace those of condemnation.

### **Donne**

Though Book I of *The Faerie Queene* depicts numerous battles with serpents, the frequency with which Spenser relies upon these serpents to elucidate the chief danger and its solution does not parallel Donne's own conviction that "there is a snake in every path, temptations in every vocation" (9). Unlike Spenser's wormes, which occupy the especially traumatic episodes of Redcrosse's life, Donne's wormes afflict his congregants as they live their normal lives. Donne's wormes focus the attention of the audience on the danger as it appears in the everyday world. Donne calls his congregants to a faith in which the battle with the Edenic serpent takes place in whatever locality God has seen fit to place them—not in the far away land of Eden.

Analyzing Donne's version of faith through his worme imagery is a very different task from analyzing Spenser's version of faith through his worme imagery because Donne is less interested in perfect definitions than Spenser is. Donne does not spend time defining what faith is; instead, he simply tries to get his congregation to apply faith

whether they know what they are doing or not. As a result, the relation between faith and Donne's worme imagery will not be as forth-coming as it was in the Spenser section. Nevertheless, by the end of this section the various facets of that relation should be clear. I will examine how Donne's worme imagery recommends a localized faith as the solution to the chief danger of intellectual dilettantism by analyzing: 1) how Donne depicts the ubiquity of the Edenic serpent, 2) how Donne urges his congregation to subvert the worme's malicious intention, and 3) how Donne's worme imagery imitates the faith-bestowing properties of the Eucharist.

The first step in understanding how the faith that Donne proposes differs from the one that Spenser proposes resides in observing how Donne couches his variety of faith within a local (rather than an epic) context. Spenser's epic suggests that the true Edenic dragon can only be fought in Eden<sup>12</sup>, but Donne insists that the battle with the Edenic serpent is more widespread. Donne explains that the Edenic serpent is not on the endangered species list when he exhorts his congregation to:

proceed vigilantly in your several wayes, with a fore-knowledge, that there is every where *coluber in via*, A Snake in the way; in every way that you can take, in every course of life, in every calling there is some of the seed of the old Serpent presents it self (I. 3. 205).

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<sup>12</sup> We know that Redcrosse can only fulfill his quest by defeating the dragon in Eden: 1) because his battle with Errour suggests that he must follow the narrow path to truly reverse the Edenic curse, and 2) because Una tells him as much when he tarries to engage *Despaire* (who is like a "Snake in hidden weedes" (I. ix. 28). When Una sees that Redcrosse is about to kill himself with a knife that *Despaire* has given to him, she snatches the knife away and reprimands him, "Is this the battell, which thou vauntst to fight / With that fire-mouthed Dragon, horrible and bright?" (I. ix. 52). The implication is that Redcrosse should quit endangering his quest with non-Edenic snakes and make his way expediently to Eden. Indeed, Una takes him directly to free her parents, stopping only at the House of Holinesse to let Redcrosse recuperate for his up-coming battle. Even if one interprets Eden as a representation of Redcrosse's soul, Spenser's emphasis on fighting the dragon in Eden still differs significantly from Donne's emphasis that one should fight the serpent in daily life. Spenser's location of the dragon in the soul connotes a spiritual or ethereal battle, but Donne's location of the serpent in daily life stresses the physical or "ordinary" world.

Here, Donne does not define his audience's responsibility in terms of following the proper (narrow) path as Spenser does. Instead, he calls upon them to proceed vigilantly on whatever path they find themselves because all paths lead to some manifestation of the Edenic serpent. On the one hand, Donne's admonition that his congregants "proceed vigilantly [...] with a **fore-knowledge**" resonates with Redcrosse's own need to prepare for his battle with the Edenic dragon. However, Donne's admonition that there is "every where *coluber in via*," limits the epic nature of his congregant's journey. In Donne's version, the Edenic serpent does not stand at the end of the narrow road that leads to Eden; instead he stands in the road, more like a bandit than an archnemesis. An encounter with the Edenic serpent does not just await those who put away their rustic way of life and enter into the queen's service; it awaits everyone—for anyone can be assaulted by a robber—even those who eschew the queen's quest for a more domestic life. Thus, though Donne's description of the Edenic serpent involves the idea of "foreknowledge" which may seem analogous to the forward-looking attitudes that Spenser's knights appropriate, Donne's concern with the future actually draws attention to the pervasiveness of the battle with the Edenic serpent. The battle is in "every way that you can take, in every course of life" and not presented in an exclusively epic context.

Perhaps the best example of how Donne contextualizes the chief danger in the daily lives of his congregants lies not in a literal interpretation of his metaphors, which ubiquitize the Edenic serpent, but in his general style of imagery. Though the previous image of the snake in the way riffs upon the classical imagery of the Edenic serpent, much of Donne's worme imagery falls into the *momento mori* tradition. This imagery

stresses the worme's role in the natural decomposition of the human body rather than in its violent taking of human life. Donne's *momento mori* imagery thrusts the Edenic serpent into the lives of his congregants regardless of their station in life when he reminds them that in death all will be alike. In "Death's Duell" Donne preaches that when he has died:

The *ambitious* man shall have *no satisfaction*, if the *poorest alive* tread upon him, nor the *poorest* receive any *contentment* in being made *equall* to *Princes*, for they *shall be equall but in dust*. One dyeth at his full strength, being wholly at ease and in quiet, and another dyes in the *bitterness of his soul*, and never *eates* with *pleasure*, but they lye down *alike* in the *dust*, and the *worme covers them*; The worme covers them in *Job*, and in *Esay*, it *covers them and is spread under them*, the worme is spred under thee, and the worme *covers thee*. (X. 11. 238).

The mighty and the lowly will both encounter the worme in death, and this trivializes the differences in their lives<sup>13</sup>. Leading a life of repose and pleasure ultimately fails to distance the life of the rich from that of the poor, and in this sense everyone is on a path toward the Edenic serpent that will eat their dust. The very proximity of the worm to the human body tends to emphasize the equivalent plights of the rich and the poor. The worme covers and underspreads everyone who dies, and by surrounding his audience

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<sup>13</sup> The reference to Job expresses the leveling effect of death by alluding to chapter 21 verses 23-26, which reads: "One dieth in his full strength, being wholly at ease and quiet. His breasts are full of milk, and his bones are moistened with marrow. And another dieth in the bitterness of his soul, and never eateth with pleasure. They shall lie down alike in the dust, and the worms shall cover them" (KJV). Likewise, the reference to "Esay" (Isaiah) communicates the leveling effect of death by alluding to chapter 14 verse 11, which reads, "Thy pomp is brought down to the grave, and the noise of thy viols: the worm is spread under thee, and the worms cover thee" (KJV).

with the worme, Donne informs them that no one can escape from the worme either by remaining in the luxury of the Queen's court or by avoiding it all together.

