Justice in *The Faerie Queene*

Justice alone of all the virtues is held to be another’s good, because it relates to another. For it does what is good to another, either a ruler or to someone who shares in the community.—Aristotle

Upon reading a given poem, we are unlikely to ask, “Is this poem just?” What, after all, does poetry have to do with justice? Many of the norms and habits that we associate with justice—fairness, equality, impartiality, procedural regularity, generality, and lawfulness—do not seem especially relevant with regard to poetry as such. Where justice in the sense of lawfulness requires formal abstraction from particularity for the sake of positing the equality of moral subjects before the law, poetry allows for insistence not only upon the particularity, but the singularity of the objects to which it is partial. In some instances, it delights in seeing itself as the source of law, or the means of transcending it. If justice is understood as “another’s good”—a “good to which the other person is entitled,” the question of its relationship to poetry becomes even more perplexing. We might agree that poetry does what is good with respect to its readers. But by what measure of right are we entitled to it? Poetry owes us nothing.

Are there instances in which it might be said that a given poem, in the course of doing what is good to one party—say, a ruler—neglects or does ill to a second party—say, others who share in the community? If so, what would that do to our understanding of that poem as being just towards its readers or just in a more general sense? What happens if the poem takes the others to whom injustice is being done only as sharing in the community to the extent that they figure as objects of justice (those to whom justice must be done for the sake of some perceived larger good) rather than as equal doers of it?

Perhaps no poem written in English poses these questions as much as does *The Faerie Queene*, a poem which attempts, at minimum, to do justice to Queen Elizabeth I
and to the people of Ireland. The justice that is done to the latter is dealt with in Book V, “Artegall, or the Legend of Justice.” More than any other book in the poem, that of justice has commonly been thought to invite imaginative participation in acts of colonial injustice. Book V is where the bulk of the scholarship dealing with Spenser’s justice begins and, for the most part, where it ends as well.

In his discussion of the poem’s conception of the Irish people as others, Richard McCabe observes that “Aristotle held that justice sought ‘the good of others,’ but in colonial terms the Other’s good was held to depend upon the imposition of ‘civil’ laws.” In his account, the necessity of that imposition justifies violence. Yet to his mind, Spenserian romance ultimately “frustrates” resolution with respect to the question of how the enemy may be thought of as being “other than myself and marked by some absolute difference.” He sees Spenser’s treatment of justice as “self-contradictory.” For some readers, however, as Sean Kane notes, Spenser’s account of justice is not quite contradictory enough: Book V imparts to them a “sense that justice for Spenser means little more than the preservation of royal authority.”

If Spenser’s imperial justice is in large part the imperial might that it requires if it is to be realized, is it really justice at all? For “the reader who expects The Faerie Queene to deliver a consistent idealization of the virtuous life,” apparently it is not. For Kane, Book V “is the culmination of the endeavor of reconciling classical and Christian value which is the whole project of Spenser’s epic.” Yet for others, Book V is the place in which the morally defective brand of justice that characterizes the poem as a whole—namely, justice as the name that power assigns to the violence that it needs to maintain itself—becomes visible. In James Broaduss’s view, Book V’s account of clemency and
equity does little to make up for its moral deficit: “What is missing from… [Book V] is the sense that each of us needs understanding and mercy, that none of us, if judged according to our ‘desert,’ would escape a whipping.”\(^{16}\)

Does the justice of Book V characterize *The Faerie Queene* as a whole to the point that we need not look extensively elsewhere to think about Spenser’s approach to justice? If there are in fact other modes of justice in the poem, how do they diverge from and overlap with those of Book V? At stake in such questions is not only the matter of justice considered as a topic but also justice considered as a mode of poetic activity.

There already exist in the scholarship insights into justice as it pertains to the entire poem. For example, it has not escaped the notice of scholarship that although *The Faerie Queene* is nowhere explicitly described as being holy, temperate, chaste, friendly, or courteous, it is apparently supposed to be understood as a matter of “just memory” (II.Proem.1) According to Judith Owens, “just memory,” when understood in light of what it means to be “just,” may be seen as a creative means of making knowledge and shaping history.\(^{17}\) In the not too distant past, Jeff Dolven has considered the relationship between allegory and *The Faerie Queene*’s enactment of poetic justice via punishment.\(^{18}\) In this context, the “logic of poetic justice,” Dolven suggests, entails “the idea of allegory as something one might do to someone, rightly or wrongly.”\(^{19}\) Finally, Rebeca Helfer has recently suggested that *The Faerie Queene* fosters justice with respect to the truth-seeking judgment of texts and persons: “The ability to judge writing, to do justice to a text or person…lies at the heart of the Spenserian education.”\(^{20}\) For Helfer, Spenserian justice is a matter of truth-telling that depends upon “discernment, that is recognizing fictions as such.”\(^{21}\)
For Paul Alpers, however, the “moral interest and value” of Spenser’s stanzas has not to do with judgment but rather “with the understanding of one’s situation that comes from seeing it with more than one perspective.” In this context, understanding demands abstention from judgments sufficiently determinate to inform moral choice.

Judging, which is an action and of which choice is the essence, is precisely what Spenser does not expect of us. In most cases...he assumes that the hero’s behavior is good and devotes his poetry to making us see and understand general themes, issues, and problems of man’s life. In the rare case that is genuinely doubtful...he makes us see both sides of the question. In the most important instance of wrong behavior on the part of a hero, he deliberately, and for reasons that are at the heart of Book I, prevents us from passing judgment on the Red Cross Knight or making any single determination about the nature of his plight.

Alpers defines the moral horizon of the poem with reference to the boundaries of knowledge (including self-knowledge) rather than the imperatives of judgment. In his view, Spenser aims to see “all around...complex issue[s]” rather than to model choice.

Such a reading of the poem suggests a difference between Spenser and Milton. “Though [God] command us temperance, justice, continence,” Milton claims, He “yet pours out before us, even to a profuseness, all desirable things, and gives us minds that can wander beyond all limit and satiety.” Milton relies on choice to reconcile God’s demand for the ordering virtues (including justice) with the creation of a world characterized by a profuseness of desirable things, and minds characterized by a capacity for wandering. In contrast, Spenser evinces little faith in the capacity of choice to heal the split between the human mind, the fallen world in which it wanders, and divine will. Events in the mind are not the primary drivers of events in the world of the poem. In Book I, for example, it is the outburst of angry Jove, not poor human judgment and choice, which causes the day with clouds to be “sudden ouercast” (I.i.6), and
Redcrosse Knight and Una to be “enforst” to “seek some couert nigh at hand” (I.i.7).

Alpers’s view of the poem as an invitation to see things from many perspectives (rather than to “assign praise and blame”), crucially important though it is, obscures the fact that when the poem abstains from inviting us to exercise judgment it is sometimes because it has already done the judging for us. On such occasions, the poem does not reject judgment; rather, it invites deference to its judgment. The morally pre-processed Errour, for instance, simply is what is wrong with her. Even by the “little glooming light” in which she is first seen, she is what she has been deemed to be in the process of being contrived (I.i.13-14). As William Blissett notes, “This quasi dragon has no adversarial dignity, being allowed no good association.” She guards no “secret or treasure.”

Multiple intellectual perspectives exist outside the poem from which she might be seen but the poem does not encourage readers to do justice to Errour by beholding her from multiple moral perspectives.