Though this passage reasons that everyone will die and thus encounter the Edenic serpent, the reader should be careful not to underestimate the universality of one's encounter with the worme. To explain the universality of the worme by an event that happens after life would underestimate the daily role as Donne describes it in the lives of his congregants. For Donne, one's death and one's grave do not wait for one at the end of his years; instead he believes that every season of life is a type of death. In "Deaths Duell" Donne claims that "all our *periods* and *transitions* in this life, are so many passages *from death to death*. Our very *birth* and entrance into this life, is *exitus a morte*, an *issue from death*, for in our mothers *wombe* wee are *dead so*, as that we *doe not know* wee live" (X. 11. 231-2). In Donne's mind, there is no "*grave so close, or so putrid a prison, as the wombe,*" and in light of this sentiment, Donne's comments on the universality of one's encounter with the worme seem more like a description of the worme's ubiquity. The worme will meet you when you are dead and in the grave, but one is constantly moving from death to death. From one's conception to one's burial, he always faces the Edenic curse.

I have demonstrated Donne's contention that the Edenic serpent resides in every course that life can take and that it affects every stage of life in so far as that stage is a type of death. However, when Donne describes the worme as something that is not just around a person but actually inside him or her, the preacher reveals how his vision of the world calls for a different sort of faith than Spenser's. By making the serpent so ubiquitous as to actually be inside every person, he shifts the task of faith away from

killing the serpent and toward subverting the serpent's malicious intentions. In hyperbolic style, Donne presses the battle against the serpent into the very bodies and minds of his congregants when he explains that "Man carries the spawn and seed and eggs of affliction in his own flesh and his own thoughts make haste to hatch them, and to bring them up. We make all our worms snakes, all our snakes vipers, all our vipers dragons" (X. 9. 198). One cannot run one's sword through a nascent worm living inside of him. Much less can he slay a full-blown dragon that lives inside him. One cannot obtain the proper perspective to kill something that one's own thoughts nurture.

In addition to the impossibility of obtaining any distance from the serpent and thus gaining an opportunity to kill it, Donne suggests that one would not want to slay the worm even if he could for in his mind the worm becomes one's whole family. He laments that the worm will eat the dust of his loved ones when he says, "*Miserable riddle, when the same worm must be my mother, and my sister, and my selfe. Miserable incest, when I must be married to my mother and my sister*" (X. 11. 238). If Donne does not want the worm to eat him for fear of being thus incestuously married to his mother and sister who are already part of the worm's body, then surely he would not want to kill that worm and thus murder his relatives.

When Donne depicts the challenge of the worm as a miserable riddle, he acknowledges that no definition of virtue (regardless of how perfectly it may be conceived) can rectify the problem posed by the Edenic serpent. The riddle itself is miserable because a human being who was designed for virtue and dignity will meet his or her end in the indiscriminate belly of a worm that makes no distinction between the good and the evil, sage and fool. Since no conception of virtue has the power to

overcome the fate that awaits the worme-ridden human body, Donne focuses his energy on taking advantage of the worme's malicious intent. Rather than try to vanquish the worme as a knight would, Donne asks his congregation to believe that the worme's evil designs actually further Christ's plan of salvation. He thus exhorts his audience to apply their faith to the wormes that surround them rather than project it on some future defeat of the serpent.

This may seem like a counter-intuitive approach to solving the problem of the Edenic serpent, but Donne locates his strategy in the very immediacy of the serpent that is so threatening. Though the ubiquity of the serpent in the lives (and deaths) of his congregation is reason for alarm, the presence of the serpent in the Edenic paradise is reason to believe that the serpent's nearness is not entirely alien to God's plan. When Donne looks to Eden, he notes that "there were serpents in Paradise too; yet *Adam* offered not to goe out of Paradise, till God drove him out" (X. 7. 160). Since there were serpents in Eden while it was still paradise, Donne's congregation need not fear the nearness of the worme, and they should not attempt to extirpate the serpents from Eden.

Instead of killing the wormes, Donne's congregants are—like Paul—to be witnesses and benefactors of the miraculous transformation of the snake from agent of danger into a vehicle for salvation. When Paul is shipwrecked on the Island of Malta, a venomous snake bites him, and when he does not die, he finds himself no longer a prisoner of the Roman state but someone revered as a god by the inhabitants of the island. As Donne terms it in his sermon on Genesis 3:14, "The Viper was *Pauls* advocate; it pleaded for him, and brought the beholders in an instant from extreme to extreme, from crying out that *Paul* was a murderer, to cry that he was a god" (X. 8. 186). Donne's



congregation is to have faith that if the serpent has done this for Paul, then the worme can do the same for them. Indeed, Donne models for his congregation how they should apply this faith to their own lives when in this same sermon he continues:

Though at any time, the Serpent having brought me to a sin, [may] cry out, *Thou art a murderer*, that is, [it may] bring me to a desperate sense of having murdred mine own soul, yet in that darknesse I shall see light, and by a present repentance, and effectual application of the merits of my Savior, I shall make the Serpent see, I am a God; thus far a God, that by my adhering to Christ, I am made partaker of the Divine Nature [...] then I may say to the Serpent, Your meat is dust; and I was dust; but *Deposui terram*, I have shak'd off my dust, by true repentance, for I have shak'd off my self, and am a new creature, and am not now meat for your Table.

(X. 8. 186)

Here, faith consists in seeing the serpent change from a malady into a participant in the redemptive process. The viper that bit Paul argued Paul's case to the inhabitants of the island by convincing them that he was Godlike, and Donne applies the serpent's salvific capacity to his own situation by engaging the serpent in dialogue and letting the debate reassure him of his own adoption as a son of God. When Donne demonstrates how this debate with the serpent brings him from desperation to the "effectual application of the merits of my Saviour," he echoes the way the Edenic dragon scorches Redcrosse and thus propels him into the well of life. However, Donne's depiction stresses the at-any-timeness of miraculous conversion, and so orients his faith according to a more local (less epic) phenomenon. Unlike Redcrosse who makes it all the way to Eden before the

serpent pushes him toward God's grace, Paul does not make it to his destination (Rome) before the serpent becomes his advocate. The implication is that the serpents that Donne's congregants find in their daily lives can serve them as Paul's encounter with the serpent in Malta served him if only they would deal with these serpents in faith. Rather than depend upon a climactic culmination of faith and the saving work of God in the defeat of the serpent, Donne urges his congregation to exercise their faith by applying it to their all too familiar, worme-ridden circumstances. This faith looks not to how God will save believers at the climactic moment, but how he is already using the serpent to manifest the adoption of his congregants as children of God. This faith asks the believer to view the serpent's power to eat dust not as the curse of death in the dissolution of the body but as the salvation of the soul from the Edenic curse. The serpent can eat but dust, and the soul is not dust.