The mixed moral landscape of Faerie Land makes uneven demands on the reader. It is dotted with figures who show up as products of prior judgment, figures who bear some faint marks of prior judgment, such as Archimago, who appears on the scene tagged with the moral warning labels “seemde” and “shew” as (I.i.29), figures like Duessa who, though outwardly fair, we are to judge as “ever false” (I.ii.37; see also IV.i.17), figures who represent models of judgment that we are meant to reject, such as the Egalitarian Giant, and figures, such as Calidore, whose actions both invite and resist judgment. With respect to VI.x.1-3, Alpers rightly notes that “Spenser was content to treat the elements of a complex moral case as distinct and self-contained moral perspectives and not to combine them into a single structure of judgment.”
How are we to reconcile Spenser’s poetry of one and of many perspectives? To begin with, I want to suggest that we might consider this question by thinking of it in terms of justice. In that context, I would like to reflect upon the possibility that Spenser uses the poem to enact justice through the distribution of praise and blame as well as through the provision of multiple perspectives. How does this work?

C.S. Lewis remarks that Spenser’s justice entails “alloting carefully graded shares of honour, power, liberty, and the like to the various ranks of a fixed hierarchy.” The very process of incorporating a given entity into the poem and disposing of it (whether that process of incorporation and disposition is understood as conceiving of an entity in the course of poetic thinking or fashioning it, via representation, into an object among other objects of attention) may entail an allotment of opprobrium or praise. It also entails the allotment of different sorts of poetic attention—some suggestive of pre-judgment, others of abstention from judgment.

Figures such as Orgoglio, that “monstrous mass of earthly slyme” (I.vii.9) or Ate, whose very “handes” are “vnequall” (IV.i.29) are be seen from one perspective—that entailing disopprobrium—if the same goal is to be accomplished. The same can be said of (among many others) Adicia, the Souldan, and Geryoneo, who, James Bednarz notes, “is presented as wholly negative.” We can’t see them as other than what they are supposed to be. Yet certain phenomena in the poem (for example, the landscape of Faerie Land itself) warrant being “heard” and “seen” from the many perspectives, such as those afforded by the experience of wandering down “exceedingly spacious and wyde” (VI.Proem.1) paths if they are to receive justice in the sense of being revealed as what they are, even if what we can say about what they are is simply that they are varied
Spenser practices what might be called perspectival justice in the very process of practicing his retributive-distributive justice.

The notion, however, that poetic representation and cognition entail distribution—reflecting a sense that the thing being represented or cognized somehow deserves a certain amount or brand of poetic attention by virtue of its role in some implicit order—leaves some key features of the poem’s approach to justice unexplained. What happens when Spenser is dealing with entities functioning as “others” of a sort (such as the very virtues he is writing about) the hierarchical rank of which is unclear? How does his art of justice work in a context which is characterized by fluidity with respect to the rank of virtues but fixity with respect to the perceived existence of a hierarchical moral order? It is in this context that the tension between one and many perspectives is especially felt.

A number of years ago, James Nohrnberg indicated that *The Faerie Queene* attempts to do justice to the very virtues that Spenser was writing about. To his mind, “justice is…done to temperance” in Book V rather than Book II. In this paper, I take up the question of how Spenser does justice to another virtue: that of justice itself. I employ a broadly and loosely Aristotelian notion of justice as a virtue pertaining, at minimum, to what is due to others by right with a view towards their good. I take good in this particular context to mean furtherance or flourishing in some cases and a sought-after end in others. In its capacity as moralized and moralizing song, the poem as a whole aims, among other things, to foster the just distribution of the “dew right” (II.ii.29), the “duefull meed” (IV.i.6) and the “good right” (V.iv.17) to which “each one” (V.iv.20) is entitled. What is “dew,” in Spenserian usage, carries a suggestion of what is proper or fitting to each, such that Spenser may speak broadly of the “dew courses” (V.ii.42) of things
subject to daily view. What is good goes beyond what is due to suggest consonance with the higher aim for the sake of which justice is sought; the age of justice is thus envisioned as the time when not justice but rather “good” was “onely for itself desired” (V.Proem.3). But who or what counts as a “one” and “other” to whom justice of some sort is due in the Spenserian scheme?

At least on the level of its conspicuously promulgated intentions, the Queen is the primary “other” with which the poem is concerned. The poem reflects as well upon the good of others via its treatment of the “indistinguishable members of a ‘rebellious route’” that serve as a stand-in for the Irish.37 Yet at least notionally within the moral logic of the poem, the category of others includes the virtues, which are also subjects and objects of justice, albeit in a quite different register. Although the poem entertains the proverbial notion that it is “vertue selfe, which her reward doth pay” (V.xi.17) and a hybrid Protestant-chivalric notion that it is suspect to expect “meed” for having done one’s knightly “dew” (II.viii.56), virtue (which, in rewarding itself, reflects its internal structure of justice) receives external reward as well, at least in situations characterized by right order.38

In addition to dispensing the right, the poem also reflects upon its consistency with various sorts of good (that of the others to whom it is due but also to the good of the overlapping communities—national, moral, religious—with which Spenser is concerned). Just as importantly, the poem ponders justice as a mode of right order in light of which rank may be ascertained. In its capacity as the virtue consistent with and generative of right order between others in the community, Spenserian justice, as Nohrnberg and, before him, Thomas Roche have suggested, serves as the social version of the virtue of
temperance, which pertains to order within single individuals. In situations involving at least two parties or entities, justice asks when and if “right” is “good” (V.iV.17) with respect to each concerned. Questions of justice look to the good as it pertains to what is due by virtue of right in situations involving the claims of more than one.

To the extent that Spenser does justice to justice, it is not because the poem works out a single, coherent, declarative answer to the questions posed by justice. Rather, he generates multiple, coherent, partially conflicting answers to those questions, migrates from one answer to another and, at points, juxtaposes them, forcing collisions of varying degrees of directness. Even when one version of justice is overmatched by another, as in the confrontation between ArtegaIl and the egalitarian giant of Book V, or the contest between Mutabilitie and Jove in Book VII, the version that conquers is itself subject to revision or to being shelved as soon as the need for another sort of justice arises. Spenser’s justice may be sought for in his process. In claiming as much, I am attempting to put into question the notion that his justice is “at bottom” a matter of securing imperial power or, alternatively, one of abstract theory.

To be sure, the field of justice in The Faerie Queene includes imperial might. And, in keeping with its relation to truth, it has abstract, theoretical dimensions as well. It also includes (this is a rough, partial account) questions of cosmic justice, divine justice, justice as a mean, justice as it characterizes memory, legal justice, “just reuenge” (II.i.36), equity, brute justice, temporal justice (justice enacted by time in time), justice as it pertains to the fashioning of “a just, coherent, stable identity” fit for empire, “just dominion,” perspectival justice, and finally, justice for poets. The Faerie Queene’s indictment at the hands of the mighty registers for Spenser as a problem not of
The moral discrepancy between *The Faerie Queene*’s multiple modes of justice makes it difficult to understand the way in which Spenser may be understood as a teacher of justice. There is no readily apparent single moral perspective in light of which all of his varying notions of justice may be seen to cohere. Yet here, I claim that it may be necessary to understand him as a teacher of justice, albeit one of uncertain ethical status. I shall even consider the possibility that Spenser’s justice is evocative in some few respects of Nietzsche’s genius of justice—which we have good reason to think of as being in other respects anathema to his sensibility.

In suggesting that Spenser’s mode of justice is of uncertain ethical import, I am not merely indicating that Spenser was morally ambivalent about justice (as he has rightly been thought to be ambivalent about much else), or that he inherits a sense of the “tensions inherent in ethical phenomena itself” from Aristotle, for example, with respect to the tension between the virtues of justice and magnanimity. The pathos of Spenserian justice does not arise exclusively from a collision with other virtues or with some recalcitrant “reality” but rather from what I shall describe as a fissure within justice that extend beyond the much-canvassed distinction between justice and equity.

The limitations of space prevent me from doing justice to Spenser’s justice in all of its variety. In the next section of this paper, after discussing some of general issues pertaining to the relationship between poetry and justice in extra-Spenserian and Spenserian terms, I consider a few of his multiple modes of justice. Finally, in a third section, I focus on an extended sequence in Book I, with some assistance from Nietzsche.
Poetry and the Writing of Wrongs

No poem or play or song
can fully right a wrong
inflicted or endured.

…
History says, Don't hope
on this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
the longed for tidal wave
of justice can rise up,
and hope and history rhyme.
—Seamus Heaney, The Cure at Troy

To whatever extent we still think of poetry as a means of doing justice in some sense, it is more often the case that we focus on the wrongs that poetry attempts to redress rather than the obscure notions of “right” (much less, good) in light of which it aims to do so. Is it the proper business of poetry not only to write of wrongs, but also to attempt to right them—to serve as a means of redress? Do poets have a duty to do justice (following from an obligation and issuing in an entitlement on the part of reader) or is taking up the task of righting wrongs merely a morally attractive option in this context?

Whatever the nature of our questions about the capacity of poetry to do justice may be, it is arguably the case that the desire that poetry should be just—that it should further the good (but what sort of good?) for others (but which ones?)—still persists, even if that desire frequently manifests itself only in frustrated form via complaints about particular poems that do not seem to get justice right in some way. We are all familiar, for instance, with arguments detailing the perceived tendency of various poets and poems to promote or present as unexceptionable or even attractive moral and political positions that we find unjust. More broadly, we may think it hard that poetry cannot offer recompense for injuries and injustices registered outside of it. “No poem or play or song,” notes Heaney, “can fully right a wrong / Inflicted and endured,” but that does not mean
we do not ask poetry to do so. Heaney avoids saying (or lamenting) that poetry cannot right wrongs at all—the point is that no poem can fully right a wrong, much less the interminable series of them of which much though not all of history consists. If one listens to “history,” Heaney’s poem suggests, one hears it say, “Don’t hope / On this side of the grave.” Having said that, the poem immediately offers grounds for hope: “But then, once in a lifetime / The longed for tidal wave / Of justice can rise up, / And hope and history rhyme.” The rising wave of justice does not merely make hope and history meet; rather, they “rhyme.” Here, justice makes history do poetry.

In writing of wrongs, poetry does justice in a sense by not allowing us to avoid taking note of historical or personal injustice. But while poetry may serve as a safeguard against the tendency of nature to let acts of injustice be covered over by time, it is the readers of poetry who, as Wordsworth reminds us in the famous gibbet episode in Book XI of the 1805 Prelude, must attend to the task of keeping the engraved letters through which memories of injustice are preserved “fresh and visible.” Apart from the service of preserving highly perishable memories of injustice intact—as if in a sort of moral refrigerator—poetry has frequently been thought to offer us the promise of justice in a wide array of senses—so wide that, if they are taken together, the word “justice” seems to lose any meaning more determinate than that which “concerns the proper treatment of other people” or something somehow right or fitting.

Readers of poetry at different times in different places, of course, ask justice of and find justice in poetry in a way that reflects their larger understanding of what it is that a poem “ought” to do as well as what it actually does. One of the most important ways in which poetry has traditionally been thought to do justice is to purge passions that
might spill over into unjust acts. Crucial as well is the ability of the poet to (in Milton’s words) “inbreed…in a great people the seeds of virtue,” and “deplore the general relapses of Kingdoms and States from justice.” The processes of purgation, implantation, and deploration may be understood to further justice in the sense of the common good.

When, in 1678, Thomas Rymer coined the phrase “poetic justice,” he was not concerned with the means by which the passions might be purged, virtue implanted, and injustice deplored. In looking at history, he suggests, Sophocles and Euripides perceived “the same end happy to the righteous and the unjust, vertue often opprest, and wickedness on the throne…. Finding that this unequal distribution of rewards and punishments did perplex the wisest… they concluded that a Poet must see justice exactly administered.” Rymer’s poetic justice is justice beheld under a species of eternity and “exactly administered” by the poet as sole lawgiver, judge, and sheriff, rather than justice as it is imperfectly realized in the realm of the mundane. The primary way in which we think of the phrase “poetic justice” still reflects our distant debt to the rarely-read Rymer. When we hear “poetic justice,” we tend to think first of fitting punishments and rewards.

*The Faerie Queene* does indeed conduct the paradigmatic business of Rymerian “poetic justice,” namely, the exemplary allotment of “just desarts” (II.i.29). It is with respect to its administration of this particular brand of justice as it pertains to the Irish people, on the one hand, and Queen Elizabeth, on the other, that it is widely thought to be defective. One way of understanding Spenser’s poetic justice of punishment and reward (in which the Irish figuratively receive punishment and the Queen, fulsome praise) in the context of the poem as a whole is to regard it as a function of his “courtly epideixis,” the purpose of which is “the creation of an ideology that confirms Elizabeth as the ideal ruler
of an elect nation.”55 The moral logic of this epideixis may be read as dictating “dualism in [Spenser’s] conception of figures: icons of virtue (eg, Una, Mercilla, Britomart), which deserve to be praised, contrast with icons of vice (eg, Duessa, Archimago, Acrasia), which deserve blame.”56

According to this logic, it would seem that the dualistic justice of Book V is not, to borrow a phrase from McCabe, “an aberration in The Faerie Queene’s moral temper”57 but entirely consistent with or indeed the very flower of that temper. This latter view might appeal to the now familiar notion that Spenser was in thrall tout court to imperial power, committed to destroying all others who countered it, and, as such, dependent upon a notion of justice entailing a sharply differentiated division between the just imperial self and the unjust other. Love of power (once wedded to force) could then be thought of as parent to and guarantor of Spenser’s justice. Given this genealogy, it would make sense that the poem’s promise of fashioning “a just, coherent, stable identity anchored in the ardent worship of power”58—would justify the moral expense of an affront to justice construed as a limit upon power if it did not render that expense invisible.

The view I have just sketched out would suggest that to the extent that The Faerie Queene does justice, it does so via moral sacrifice (the brand of justice that does not serve power must be sacrificed for the sake of the justice that does) and perhaps even that its morality consists of such sacrifice. Alternatively, one might think that what is at stake in the poem’s account of justice is theoretical sacrifice. From this perspective, it would seem that the poem fails to do theoretical justice to the virtue of justice in the very book that speaks of justice because of its incapacity to “find an adequate ground for the theory” of justice.59 The Faerie Queene becomes fit to further virtue by leaving behind its theory
of justice in the wilderness, and finding a foundation for community outside of theory.60

From each of the perspectives just considered (the first drawing in part from Stephen Greenblatt’s work and the second in part from that of Gordon Teskey) the poem would appear to testify to the loss and violence entailed in the gain of the capacity to do justice, albeit in different veins. Divergent though they are, both perspectives speak to the poem’s conception of what is due to others, otherness, and “the otherness of others.”61 What is due to “the Other” in Greenblatt’s account is the destruction required by the poem’s model of “just, coherent, [and] stable identity”; what is due to the other in Teskey’s account is courtesy, entailing “an approach to the other which yet leaves the other alone.”62 The former necessitates judgment sufficiently determinate to issue in action; the latter opens up multiple perspectives, none of which necessitate an attempt to prove puissance (I.i.3) upon the other so as to ensure singular rightness over and against another perspective. The other, in this approach, may safely be left alone.