The actual benefit that derives from the serpent becomes more obvious when Donne's worme imagery further addresses the topic of self-examination. The faith that Donne recommends to his congregation has as its touchtone the observation and cognizance of the redemptive process as it takes place in one's own life through the stimulus of the worme. This faith is local in the sense that it observes what is already at hand rather than what God will eventually do later on, and because of this, it invokes the language of household cleaning. Donne preaches:

He [the serpent] eats but our dust, in our death, when he hath brought us to that; that is a mercy; nay he eats up our dust before our death, which is a greater mercy; our carnal affections, our concupiscencies are eaten up, and devoured by him; and so, even his eating is a sweeping, a cleansing, a

purging of us. Many times we are better for his tentations [...] My discerning a tentation, makes me see my weaknesse, and fly to my strength. Nay, I am sometimes the safer, and the readier for a victory, by having been overcome by him. The sense, and the remorse of a sin, after I have fallen into it, puts me into a better state, and establishes better conditions between God and me then were before, when I felt no tentations to sin. He shall eat up my dust, so, as that it shall fly into mine eyes; that is, so work upon my carnall affections, as that they shall not make me blinde, nor unable to discern that it is he that works. (X. 8. 185-6)

In this passage, the serpent is not a monster who imprisons kings and queens in Eden; rather, it is a domestic servant who sweeps, cleans, and purges the sin from one's life. He eats one's carnal affection and "concupiscencies" as he gnaws on the body, devouring the strength and appetite of the flesh as he brings one closer to death. Even more than that, the worme's eating casts dust into one's eyes so that he notices his sinful state, but not so much dust that it blinds him to his situation. The worme, like a housekeeper, stirs up the dust even as he sweeps it away, and by doing so he allows one to benefit from it. And this is how Donne's faith operates on a local instead of an epic format: it replaces confidence in God's provision of a well of life with confidence that the serpent is purifying and has purified oneself.

In the context of the sermon, this passage presents a type of purification that models the fuller purification accomplished by Jesus Christ's crucifixion when he became the serpent who was lifted up ("I am a worme, and no man" (Psalm 22:6)). As

Donne writes at the end of this sermon on Genesis 3:14, "The crucified Serpent hath taken our flesh, and our blood [i.e. he has swept away our dust] and given us his flesh and blood for it" (X. 8. 190). This worme image leaves the congregation with a reminder that the body and blood of Jesus, the Eucharist, are symbols that prop up one's faith through their immediacy. They make an esoteric, soteriological event more accessible by rehearsing the crucifixion in the local parish. The Eucharist makes the substitutionary atonement part of the parishioner's common experience. In this sense, Donne's worme imagery also invokes faith by making the esoteric more accessible by localizing God's redemptive work in the common experience of his audience. Indeed, since flesh-eating wormes feature so prominently in Donne's worme imagery, their close relation to Eucharistic theology should not come as a surprise. One could even envision the Eucharist and Donne's flesh-eating worme imagery as two sides of the fulfillment of the first messianic prophecy. The Eucharist stresses the head crushing part of the prophecy by urging the communicant to have faith that Jesus has defeated death, the penalty for sin. Donne's worme imagery, however, focuses on the heel-biting part of the prophecy by urging congregants to believe that the serpent eats up one's sin even as he devours one's flesh. The heel-biting side of the prophecy localizes God's saving work by bringing it out of the church and into a more ordinary environment where the congregation feels affliction, heel biting, and the temptation to sin most often.

The esoteric idea which Donne's worme imagery most aims to localize in the congregant's daily life is the redemptive potential of affliction. Suffering extreme hardship is certainly a tax on one's faith (it made Job renounce God), so in using worme imagery to explain how God utilizes affliction, Donne bolsters the faith of his

congregation. I have already addressed several places where Donne draws attention to the serpent's paradoxically beneficial effects, so I will not belabor the point. I will, however, address a significant correspondence between two sermon excerpts in which Donne deploys worme imagery as he attempts to explain what afflictions mean for the believer. In the first excerpt, the serpent does not have a strong localizing function (other than the fact that it serves as an elegant, illustrative tool for explaining how God's afflictions work). In the second passage however, the movement towards localization is strong. Together, they will further demonstrate how Donne's worme imagery moves its audience to faith—a faith based on the local rather than the epically extended.

The first passage glosses the story from the book of Exodus in which Moses's staff turns into a serpent while pharaoh is watching. Before turning back into a staff, this serpent devours the serpents which pharaoh's magicians have produced from their own staffs. Donne's explication of the story describes the way in which afflictions that come from God work for the believer's benefit and then change into something more pleasant. The following comes from the same sermon in which Donne discusses the three names of man and how the scripture uses the name "Gheber," which describes man at his most excellent, in order to proclaim "I am the man, that hath seen affliction, by the rod of his wrath" (Lamentations 3:1). By the time the sermon progresses to the passage I am about to quote, the thrust of the sermon has completed its illustration of the ubiquity of affliction and has moved on to explain that the affliction that comes from God relents as quickly as it can. In Donne's words:

When Gods rod in *Moses* hand, was changed to a Serpent, it did no harme,  
that did but devoure the other Serpents: when Gods rods are heaviest upon

us, if they devoure other rods, that is, enable us to put off the consideration of the malice and oppression of other Men, and all displeasure towards them, and lay all upon God, for our sinnes, these *serpentine* rods have wrought a good effect: When *Moses* his Rod was a Serpent, yet it return'd quickly to a Rod againe; how bitter so ever Gods corrections be, they returne soone to their naturall sweetnesse" (X. 9. 210).

Donne here describes the benefit of the serpent as he does in other places: as the catalyst for repentance and virtue. When he notes that the devouring serpent turns back into Moses' staff, he adds that the benefit that one gains from the affliction of the serpent will one day take a more pleasant form. Indeed, after its transformation in Pharaoh's court, Moses' staff goes on to perform miraculous wonders. When Moses strikes the Red Sea with it, the waters part; when he holds it above a raging battle, the sun stands still until the Israelites prevail; and when he strikes a desert rock with it, a stream appears from which people can drink. The message is that if God's corrections are now burdensome, God's provision will be much sweeter later on. The benefit, the correction, of the serpent is an affliction now, but since God is faithfully using that affliction to benefit his chosen one, who can doubt that his attentions will be exponentially more wonderful when they no longer have to steer one away from sin and towards repentance?