The importance of courtesy as it informs certain encounters in the poem (including, as Teskey rightly observes, Spenser’s encounter with the “other” that is courtesy itself) ought not to be gainsaid. In particular, as Donald Cheney observes, courtesy works at court as a guide to “accord[ing] fitting treatment to all,” but then, at court, “social rank and intrinsic worth are indistinguishable.”63 With respect to the virtues themselves, however, relative rank and intrinsic worth are not neatly aligned. We are told for, instance, in Book V that justice is the “most sacred vertue she of all the rest, / Resembling God in his imperiall might” (V.Proem.5). But we are also told that chastity is “The fayrest vertue, far above the rest” (III.Proem.1) and that love is “of honor and all vertue… / The roote” (IV.Proem.2). Superlative or definitive qualities are allotted to
each, but with little guidance as to where, say, the most sacred virtue is to be ranked in relation to the root of all virtue. There is no readily apparent larger economy of rank within which the sacred and the radical (in the sense of the originary) might be comparatively assessed on the same scale and accordingly allotted their due share of praise and poetic attention.

Spenser’s overall habits of poetic distribution, which suggest a concern with proportion and fittingness, might be usefully contrasted with the mode of justice famously assigned to Homeric epic, namely that of impartiality. Hannah Arendt traced the origin of impartiality to “the moment when Homer chose to sing the deeds of the Trojans no less than those of the Achaeans, and to praise the glory of Hector, the foe and the defeated man, no less than the glory of Achilles, the hero of his kinfolk.”

There are two aspects to Homer’s putative impartiality: first, he evenhandedly distributes his poetic attention in terms of quantity, singing “no less” of Hector than Achilles. Secondly, he distributes praise to the glory of Hector as much as to that of Achilles.

Reservations about Arendt’s reading of Homer (with its fictive “moment” of heroic decision on the part of a single poet to elect impartiality) aside, it may be said that, at least on one level, Spenser takes the opposite tack: of necessity, the poetic justice of his moralized song rules out the allotment of praise to the hateful and hellish foes who oppose its heroes—since those heroes are the patrons of the virtues, to do otherwise would be to praise those who oppose the very qualities the poem hopes to foster. It would not be even minimally plausible to designate Errour, Orgoglio, Duessa, Archimago, Ate, Geryoneo, or the Blatant Beast as a “true hero” of the poem, analogous to Hector in the Iliad. At the same time, however, the foes of virtue are not uniformly hellish.
Cymochles, for example, though part of a pair “that breathed strife and troublous enmitie” (II.viii.10) shows himself to be capable of shame, of striving for honor, and of a concern with the yielding of “dew praise or dew reproach” (II.vii.14). The tentative provision of a perspective from which one might view him as potentially praiseworthy, however, is not sustained. His desire for the right allotment of due esteem amounts to a desire for “dew reuenge” (II.viii.28). Ultimately, he dies a death suggestive of a punitive parceling out of what the poem treats as a just desert: “He tumbling down on ground, / Breathd out his ghost, which to th’infernall shade / Fast flying, there eternall torment found, / For all his sins, wherewith his lewd life did abound” (II.vii.45). Eternal torment is “found for” Cymochles’s abundant sins; his fast flight to infernal shade is apparently meant to be taken as a fitting denouement to his lewd life. Here, movement enacts judgment.

On the occasions when Spenser does open up the possibility of multiple perspectives regarding figures of evil, vice, and sin, he is less likely to sustain them than he is with respect to his treatment of the figures who contend with such ills in the course of their pursuit of virtue and of the virtues themselves. Indeed, the very pursuit of virtue tends to prompt movement towards the differentiatedness that issues in conflict, but which allow for the possibility of revision (even in Book V, where Artegaill, despite his dependence upon Talus, is separable from him). In contrast, movement fueled by vice points toward a state in which revision is (justly, in the view of the poem) no longer an option. Gryll must be left to be Gryll and to have his “hoggishe minde” (II.xii.7) because he can no longer have any other. Gryll “chooseth” the beastliness that he cannot but choose, being already beastly. Malbecco is slowly eaten away at by jealousy until he
becomes what consumes him. Yet as Colin Burrow points out, “Malbecco is not simply a ‘daemonic agent’ obsessed by a single idea that sucks the vital juice out of him and turns him into an allegorical figure; there is a stage in his history at which he could become almost anything from a bird to Feare or Despaire.”

That Malbecco becomes not a bird, or Feare, or Despaire, but rather what consumes him is not an accident in terms of poetic justice. He feeds on jealousy; it ultimately feeds on him. The process of diminution from his initial, already unfortunate state (we are introduced to him as a “cancred crabbed Carle” in III.ix.3) registers in material terms as transmutation into “nought” (III.x.10). At that point, Spenser suggests a convergence of perspectives. From within and from without, “to him selfe, and euery wight,” Malbecco is “hateful” (III.x.60). The question is whether the reader may count himself or herself among those wights. Alpers claims that “Spenser establishes our kinship with an evil by directly appealing to us—by engaging some feeling or attitude that we acknowledge as ours.” But if anything, one’s negative judgment of “Gelosy” could conceivably be heightened by whatever sense of partial, pained identification that one might feel with the deformation that follows from it. One’s sense that the latter is just according to the moral logic of the poem does not depend upon the denial of its tragic nature or of one’s own kinship with the passions that pointed towards it.

While it is possible, as Alpers suggests, to feel kinship with figures such as Malbecco, recognition of commonality of some sort does not necessarily disable judgment concerning vices and evils in *The Faerie Queene* by prompting the development of a perspective from which they are no longer seen as such. There is complication and development, but only within the limits of an overarching perspective
in light of which evil and wrong are taken by the poem to be evil and wrong, however much the reader might claim them as one’s own. What is wrong may be what is all too much one’s own.

In the tournament held in Canto V of Book I, Spenser considers the conditions under which pity may prompt a temporary suspension of judgment. Redcrosse Knight is fighting a figure identified only at this point as “the cruel Sarazin” (I.v.4). The former is said to fight “all for praise and honour”; the latter, for “blood and vengeance” (I.v.7). In Stanza 9, the poem propounds a straightforward moral evaluation of these efforts: “So th’one for wrong, the other striues for right” (I.v.8). The one is associated with a dragon, the other, with a “Gryfon,” meant to evoke Christ. Lest we remain unclear as to how to judge the combatants or indeed, whether we should judge them at all, Stanza 9 drives the same point home again: “So th’one for wrong, the other striues for right” (I.v.9).