Donne localizes this concept in the homes and business places of his congregants when he teaches them about reconciliation with God in an earlier sermon. Though this means that he is not localizing the reconciliation discussed above in the lives of those particular congregants, Donne's mind certainly connects the idea of reconciliation with that of localization. In this sermon preached on 2 Corinthians 5:20 ("We pray yee in

Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God"), Donne explains the nature of reconciliation, saying, that if "A *Reconciliation* is required" then "there is an enmitie" between the sides needing reconciliation (X. 5. 135). But if there is need of reconciliation, then between the two sides "there was a friendship" in the past (X. 5. 135). If two sides had always been at odds, then a new peace would not have any "re-conciliation" about it. It would be an entirely new state of affairs. However, the peace that Jesus offers is in fact reconciliation between God and man because Adam was once at peace with God in the Garden of Eden. Since there has been a past friendship, there is hope that the present enmity will give way to a future friendship, and since the past friendship between God and Adam is surpassed by the "elder Innocency" of the 2<sup>nd</sup> friendship between God and man in Christ, the future paradise will be even sweeter than the first.

In his sermon Donne conveys this idea through localization and a worme image. He explains that the present enmity between God and man, man's current state of affliction, promises an unfathomable paradise through reconciliation when he exhorts his congregation to "be ye reconciled to God" and to:

Go home, and if you finde an over-burden of children, negligence in servants, crosses in your tradings, narrownesse, penury in your estate, yet this penurious, and this encumbred house shall be your Paradise. Go forth, into the Country, and if you finde unseasonableness in the weather, rots in your sheep, murrains in your cattell, worms in your corn, backwardnesse in your rents, oppression in your Landlord, yet this field of thorns and brambles shall be your Paradise. (X. 5. 138-9)

At home in one's house and on one's estate, Donne's congregation is to see their afflictions as symbols for the greatness of the coming Paradise. Donne urges his audience to look upon their afflicted condition, the wormes in their corn, because their present affliction will stir them to faith that they will once again be at peace with the serpent and in paradise with God. This comfort that affliction will turn into paradise mirrors the claim in the previous passage that God's serpent's will regain their natural sweetness. In this passage however, the exhortation to go home and to one's estates localizes the concepts in his congregation's ordinary lives. In the second passage crop-eating wormes replace Moses' miraculous serpent eating staff, and in this contrast we witness an attempt to apply the lifted up serpent who swallowed up death to the everyday lives of the congregants.

The contrast between Spenser's extended and epic faith and Donne's local faith may best be summarized in the following way. Donne draws attention toward God's present action in redeeming the world through affliction. He repeatedly directs his audience's attention to their everyday lives—not to some imaginary quest to save a princess from a faraway dragon. Though both Spenser and Donne's versions of faith value persistence (think of Arthur's long search for Gloriana and Donne's exhortation for his congregation to focus on their *daily* strife), their faiths diverge in their vision of salvation. Whereas Spenser depicts salvation in terms of defeating the dragon through the climactically providential acts of God, Donne portrays salvation by infusing the soteriological into the mundane. Of course, part of this difference stems from Spenser's allegorical mode, which describes the journey of faith a Christian "everyman" in chivalric terms. Thus, Donne's emphasis on the role of affliction in one's daily life is not



entirely distinct from the way that the Edenic dragon scorches Redcrosse and makes him fall into the well of life. However, Donne's emphasis on simple application as opposed to Spenser's emphasis on avoiding reductionism generate a true distinction in the ways that they combat the chief danger of the human situation. Ultimately, this distinction is most visible in the Biblical hermeneutics of each author, and this is the topic of the final chapter.

## Conclusion

The previous two chapters have argued that Spenser and Donne describe the chief danger and the solution to that danger through distinct spatial metaphors—metaphors which often manifest themselves in terms of the worme imagery that each author deploys. Spenser depicts Error's circular constrictions as oversimplification and depicts Redcrosse's immediate approach to this serpent as an attempt to conclude his quest prematurely. In Book I of *The Faerie Queene*, one avoids the danger of oversimplification by engaging in a faith which looks expectantly to that which is not yet fully realized. Like the dragon on Arthur's helmet, this faith summons one to undertake a prolonged and hazardous quest. Donne on the other hand portrays the chief danger as the flying serpent which tempts one's nobler faculties by encouraging too much subtlety and not enough application. In order to defend against this intellectual dilettantism (an overly extended process of speculation), one must look away from the ethereal serpent that distances itself from reality and look to the worme already creeping in every circumstance of life. Such a movement from the speculative to the tangible reveals God as he is already at work in the daily life of his beloved—even through the very wormes which gnaw away at her health. This faith, rooted as it is in one's immediate surroundings, compels one to obey God's will in the most accessible sphere which turns out—in spite of its mundane appearance—to be an extraordinarily spiritual one after all.

In order to further demonstrate the presence of these conceptual frameworks in the work of each author, I will now turn my attention to the relation between these frameworks as they appear in each author's approach to Biblical hermeneutics. Such an analysis will provide a (relatively) concrete conclusion to what has been up to this point a

highly speculative exercise in textual interpretation. Though it is impossible to determine whether Spenser's wariness of the immediate and Donne's distrust of the extended propel them toward their distinct modes of Biblical interpretation or whether these modes of interpretation precipitate their formulation of the post-lapsarian world, an analysis of their preferred hermeneutical processes will provide an anchor point for seeing their distinctive approaches to the world. It will ground my interpretation of their own text-making in their relationship with another authoritative text, and will thus add credibility to my interpretation. The spatial and serpentine metaphors deployed so prominently in their works resonate with their respective Biblical hermeneutics.

In order to summarize each author's Biblical hermeneutic, one could say that Spenser tends to emphasize the context of scriptural passages—that is, seeing the passage as a part of a longer story or quest, but Donne sometimes wrests passages from their original context and provides new contexts for them. Donne looks into the language of the fragment to extrapolate its significance rather than derive (like Spenser) the passage's significance from its surroundings. That is to say that Donne looks into the construction of a phrase or the connotation of a word in order to render its meaning while Spenser construes the meaning of a passage according to how it corresponds to the verses that surround it. Of course, these hermeneutics are not mutually exclusive, but Spenser tends to interpret the scripture with a gesture toward the serpent at the beginning of the Bible and toward the prophetic demise of that serpent at the end of the Bible whereas Donne tends to interpret the scripture with an eye toward the serpent that is in every street, with an eye toward the worm whose eggs are already hatching inside his audience.