The poem considers the conditions under which pity may momentarily blot out the desire to see one or the other win in the very stanza that assigns opposite motivations to each: “Great ruth in all the gazers harts did grow, / Seeing the gored woundes to gape so wyde, / That victory they dare not wish to either side” (I.v.9). Yet when Redcrosse Knight does win, the people at the tournament who in Stanza 9 couldn’t wish that one or the other would win follow him home to the House of Pride “with great glee, / Shouting and clapping all their hands on hight, / That all the ayre it fils, and flyes to heauen bright” (I.v.16). The response in Stanza 16 is not depicted as being any more or less exemplary than the one in Stanza 9. The poem refers to Sansjoy as the “faithlesse enimy” (I.v.9) after ruth has grown in the hearts of the gazers, their momentarily judgment-suspending
pity notwithstanding. While they behold the wounds through the lens of pity; the reader is invited as well to consider the encounter in light of the conflict between right and wrong.

At this point in the poem, Redcrosse Knight is becoming further entrenched in sin, but in becoming so, he does not become a “faithlesse enmy” (I.v.9). In commenting on this episode, Susanne Wofford remarks that Redcrosse “is victorious over Sans Foy, only to pick up his armor, take up with his consort, Duessa, and in all ways show himself to be well within the grip of Faithlessness.” To her mind, “The poem's psychomachian battles confirm the identity between the two knights rather than distinguish them.” In her view, the effect of this confirmation is that the poem’s scheme for deciding between good and evil, based on an assertion of ontological difference that paralleled the assumptions supporting the Elizabethan social system, comes to seem arbitrary in the sense that it is neither derived from the action nor, in the case of psychomachian struggle, able to use the action to sustain it.

This reading rightly notes the non-derivation of Spenser’s “scheme for deciding between good and evil” from action, while missing the distinction between being in the grips of faithlessness — a state which allow for the possibility of escape from those grips — and being a “faithless enemy” (I.v.9) — a state which, for Spenser, allows for conjunction with its opposite but contains no ontological escape hatch. His is not a poetry of radical conversion. Temporary moral blurring does not lead category jumping from enemy to friend of (because aspirant to) virtue, much less the obliteraton of categories that facilitate and follow from judgment, reflecting the fact that ontological difference is not derived from or sustained by the action (much less the “moment” of judgment issuing in action) of its figures but is rather a function of the poem’s poetic justice. For Spenser, characterization entails, among other things, moral evaluation and categorization.
The moral category of rightful desert (and indeed, of “misdesert”—Spenser’s neologism) figures prominently in the Spenserian poetic ethos as it is reflected in the conceit sketched in the “Letter to Raleigh.” The conceit hinges upon knightly errands of justice performed at the behest of the Faery Queene, with the aim of redressing complaints pertaining to the offenses suffered by some aggrieved and attractive or otherwise compelling innocent or another (a “faire Ladye in mourning weeds,” “an infant with bloody hands,” and yet another fair lady, this time “most faire”). The poem is to track a series of movements pointing away from the figure of the faerie queen. Yet the errands allowing for and necessitating distance from her are being performed at her behest and will apparently circle back around to the queen when the ill-deserved wrongs that have come to her notice have been redressed. Here, the suggested narrative structure is that of hub and spoke, except that the spokes are slightly overlapping loops.

Spenserian “misdesert” coexists with “misfortune” (VI.i.12) and with the (capricious?) will of the gods experienced as perceived necessity (I.i.6-7) as well as with the idea of providential care from heaven. The category of desert is flexible (and hence, elusive), as reflected in the multiple ways in which it is deployed in different contexts. In Book VI, for example, deserved punishment cleanses the blood shed in its administration of any shame, “for it is no blame / To punish those, that doe deserue the same” (VI.i.26). There is no trace in this stanza of the justice that seeks to “save” (V.x.2) its subject than to spill it, desert notwithstanding. In V.x.2, justice answers to the demands of art, while not neglecting those of “the doome of right” (V.x.2).

With respect to the question of what is due to others, the question, for Spenser, is whether one is dealing with an other who is a friend, a foe, a foe pretending to be friend,
a helpless, imperiled, or otherwise oppressed party who is deserving of the attention of knights as friends, or a “shamefull” (VI.i.26) party some feature of whose imagined existence connotes a violation of justice and hence, deservingness of punishment. The other-as-enemy may amount simply to matter upon which to prove the power of the aspirant to virtue; in certain cases, he, she, or it is a moral subject in terms of being culpable but not in terms of having any apparent capacity to choose to be otherwise, as in the case of Envy, Distraction, and Erroud. If we were to take the treatment of their fellow intractable fiends as being illustrative of Spenser’s more general ethos regarding the question of what is due to others by virtue of right, it would be difficult to characterize that ethos as promoting the furtherance of justice through the inculcation of norms of understanding that foster, as Alpers would have it, knowledge of the human situation as distinguished sharply from judgment with respect to good and evil as they figure within that situation. Spenser’s treatment of the intractable, unredeemed other is not representative of an overarching stance towards others as such but neither is it negligible in that respect. His morality does not rule out the existence of monsters. Sometimes, it makes them.

In his treatment of the virtues, Spenser does not signal impartiality or attempt to treat them all as being equal. Holiness, for example, does not get any sort of a buildup (even of the perfunctory variety) in the Proem to Book I comparable to that which justice receives in Book V. Apparently, holiness is not “the most” of or the root of anything. Temperance fares somewhat better with respect to praise of its merits (II.i.58; II.xii.1). More broadly speaking, the poem does not comport itself identically with respect to implicitly higher virtues and lower ones. Yet while Spenser’s virtues are more and less
praiseworthy and worthy of attention, none of them exist to be justly contended with or written out of existence, as do his evils. In the larger moral field of the poem that includes the vices, as C.S. Lewis indicates, not even liveliness is equally distributed by Spenser: “His evils are all dead or dying things. Each of his deadly sins has a mortal disease.”

This is consistent with the poem’s conception of desert but also with its understanding of the consequences (especially with respect to the elimination of the capacity for redemptive change) that are consistent with the nature of sins, as distinguished from sinful creatures. Unlike the patrons of the virtues, vices cannot themselves participate in revision, understood as the condition for the poetic equivalent of redemption or, in terms of narrative structure, their return to the Queen.

What I earlier called the mixed moral landscape of the poem is occupied by both morally compact and morally differentiated figures. While the former require the single perspective lens of moral blame for their proper understanding, the latter are only perceptible from multiple, shifting perspectives (those variously suggestive of moral blame, praise and occasionally sympathetic abstention from judgment). They are susceptible to change, albeit within the context of their end-directed growth in virtue and consequent battle with vice. Spenser spares his differentiated figures from death, while making most (though not all—the Blatant Beast, that “hellish Dog” [VI.vi.12] escapes his chain to roam at liberty) of his compact figures subject to it. These figures are severely limited with respect to eventualities: they are either sick, dead, or pointed decisively in the direction of death. Envy and Distraction, for example, are “old” (V.xii.28); the former’s lips, being “blew” (V.xii.29), are already colored by death. One may pass such figures by (V.xii.42) but if necessary, one must “ouertake or else subdew” (VI.i.7) them.
Spenser does not model abstention from judgment in using Artegaill to model abstention from outsourced violence in V.xii.43 towards the judged.

Justice in the wake of sin or surrender to vice, as distinguished from justice manifested in or directed at personified vices, does not rule out, even if does not immediately point towards, the restoration of the capacity to increase in virtue. If one of these modes of justice is just, it is hard to see how the other can be as well. Further, how can the two modes of justice that figure in characterization be squared with the poem’s account of cosmic justice (see the Proem to Book V), the temporal justice that is timeliness (I.ix.2) or the justice that characterizes the poem’s memory (II.Proem.1)? Is “just” simply a word that Spenser is using to generate meanings that need not cohere?

One way of understanding the coexistence of different modes of justice in the poem would be to identify one of those modes (for instance, that dictating destruction as the vehicle through which a “just identity” that affirms power is secured) as being consistently dominant throughout, such that, where the poem pretends to different sorts of justice, the variety is merely phenomenal. Underlying the apparent multiplicity, one might say along these lines, is the truth that Spenser loves power and that power must pretend to justice in order to present itself as rightful authority (thereby augmenting itself) and to license its use of violence to enforce right. Alternatively, one might view Spenser’s treatment of justice as primarily dynamic and provisional, such that he might be said to try out certain approaches or lines of inquiry with respect to justice, and, in the face of aporia, to shift gears and move on.

A third way of dealing with the simultaneous coexistence of different modes of justice within the poem might be to try and account for their irreducible multiplicity.
Does Spenser’s justice lend itself to multifarious manifestations because it is merely a name that power and those complicit with power use to license its indulgence of ever-changing needs and whims or does it lend itself to such manifestations precisely because it is just?

**One Eye and Many: Doing Justice to Justice**

Tell me, where is the justice found that is love with seeing eyes? Then invent me the kind of justice that not only bears all punishment but also all guilt! Then invent me the kind of justice that pardons everyone, except the one who judges!  
—Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*[^81]

In writing of what he calls the “species of genius” with respect to justice in *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche remarks that

> it is the way of this kind of genius to avoid with hearty indignation everything that confuses and deceives us in our judgment of things; it is consequently an opponent of convictions, for it wants to give to each his own, whether the thing be dead or living, real or imaginary— and to that end it must have a clear knowledge of it; it therefore sets everything in the best light and observes it carefully from all sides. In the end it will give to its opponent, blind or shortsighted ‘conviction’ (as men call it—women call it ‘faith’), what is due to conviction—for the sake of truth.[^82]

Nietzsche’s genius of justice is heartfelt (*herzlichem*) in its avoidance not of judgment but of everything that hinders it. Among the things that hinder judgment are convictions (*Überzeugungen*), for they apparently prevent the rendering to each thing what belongs to it. He repeats the word “conviction” in the last sentence in order to emphasize his own just aim of giving to conviction what conviction is (*was der Überzeugung ist*).

Conviction is defined by Nietzsche as “the belief that on some particular point of knowledge one is in possession of the unqualified truth.”[^83] To his mind, such belief gives rise to violence. If, however, those prone by virtue of their conviction to undertake

[^81]: Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*  
[^82]: Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*  
[^83]: Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*
sacrifices of “honour, body, or life” had spent their time investigating with what right they adhered to this or that conviction, by what path they had arrived at it, how peaceable a picture the history of mankind would present! How much more knowledge there would be! We should have been spared all the cruel scenes attending the persecution of heretics of every kind...the inquisitors would have conducted their inquisition above all within themselves. 

For Nietzsche, the aim of furthering an increase in knowledge and understanding does not mean that the aim of giving to each what is due to it is entirely done away with. The agonistic structure of opposition persists in different terms. Conviction, no less than any human heretic, gets what is coming to it but as the intellectual not the theological opponent (Gegnerin) of truth.

What is due in this sense is understood to depend upon a clear-sighted view of the object of justice; in order to see that object clearly it must be seen in the best light possible and beheld from all sides. As Alan Schrift observes, “In opposition to the Kantian ‘disinterested spectator’ as the paradigm of objective judgment, Nietzsche posits Argos...the hundred-eyed monster who has mastered his pro and con and raised himself to justice (Gerechtigkeit).” Through what does the justice of the many-eyed Argos evolve? Through wandering around the world—“through long practice in the art of travel.” The seeing of many places fosters many eyes with which to see. (In the Odyssey, Homer offers a more skeptical account of the habitus associated with the quintessential traveler, Odysseus: the cunning intelligence which he possesses in abundance has many ways and eyes, and is not more just because of it: “Certain aspects of metis tend to associate it with the disloyal trick, the perfidious lie, and treachery.”

For Nietzsche, justice, whether one-eyed or many, still apprehends and judges that which is guilty of judgment. The punitive function of the justice that would judge heretics
has migrated; it has not been simply eradicated in the interest of furthering the norm of understanding things better (in a manner consistent with love) by seeing them through (many) open eyes. If one wants to behold things from the stance of one eye, he suggests, that one eye must carry within it the capacity to see as many eyes. Thus, when Nietzsche asks, “Do you want to become a universal just eye?,” his response is that “You must be one who has gone through many individuals and whose last individual uses all earlier ones as functions.”

Justice administered through a universal eye requires both one and many eyes if it is to be able simultaneously to judge the defects of eyes whose views are colored by parochialism while retaining their views as functions. Universality here is cumulative rather than subtractive of the gazes of many.

Unlike Nietzsche, of course, Spenser is a proponent of faith, and he understands it in opposition not to knowledge but to despair. Like Nietzsche, however, Spenser uses the trope of a just eye to think through questions about judgment and perspective. Whereas Nietzsche attempts to curtail the judgment-yielding properties of justice by limiting the proper object of justice-as-condemnation to conviction (or faith, if one happens to be a woman), and by proposing an intellectual model of inward inquisition as a substitute for outwardly-realized persecution, for Spenser, the justice that can’t see beyond condemnation is defective apart from a good external to itself: namely, grace. In Book I, justice is morally and theologically disabled (and disabling) apart from grace.

Also unlike Nietzsche, Spenser is concerned with justice as it is mediated through the “equall eye” (I.viii.27: I.ix.47) in heaven not that of a posited just human “eye”. In Cantos VIII and IX of Book I, he presents us with not one but two versions of a universal and equal eye. After Arthur and his squire defeat the giant Orgoglio, Una approaches the
squire and assures him that he will receive his reward: “...he that high does sit, and all things see / With equall eye, their merits to restore / Behold what ye this day haue done for mee, / And what I cannot quite, requite with useree” (I.viii.27). The squire will not only be rewarded in proportion to his meritorious actions, but with interest. The divine eye views not only all people but “all things” equally.

Here, vision is impartial because it is comprehensive; the eye that sees equally is the eye that can democratize its attention without sacrifice of focus and see things in relation to one another, and as parts of a whole. Power and impartiality coincide in this instance; the “equall eye” distributes attention to all things, and corrects imbalance through acts of equitable restoration. Yet the judgment that issues from equal vision, in this sense, does not distribute rewards with a view towards exactitude or balance, but rather liberality, and there is some suggestion that special care is being taken in this instance because the deed that has been done that day is “for mee” (i.e., the English church that Una represents). The impartiality of divine vision (see Deut. 10:17; II Chron. 19:7) is not affective, but perspectival; the eye is “equall” not because in seeing things, it sees through to the hidden truth about them, but because it sees all things and, in seeing them, gives back to them in accordance with their particular merits beyond what is required by justice. The eye is not truth-yielding (as is time, in I.ix.5); it does not look into the dark to bring what is hidden in it to sight, or into the heart to disclose whatever congealed darkness or light might be found there.90

In the very next canto of Book I, we are presented with another, very different image of an “equall eie.” When the Red Cross Knight seeks out the figure of Despair, he finds in a “darksome cave” a “cursed man, low sitting on the ground, / Musing full sadly
in his sullein mind.” Next to him is the warm corpse of the knight Sir Terwin, from which the blood is still flowing. The Red Cross Knight, incensed, accuses Despair of being “the author of this fact”(I.ix.37) although Sir Terwin himself inserted the knife. It is initially suggested that the fact that he was willing to kill himself after being reduced to despair by Despair and being given a knife by him shows that he must have had a “guiltie mind deserving death.” Despair asks: “Is it then uniuist to each his due to give?” (I.ix.38)

His argument now shifts to the claim that in giving Sir Terwin the knife, he was in fact assisting him in receiving his good—namely, that of death, which Despair presents as a state of “happy ease” in which one enjoys “Sleep after toile, port after stormie seas” (I.ix.40). Despair now begins to convince the Red Cross Knight that he, too, should avail himself of death, partly because “Death is the end of woes” (I.ix.47) but primarily because he has defiled himself with sin, and God’s justice, as Despair would have it, demands his death as a consequence: “Is he not iust, that all this doth behold / From highest heauen and bears an equall eie?... / Is not his lawe, Let euery sinner die; / Die shall all flesh?” (I.ix.47).