Spenser most overtly addresses Biblical hermeneutics in relation to two serpent images. The first is Despaire, who creeps close “as [a] Snake in hidden weedes” (I. ix. 28), and the second is the serpent enfolded on Fidelia’s golden cup (I. x. 13). I will now turn my attention to the first of these images.

When Despaire tempts Redcrosse to commit suicide, he deploys as his primary tool the decontextualization of scripture. John N. King has argued persuasively that

Despair exemplifies the fault of quotation out of context by piling up incomplete references to the scriptures in order to confound Redcrosse, who can neither reply effectively to the heaped-up proofs of his state of sin nor recognize that those arguments constitute a mismatched pastiche of texts drawn from the Epistle to the Romans and other scriptures in the Old and New Testaments (215).

Indeed, truncated reference features prominently in Despaire’s temptation of Redcrosse when he preaches:

Is not his [God’s] law, Let every sinner die:  
Die shall all flesh? What then must need be donne,  
Is it not better to go willinglie,  
Then linger, till the glasse be all out ronne? (I. ix. 47)

As King suggests, Despaire’s question “Is not his law, Let every sinner die” paraphrases the first part of Romans 6:23—“the wages of sinne is death” (216). When Despaire cites this verse out of context, having already convinced Redcrosse that he is a sinner, he makes suicide seem as if it were in accordance with God’s will. To complement the

effect of his use of scripture, he even suggests that the knight should go to his death “willinglie.”

Yet Spenser leaves no room for doubt in the mind of his audience concerning whether or not Despaire’s interpretation of the Bible is legitimate. As King points out, “Una intervenes in this one-sided debate by completing the Pauline argument that Despair has left half-stated” for “she points out that he has suppressed the merciful ending of [...the] text [that] concludes: ‘but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Rom. 6:23)” (216). In the words of Una, “Where iustice growes, there growes eke greater grace, / The which doth quench the brond of hellish smart, / and that accurst hand-writing doth deface” (I. ix. 53). Though the law, which was originally written by the hand of God on the stone tablets given to Moses, demands justice, the grace of God wipes out the penalty of that code and saves the sinner from condemnation.

In this episode, Spenser clearly emphasizes the importance of interpreting the Bible in context. The temptation to wrest certain phrases from the text and then jump to a premature conclusion is just another manifestation of the error into which Redcrosse has been falling ever since he departed from Gloriana’s court. When Una chastises her knight by asking him if this is the “battell, which thou vauntst to fight / With that fire-mouthed Dragon, horrible and bright?” (I. ix. 52), she echoes her admonition that Redcrosse should not wander into Errour’s cave but should proceed to Eden to fight the climactic battle of the quest. Indeed, the Biblical hermeneutic she proposes makes the same motion away from the overly local focus of the Snake “creeping close” (I. ix. 28), and toward a broader (more epic) field of battle. She ushers Redcrosse toward a grander

scriptural context even as she ushers him to the House of Holinesse, where Fidelia confronts him with a stylized serpent image and a Bible sealed with blood.

When Fidelia greets Redcrosse with a golden communion cup in one hand and an impressive Bible in the other, she stresses the reverence with which one must approach the elements that she holds. She is after all “Fidelia hight” and the very loftiness of her name combines with the “sunny beames” which she throws from her face to convince the onlooker that he is in the presence of the divine (I. x. 12). In her presentation of the scriptures, there will be no casual quotation. Instead, her iconic portrayal of the scriptures as a counterpart to the Holy Communion stresses the need to see them in context of the savior’s crucifixion. The cup brims with the “wine and water” which represents Christ’s blood, and the presence of the Bible which is “signd and seald with blood” invokes not only its role in prophesying and reporting the substitutionary atonement, but also its role as the corporeal counter part to the Eucharistic wine. When Jesus is fasting in the dessert, he says that “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Matt. 4.4, KJV), and Fidelia’s juxtaposition of the communion wine and the Bible resonate with this passage in construing the Bible as a type of communion bread. At the very least, the iconic portrayal of the Bible next to the cup reminds the audience that the Bible deserves the same degree of reverence that belongs to the Holy Communion, and such a proposition evokes the way in which Jesus refutes Satan’s irreverent use of scripture in Matthew chapter 4.

For example, when Satan takes Jesus up to the highest point of the temple and bids him to prove that he is the Son of God by throwing himself to the ground, he tempts

Jesus by quoting Psalm 91: 11-12. Satan says that he should cast himself down “for it is written, He [God] shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone” (Matt 4.6, KJV). Jesus, however, refutes Satan by placing the verse in a broader context. He quotes Deuteronomy 6:16 saying, “It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God” (Matt 4.7, KJV). Though Jesus does not respond with a passage that is contiguous with Satan’s passage, he does contextualize Satan’s passage within a broader view of scripture. That is, he balances Satan’s recommendation by locating it within the broader theme of temptation in a way that is comparable with the way that Una balances Despaire’s guilt-mongering with the doctrine of grace. Indeed, since Fidelity’s presentation of the communion cup and the Bible, follows so quickly upon the heels of Redcrosse’s temptation by Despaire, and since the juxtaposition of the Bible and the communion cup readily evoke Jesus’ temptation to turn the stones to bread, the association of Matthew 4:7 with the Fidelity episode blends well with Spenser’s message concerning Biblical hermeneutics. Through the evocation of Jesus’ temptation by Satan, Spenser reiterates the importance of interpreting the Scriptures with an eye toward their broader context.

The serpent’s presence on the golden cup summarizes this lesson in Biblical hermeneutics. The serpent’s horrible aspect (“That horreur made to all, that did behold [it]” (I. x. 13)) reminds one to deal solemnly with the elements that Fidelity presents just as its stylized and enfolded portrayal reminds one that she is dealing with things that transcend the everyday realm. This serpent does not resemble Donne’s snake in the way; instead it seems aloof and archetypal. It reiterates the importance of context by evoking

the earlier Error episode in which Error's spawn died gruesome deaths when they approached their mother (herself a brazen serpent) out of her proper context. When they misinterpreted the nature of her blood, their bellies burst. Thus, the serpent on Fidelity's cup warns Spenser's audience not to drink of that cup, or interpret the book signed and sealed in blood without paying attention to its proper context. For in that book "darke things were writ, hard to be vnderstood" (I. x. 13).