In calling to mind the ugliness of his sins, the Red Cross Knight is reduced to despair; he takes up the dagger that is offered to him and prepares to insert it into himself. At the last minute, however, Una snatches the knife out of his hand and asks him: “In heauenly mercies hast thou not a part? Why shouldst then despeire that chosen art? / Where justice growes, there grows eke greater grace, / The which doth quench the brond of hellish smart” (I.ix.53). The Red Cross Knight’s recognition of his chosenness, in her account, should serve as an apotropaic defense against despair, and a reminder that he has a portion in heavenly mercies and “greater grace,” as well as the justice alongside which
it grows. But in Stanza 1 of the next canto, it seems that this portion is not to be secured through meritorious deeds: “If any strength we haue, it is to ill, / But all the good is Gods, both power and eke will” (I.x.1). Human beings can merit glory through deeds and thus play an active role, in some sense, in constituting what is due in that context (thereby mirroring and augmenting the internal reward that virtue gives itself), but divine mercy or grace, it is suggested, have everything to do with the judgment of the donor, and nothing to do with the desert of those to whom special grace and mercy are given by virtue of their choseness.

Spenser’s first reference to “the equall eye,” in the speech of Una, suggests that the universe is watched over by an all-seeing divinity who metes out providential restoration to all things with a liberal hand where it is merited. The second reference to the “equall eie,” in the speech of Despair, suggests that the universe is watched over by an all-seeing divinity that says all flesh must die. Una’s correction of Despair’s account of the “equall eie” does not address the problems raised by Despair’s formally valid (though not, within the ethos of the poem, morally or theologically sound) employment of the conventional notions of justice as giving to each what is due, and furthering the good of the other, in Despair’s terms. If Despair were correct that death is a good (a view which Spenser means us to reject), then helping others to kill themselves would be simply a means of assisting the other in attaining his good.

This episode poses the question of whether the meaning of justice in the deontological sense depends upon an ontologically thick (meaning particularistic) understanding of the nature and circumstances of the other to whom something is due, and, just as importantly, upon the question of what is good —both for particular persons,
and more generally. The sequence in which the Red Cross’s knight suffers a spiritual
deadth as a result of accepting Despair’s argument that “death was dew to him who had
prouokt Gods ire” (I.ix.50) and attempting to render to himself what is due with the aid of
the dagger handed him by Despair suggests that he needs to be cured as much of his
susceptibility to this particular understanding of justice as much as the more intractable
problem of “inward corruption and infected sin” (I.x.25).

Through his treatment of the “equall eie” Spenser presents readers with not two
but three different perspectives to keep in mind with respect to justice. Justice may be
beheld with a view towards the unforgiving requirement of law. We are discouraged from
doing so, however. It may also be beheld with a view towards the “greater grace” that
grows alongside of it. This is the recommended view, but we are not to think that the
divine eye is somehow less than equal because it takes grace into account. Just as
importantly, there is implicitly a third way in which we might view justice as it is dealt
with in I.viii.27 and then in I.ix.47 (and perhaps, to a lesser extent, II.i.36 and II.viii.1 as
well). This third way requires that we read each consideration of justice in light of the
others, and in light of the poem’s broader, many-sided, consideration of justice. When we
do so, however, tensions surface within the poem’s overall consideration of justice.

Is the justice found in Book VI, according to which “it is no blame / To punish
those, that doe deserue the same” (VI.i.26) in any way inclusive of the view that justice,
if it is to be consistent with a God’s-eye view of things, cannot only attend to the
demands of what is due? In the context of Book I, Spenser’s justice in this particular
respect is not impartial: we are clearly meant to view the justice that dispenses with
justice for the sake of grace to be superior to that of the justice that does not. But at
particular points in the poem where another sort of justice is required (notoriously, the episodes in which Artegaill is aided by Talus), the modes of justice in the poem that look outside of justice and within it (to equity) to temper the rigor of justice are nowhere in sight. Spenser’s justice variously entails the perspective which attends to what is due (where due, again, disables blame), that which looks within justice to see where it can “save” rather than "spill” (V.x.2), that which looks to the grace that is greater than justice, and that which beholds all of these different modes of justice. This is his justice as a poet of juxtaposition, repetition with a difference, and migration through the many modes of one virtue.

The last mode of justice, in its capacity to see different sides of justice even while judging them, is Spenser’s perspectival poetic justice. His justice differs substantially from that of Nietzsche, even as it evokes it in a very few respects. Spenser’s justice is of poetic as well as intellectual import because of its demonstration of poetry’s very capacity to generate it. His one and many eyed perspective comprehends virtue and vice, right and wrong, and better and worse perspectives on justice, while maintaining its capacity for judgment, and its openness to faith. It is the condition for the perception of the shifting boundaries and conjunctions between the things that the poem ponders.

One thinks here of Sidney’s peerless poet, who can see things better than can the equally one-sided historian and philosopher not only in theoretical terms but with a view towards the government of action as well. But what the peerless poet combines, the poet of perspectival justice would seem to split apart in terms of his treatment of justice. One can do intellectual and poetic justice to justice by seeing its many different sides (not all of which, to put it mildly, are morally attractive and some of which are appalling). But
where does this leave justice as a moral virtue? Spenser suggests no extra-contextual standard by which to judge the various sides of justice relative to one another such that we might say that one is “true justice.” Is true justice equally inclusive of the justice that seeks to spare and save, or the justice that sees no blame in spilling blood where blood, by virtue of due, ought to be spilt? Justice is made less intelligible with respect to the government of action as it is made fuller and more plausible as an object of reflection.

Once we consider the intellectual dimension of Spenser’s justice, the division within justice between its moral and intellectual aspects appears to be irreconcilable unless we look beyond justice itself to the larger question of the good, understood as that which may be furthered, although to varying degrees, through both intellectual and moral virtue. In the end, it is not apparent that Spenser’s relationship with his readers is characterized by justice, unless we take the process of making manifest the tension within justice to be a means of modeling some sort of intellectual virtue through his poetry, and take that modeling as a means of furthering our good as the others of *The Faerie Queene*.