In both the Despaire episode and the Fidelity episode, Spenser intertwines his message about the importance of context with his worme imagery. The implied warnings that Redcrosse should have kept his distance from Dispaire (the serpent that creeps close) mirrors the way in which he should have taken a step back from the Biblical text that Despaire quoted to him so that he could have seen it in its broader context. Likewise, the stylized posture of the serpent on Fidelity's cup warns him to approach both the Eucharist and the scripture with reverence—a reverence that stresses proper contextualization given the ghastly fate of Error's spawn when they wrested their mother's blood out of its natural context. This emphasis on context appears more generally in Redcrosse's quest for holiness in that Redcrosse is learning that he is both sinner and saint. His context is indeed a complicated one, for though the law condemns his sins, God in his grace has forgiven him.

### **Donne**

In order to finalize the distinction between Spenser's concern for scriptural context and Donne's concern for localized meaning—between Spenser's advocacy of epic extension and Donne's support of immediate application—I will now turn my



attention to Donne's Biblical hermeneutic. I do not mean to imply that Donne opposes contextual interpretation. Indeed, he sometimes exhorts his audience to avoid proof-texting or malicious decontextualization of the scriptures. His biblical hermeneutic does, however, differ from Spenser's and this difference mirrors the difference in their general approach to the post-lapsarian world. To demonstrate how he searches for the meaning within a truncated text I will: 1) examine his gloss on Matthew chapter 4, 2) observe how he localizes meaning within a single word (or even a single suffix), and 3) witness his method of recontextualizing the scripture.

While Spenser criticizes Redcrosse for failing to add grace to Despaire's warning of condemnation, Donne makes a different critique of the Biblical hermeneutic that would tempt one to suicide. In his sermon about the punishment of the serpent, Donne makes an isolated allusion to the Matthew 4 passage which I have discussed above. Donne's allusion to the passage overlaps with Spenser's in that both authors disparage the Biblical hermeneutic advocated by Satan. However, Donne's gloss differs from Spenser's because it evokes the danger of running too quickly to a broader context. Donne suggests this hermeneutical stance when he preaches, "no man may cast himself from a Pinnacle, because an Angel may support him: no man may kill himself, because there is a resurrection of the body; nor wound his soul to death by sin, because there may be a resurrection of that, by grace" (X. 8. 183). Unlike Spenser's Despaire episode in which Una rescues Redcrosse from suicide by placing Despaire's words of condemnation within the context of God's grace, Donne's gloss suggests that the temptation to suicide lies more in a presumption that grace follows sin rather than an ignorance that "where justice growes, there growes eke greater grace" (*Faerie Queene* I. ix. 53). Donne makes

this observation in the midst of a wider argument concerning there “being no room for presumption upon God” (X. 8. 183), and he thus emphasizes that the misinterpretation of scripture stems from depending too heavily on the broader context of grace.

Indeed, Donne warns his audience not to abandon texts of condemnation too quickly. He suggests that Jesus’ response to Satan’s temptation is not so much a contextualization of Satan’s wrested passage of scripture, but rather a return to the law, which itself pertains to the Son’s saving work. Jesus does not refute Satan by quoting the verses in Psalm 91 that his tempter has omitted; instead, he refutes him by quoting an equally isolated verse in Deuteronomy 6. To proceed too quickly to the verses in the Psalms about God’s sending angels to care for his son is to fail to apply the grace that God has implanted in the law. It is a misapplication of the law, a presupposition that the law cannot be fully applied until a passage of grace makes use of its heart pricking conviction. Immediately after preaching the above passage, Donne insists that passages of condemnation possess grace within them when he says, “in the punishment of the Serpent, we shall see, that his [God’s] Mercy and Justice are inseparable [...] Mercy and Justice make up but one act” (X. 8. 183). That is to say that the proper interpretation of the scriptures is not so much a matter of pairing texts of condemnation with their corresponding texts of salvation, but locating both of these concepts within a single text—which in the case of this sermon is the last fifth of Genesis 3:14 “And dust shalt thou eat all the dayes of thy Life.” Though both Donne and Una remind their audiences that where there is justice, there is also greater grace, their textual methods differ significantly. Una provides the missing texts to balance the justice with mercy, but Donne looks into the texts to find mercy in the justice. Donne’s Biblical hermeneutic

locates mercy in the affliction of the serpent in the same way that the faith he recommends to his congregants locates God's saving work within the afflictions of daily life (rather than in some fanciful story about knights pricking on the plain).

Perhaps my interpretation of Donne's gloss of Matthew 4 seems short on concrete evidence, but other passages lend creditability to this interpretation by more clearly demonstrating how Donne locates elaborate meanings within a small portion of a text. Take for example the very first sentence of the sermon that Donne preached before the corpse of King James in 1625. The sermon is on a text from the Song of Solomon, but Donne begins with a gloss on a single word from the creation account ("*Faciamus*") in order to introduce the idea of the Trinity upon which he bases the structure of the sermon. Donne preaches:

In the Creation of man, in that one word, *Faciamus, let Vs make man*, God gave such an intimation of the *Trinity*, as that we may well enlarge, and spread, and paraphrase that one word, so farre, as to heare therein, a councill of all the *three Persons*, agreeing in this gracious designe upon Man, *faciamus*, let us *make* him, make him and *mend* him, and make him *sure*: I, the Father, will make him by my power; if he should fall, Thou the Sonne shalt repayr him, re-edify him, redeem him; if he should distrust, that this Redemption belonged not to him, Thou, the *Holy Ghost*, shalt apply to his particular soule, and conscience, this *mercy* of mine, and this *merit* of the Sonnes; and so let us *make him*. (VI. 14. 282)

In this passage Donne enlarges, spreads, and paraphrases the meaning of a single word (indeed, the emphasis is on the plural ending of the word) so that it encompasses the

entire soteriological story from beginning to end. It seems as though Donne has as great an aspiration for this one word as Spenser has for all of Book I of *The Faerie Queene*. Donne sees not only the chief danger of intellectual diletantism in this word (for it presupposes the human penchant for *distrusting* rather than applying the available redemption), but it also describes the solution to that threat—the application of the merit of the Son to the individual soul.

In this same sermon that Donne preaches on Genesis 3:14 and in a passage, which I have addressed in a previous chapter, Donne once again places tremendous emphasis on a small portion of a text. When he discusses God's impatience with mere agents of sin, (those who help others to sin without themselves gaining the benefit of the sin), he contrasts God's words to Adam and Eve with those that he speaks to the serpent. He asks Adam and Eve (the actual perpetrators of the sin) questions concerning where they are and who told them that they were naked, "But to the Serpent no such breathing; the first word is, *Quia fecisti*; no calling for evidence whether he had done it or no, but *Because thou hast done it, thou art accursed*" (X. 8. 182). This is to say that in the directness of God's condemnation of the serpent, Donne sees mercy in God's dealing with humankind. The absence of interrogative "breathing" in the serpent's condemnation turns this passage of condemnation (which Donne calls "the arraignment of all the world"), into a passage of grace. While it is true that the interpretation depends upon God's words to Adam to Eve as well as his words to the serpent, Donne localizes the meaning within the words "*Quia Fecisti*" and thus infuses them with a meaning that transcends their merely contextual significance. Regardless of how large a role context plays in this infusion of

meaning, Donne preaches as if the meaning were somehow imbedded in the words themselves. He repeats the words "*Quia Fecisti*" with dramatic emphasis.

Nevertheless, the example which most powerfully exemplifies how he locates grace in condemnation (especially as it pertains to the serpent motif) comes later in the same sermon when he addresses the fact that the serpent must eat dust all the days of its life. Donne argues that the word "dust" actually expresses hope for humankind because in Christ, humans are not dust. Though he alludes to other parts of the Bible when he makes his point, these allusions do not contextualize the term "dust" in the way that Una contextualizes Despaire's passages of condemnation. Instead, these allusions demonstrate that the promise of salvation is actually located within the language of the condemnation itself. Donne says:

I am no longer meat for the Serpent, for *Dust must he eat all the days of his life*. I am a branch of that Vine, (*Christ is the vine and we are the branches*) I am a leafe of the *Rose of Sharon*, and of that *Lilly of the valleys*; I am a plant in the *Orchard of Pomegranats*, and that Orchard of Pomegranats is the Church; I am a drop of that dew, that dew that lay upon the *head* of Christ. And this Vine, and this Rose, and Lilly, and Pomegranats, of Paradise, and this Dew of heaven, are not Dust, *And dust must thou eate all the dayes of thy life*. (X. 8. 187)

The reference to the vine of Christ from John 15:5, and the references to the rose of Sharon, the lilies of the valley, the Orchard of Pomegranates, and the dew of heaven from Song of Solomon (2:1, 2:1, 4:13, and 5:2) emphasize the fact that condemnation of the serpent is actually mercy to humankind. The serpent will have power over earthly

bodies, but will be unable to touch humans in so far as they are in Christ. So far from demonstrating the practice of contextualization, Donne's excerpting of snippets from other parts of the Bible actually highlights the depth of meaning located within isolated passages.

But Donne's belief that meaning is highly concentrated within the words of scripture does not demonstrate that he sometimes downplays the importance of context. Una, after all, seems to think that the meaning of the second half of Romans 6:23 is very potent, yet the gist of her exhortation emphasizes the importance of context. In order to see the full extent of the contrast between Donne and Spenser one must observe how Donne disregards the contexts of some of the passages that he explicates.

When, in the sermon I have been discussing, Donne explicates the first degree of the punishment of the serpent (that the serpent must creep upon his belly), he demonstrates his willingness to provide his own context for biblical passages. As he explicates the words "*Super pectus, He must creep upon his belly*" (X. 8. 183), he posits that "it should rather have been said *super pectus vestrum*, Hee shall creep upon your belly, then upon his owne" (X. 8. 184), for the serpent has power over a person's affections of which the belly is the seat. Donne does not criticize the scripture as it stands in the Vulgate, nor does he formally alter the words that come after "*super pectus*." He does, however, play with the original context of the words in order to draw out a meaning which he and (as it stands in the sermon) Saint Augustine and Saint Gregory have located within the text<sup>14</sup>. In playing with the grammatical form of the phrase, Donne is certainly

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<sup>14</sup> Some one familiar with the text of this sermon may object that what I am alleging is a decontextualization is really just Donne's attempt to describe how Saints Augustine and Gregory have interpreted the text. I disagree with this position because Donne does in fact endorse the reading. Furthermore, one can look to other examples of Donne's "re-writing" of scripture. For example, he glosses

paying attention to the narrow context of the words, but his very altering of the phrasing disregards the sort of reverence that *Fidelia* commands for the scripture. Donne's willingness to change the context connotes that, while context conveys meaning, one must occasionally recast it so that it agrees with the inner meaning of the scripture in that place.

Another of Donne's recontextualizations appears in "Death's Duell" when he wrests the cock that crowed for Peter from its original scriptural use. In its original context, the cock crows after Peter has denied Jesus three times, and it causes him to burst into tears because he is ashamed of how he has acted during the night when Jesus needed him the most (Luke 22.60-61). Donne recontextualizes this rooster by pretending that he himself is the rooster who calls his congregation, rather than Peter, to repentance. Though this certainly does not deny or contradict the original context, it does root the meaning in the text in a way that enables Donne to apply it without copious qualification. Donne essentially relocates the passage into the present when he preaches, "How thou passedst all that time last night, thou knowest. If thou didst any thing then that needed *Peters teares*, and hast *not shed them*, let me be thy *Cock*, doe it now" (X. 11. 246). In seeking to convict his audience of their sins, Donne demonstrates that he is not only willing to recontextualize scripture, but that such recontextualization is an important part of the type of interpretation that leads promptly to application. His emphasis here is not on the precise circumstances of Peter's crying or in whether his tears were virtuous or

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2 Corinthians 5:6 in this way when in *Death's Duell* he writes, "though the *Apostle* would not say *morimur*, that, whilst wee are in the body wee are dead, yet he says, *Peregrinamur*, whilst wee are in the body, we are but in a *pilgrimage*, and we are absent from the Lord; he might have sayd *dead*, for this whole world is but an *universall church-yard*, but our *common grave*" (X. 11. 234). For the sake of maintaining a progressive and non-redundant argument, I will not explicate this quote at this time.

not; instead he apprehends a particular reading of the passage and brings it to bear on the lives of his congregants.

Donne talks about this process more overtly when he recontextualizes the words of Martha, the sister of Lazarus. In a funeral sermon that Donne preaches in 1626, he expounds Martha's words from John 11:21 ("Lord if you hadst been here, my brother had not died") to illustrate that there is nothing perfect in this world, and then he concludes the sermon by recontextualizing her words in order to demonstrate "The largenesse of Gods goodnesse to us, in affording even to mans body, so dissolved into putrefaction, an incorruptible and a glorious state" (VII. 10. 259). Donne preaches:

by extending the Text, from *Martha* to this occasion; so shall we dismiss you with Consolation, by a like occasional inverting of the Text, from passion in *Martha's* mouth, "*Lord, if thou hadst been here, my Brother had not dyed*, to joy in ours, *Lord, because thou wast here, our Brother is not dead.* (VII. 10. 273)

Donne goes on to explain that Christ had been "here" in the sense that he had been with this man and in this man, and through this "misquotation" of Martha's words, Donne testifies to the saving work of Christ. The extension and inversion of the text imparts the joy of resurrection to his audience.

In light of these recontextualizations of scripture, one might wonder if Donne should not be taken at his word when he says, "It is not for man to insert, to inlay other words into the word of God" (I. 6. 252). He says this as an introductory comment in a sermon preached on Luke 23:40 which records the words of one of the thieves crucified with Jesus. The biblical text for the sermon reads, "Fearest not thou God, being under the



same condemnation,” so Donne’s condemnation of inserting words into the scripture take on a particularly severe aspect. Nevertheless, Donne illuminates (with significant emphasis on the role of the worme) that God expresses his will through other voices than His own. That is, God’s voice expresses itself out of its natural context as His voice. He describes the Bible as a Mosaic of voices which the Holy Spirit renders as the unified voice of God. He preaches:

But when the Holy Ghost is the workman, in the true Scriptures, we have a glorious sight of this Mosaick, this various, this mingled work; where the words of the Serpent in seducing our first parents, The words of Balaams Ass in instructing the rider himself, The words of prophane Poets, in the writings and use of the Apostle, The words of Caiaphas prophesying that it was expedient that one should dye for all, The words of the Divil himself (*Jesus I know, and Paul I know*) And here in this text, the words of a Thief executed for the breach of the Law; do all concur to the making up of the Scripture of the word of God. (I. 6. 253)

Here, Donne argues that in order to hear the voice of God speaking through the scripture, the audience must sometimes hear God speak in voices that are not his own. Even the voice of the devil in the words spoken through a demon possessed man (Acts 19:1) may convey God’s message when they are taken out of context.

But if the process of refuting Satan has more to do with seeing God’s words in the words that Satan speaks than it does with supplementing his menacing words with a reassurance of grace, Donne’s most powerful argument for the practice of scriptural recontextualization comes near the end of the sermon when he contrasts Jesus’ use of the

scripture with the way that those who observed his crucifixion use it. In order to explain that merely understanding Christ dishonors him when that understanding is not applied, he preaches:

The Scribes, who should have applied the ancient Prophecies to the present accomplishment of them in the death of Christ: the Pharisees, who should have supplied their imperfect fulfilling of the Law, in that full satisfaction, the death of Christ: the Elders, the Rulers, the Souldiers, are all noted to have reviled Christ: they all concur to the performance of that Prophecie in the person of Christ; and yet they will not see that the Prophecie is performed in him: *All they that see me have me in derision: they persecute him whom thou hast smitten, and they adde unto the sorrowes of him whom thou hast wounded: Our Fathers trusted in thee, they trusted in thee, and were delivered; but I am a worm and no man, a shame to men, and the contempt of the people.* (I. 6. 262-3)

By wresting Psalm 22 from David's mouth and speaking its words in his own situation, Jesus applies the prophecies about the substitutionary atonement to the present reality. David's lament about God having forsaken him no longer pertains simply to the travails of his kingship over Israel because Jesus has applied them to a more manifest expression of God's plan for his chosen people. Notably, Jesus accomplishes this divine plan by identifying his distress with the plight of the worm. This identification of the Son of God with the miserable worm is the ultimate union of justice and mercy, which Donne sees in the condemnation of the worm, and this union, this infusion of meaning into the words of David, contrasts with the biblical hermeneutic of the scribes, Pharisees, elders, rulers, and

soldiers who are much more concerned with the contextual prophecies about the messiah. They refuse to envision the “ancient Prophecies” in “present accomplishment of them;” thus, their refusal to acknowledge that the Christ is the messiah hinges upon their failure to apply the old scriptures in the new context.

As a final step toward differentiating Donne’s biblical hermeneutic from Spensers’, one should examine what Donne says about the literal interpretation of a text. His definition of the literal stresses not the contextual meaning of a given phrase, but the spiritual or figurative meaning of the phrase with which the Holy Spirit imbues it “in that place.” Donne preaches:

The literall sense is always to be preserved; but the literall sense is not alwayes to be discerned: for the literall sense is not always that, which the very Letter and Grammer of the place presents, as where it is literally said, *That Christ is a Vine*, and literally, *That his flesh is bread*, and literally, *That the new Ierusalem is thus situated, thus built, thus furnished*: But the literall sense of every place, is the principall intention of the Holy Ghost, in that place: And his principall intention in many places, is to express things by allegories, by figures; so that in many places of Scripture, a figurative sense is the literall sense” (VI. 2. 62).

Though both Spenser and Donne pay great attention to the figurative and allegorical meanings of a text, Donne’s interest in that meaning locates itself within the text itself rather than within the broader context of the phrase. According to Donne, the figurative meaning of a phrase does not directly correspond to the “Letter and Grammar” of the phrase, instead it lies underneath the syntactic elements of the language in the “intention

of the Holy Ghost in that place.” As I have noted above, Donne frequently scrutinizes individual words (for example his emphasis on the plural ending of “*faciamus*”), but this variety of analysis varies from the letter and grammar to which he alludes above. In this instance, Donne is using letter and grammar to refer to the syntactic meaning of a given text, but his analysis of words like “*faciamus*” examine the iconic aspects of the word’s letter and grammar. The letters “mus” stand not just for a plural but for a conversation amongst the Trinity. The “ia” does not just indicate a hypothetical, subjunctive form but a full scale planning of the history of human redemption. The letters of a word do not so much signify a grammatical function as they signify a detailed picture of what is taking place. Donne’s literal reading is often “a reading into” the text rather than an explication “out from” the text. It presupposes that God’s message is immediately accessible in a given passage just as the Edenic worm is immediately available for battle within one’s own body.

Christ’s identification of himself as a worm stands as Donne’s justification for scriptural recontextualization, and it also stands as the touchstone of his anti-questing theology. The conjunction of biblical hermeneutics, antagonism to chivalric quests, and worm imagery is never so clearly expressed as it is when Donne preaches:

But where are we likely to find him [Christ]? It is said by *Moses*, of the words and precepts of God, *They are not hid from thee, neither are they far off*; Not in heaven that thou shouldst say, Who shall goe up to heaven for us to bring them down? Nor beyond the Seas, that thou shouldst go over the Sea for them; but the word is very neer thee, even in thy mouth, and in they heart; and so neer thee is Christ Jesus, or thou shalt not find

him; Thou must not so think him in heaven, as that thou cannot have immediate access to him without intercession of others, nor so beyond the Sea as to seek him in a forrein Church [...] Christ is at home with thee, he is at home within thee, and there is the nearest way to find him. (I. 5. 246)

The meaning of the scripture and the application of Christ are presently available to Donne's congregation as the worm is present in them.

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