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1 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1130a4-5. All translations of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are from *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), hereafter, *NE*. In 1130a4-5, Aristotle is discussing justice in its aspect as lawfulness; he deals as well in Book V with justice in its aspect as equality and fairness pertaining to the distribution of goods. Both modes of justice are necessarily other-regarding; Bartlett and Collins observe that “Like general justice…particular justice is also distinguished from the other virtues in being defined by its orientation ‘towards another’” (272). Justice in its capacity as a virtue “bears a relation to” (NE 1130a10) at least one human other. This is not, of course, to say that justice is the only other-regarding virtue but that unlike other virtues it is “complete virtue” (1129b28) in its other-regarding aspect. Hallvard Fossheim wishes to emphasize that “justice is the *use* of virtue towards another” rather than simply “virtue towards another” but these two understandings do not rule each other out: “complete virtue turns out be virtue displayed in

2 On the supposed complicity of poetry with injustice in this sense, see the eloquent complaint of William Hazlitt, Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1818), 85.

3 While justice generally forbids the exemption of oneself (or anyone else, for that matter) from general rules; poetry, on occasion, takes pride in sparing some essential aspect of various parties (whether “your virtues rare,” “your name” or simply “you”) from the certain fate shared by all of what Shakespeare, in Sonnet 81, calls the “breathers of this world.” See Shakespeare, “Sonnet 81,” in The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 1869. His Sonnet 55 promises that “Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rime; / But you shall shine more bright in these contents /Than unswept stone, besmeard’ d with sluttish time.” See Shakespeare, “Sonnet 55,” The Riverside Shakespeare, 1853. One could respond to this vision of chaste immunity from besmearment by the profligate force to which all things partaking of being are subject by invoking the notion that “people who are alike in morally relevant respects should receive similar treatment” (Brian M. Barry, Justice as Impartiality [New York: Oxford University Press, 1995], 246). Such an approach seems, however, to lack promise.

4 Otfried Höffe uses this phrase to characterize the allotrium agathon. See NE 1130a3-5 and Höffe, Aristotle (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 155.

5 If Shelley is right that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of “the world” as such, the scope of the justice pertaining to poetry would seem to extend beyond its readers, given the discrepancy between the number of readers of poetry and the number of people in the world.

6 Andrew Hadfield correctly observes that “there has been a general agreement among critics that the allegory of justice in Book V is directly—though not exclusively—centered around Spenser’s Irish experience.” See Hadfield, Edmund Spenser’s Irish Experience: Wilde Fruit and Salvage Soyl: Wilde Fruit and Salvage Soyl (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 146.

7 The notion that The Faerie Queene is complicit in offenses that gave rise to the Irish “memory of injustice” is not limited to literary critics; see, for example Amartya Sen, “Violence and Civil Society,” in Peace and Democratic Society (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2011), 22.

8 Richard A. McCabe, Spenser’s Monstrous Regiment: Elizabethan Ireland and the Poetics of Difference (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 224. It should be noted that McCabe is not using “the Other” in a philosophically specific way (so as, for example, to evoke either Kierkegaard, Sartre, or Levinas) but in a more general way, which is tethered to his mention in the same sentence of Aristotle’s “good of others.” On the genealogy of Levinas’s “Other,” see Samuel Moyn, Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas Between Revelation and Ethics (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

9 This is McCabe’s (Spenser’s Monstrous Regiment, 231) quotation of Jameson.

10 McCabe, Spenser’s Monstrous Regiment, 231.

11 Sean Kane, Spenser’s Moral Allegory (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 140.


13 Kane, Spenser’s Moral Allegory, 140.

14 Ibid.


17 Owens suggests that although “The phrase ‘matter of just memory’ seems initially unprepossessing,” when we “understand ‘just’ in its senses of ‘impartial,’ ‘righteous,’ ‘equitable,’ ‘lawful’ or ‘honourable in one’s social relations,” we “grant to memory capacities and functions that are every bit as creative as, and even more active than, those ascribed to the idle abundant faculty of imagination.” See Owens, “Memory Works in The Faerie Queene,” Spenser Studies XXII (2007), 28. So important is “just memory” that it has elsewhere been suggested that, for Spenser, it constitutes “poetry’s ideal.” See Joseph Campana, “On Not Defending Poetry: Spenser, Suffering, and the Energy of Affect,” PMLA 120 (2005), 39. Thomas Hyde
links the poem’s aspiration to just memory to its deference to authority in remarking that “To avoid the prophet’s claim to vision—the only kind of experience that overrides all prior authority—Spenser subsumes his visionary poetics within the image of received authority and presents even The Faerie Queene, with all its visions and visionaries, as ‘matter of just memory’” (Hyde, “Vision,” in The Spenser Encyclopedia, ed. A.C. Hamilton [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990], 722).

18 Dolven contends that among the “deepest sources” of the poem’s exploration of punishment “are scenes of symbolic discipline the young poet would have witnessed in the streets and public squares of London.” See Dolven, “Spenser’s Sense of Poetic Justice,” Raritan 21 (2001), 127. The “something” done to another in the context of punishment is not, Dolven remarks, akin to mere violence, for punishment is “performed as retribution, by authority and according to some implicit or explicit law. (It is, in a sense, colonial rather than originary: the extension or expression of an already existing order.)” (140).

19 Dolven, “Spenser’s Sense of Poetic Justice,” 139.

20 Rebeca Helfer, Spenser’s Ruins and the Art of Recollection (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 314.

21 Helfer, Spenser’s Ruins, 174


27 Alpers, The Poetry of The Faerie Queene, 284.


29 Ibid.


31 Lewis, The Allegory of Love, 347. Lewis’s remark might be thought of in conjunction with Angus Fletcher’s view that Spenser, as a “provider” and epic poet “dispose[s]” the world he creates “imperially.” See Fletcher, The Prophetic Moment: An Essay on Spenser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 214.


34 On Spenser’s treatment of hierarchy, see Jon A. Quitslund, Spenser’s Supreme Fiction: Platonic Natural Philosophy and The Faerie Queene (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 133-142. Quitslund usefully observes that “Spenser refers to [a hierarchical universe] in many passages of The Faerie Queene, but a full account of his allegory should take note of the fact that however much his characters may long to be at rest in a fixed place, most of the time they are either stuck where they should not be or involved in restless motion toward a distant goal” (135).


In Nohrnberg’s account, doing justice to temperance does not mean merely doing justice to Guyon via emplotment (though it does mean that in part) but doing justice to Florimell in her capacity as the proper bearer of the golden girdle, and to Braggadocchio, whose error of incontinence (which led him to “appropriate[e] the attributes of more noble natures”) is revealed and punished. For Nohrnberg, doing justice to temperance seems to entail poetically rendering what is due to it in light of the poem’s desired good (the fashioning of virtuous persons and the furtherance of right order) and rendering to others what is consistent with justice, in light of their respective states of temperance.

36 See Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1366b7. My understanding of justice in this paper is Aristotelian in an expansive rather than a strict sense. On an Aristotelian justice construed as “the willingness to give to each their due” in relation to law, see the brief remarks of Garrett Barden and Tim Murphy, Law and Justice in Community
Although Aristotelian justice in its capacity as an ethical and political virtue is *pros heteron* (NE 1129b25), the other to whom justice is related is not any other or every other. As F. E. Sparshott observes, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, “virtue practiced ‘in relation to another’ [i.e., justice] is contrasted with virtue practiced in relation to oneself and to one’s household.” (Sparshott, *Taking Life Seriously: A Study of the Argument of the Nicomachean Ethics*, 2nd ed. [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996], 161). The import of this distinction between virtue practiced in relation to another and virtue practiced towards oneself or towards members of one’s household is rendered more specific by Michael Pakaluk: “By ‘others’ Aristotle does not mean ‘other persons generally,’ but rather those who are at first strangers, that is, persons other than those you know from private life.” (Pakaluk, *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics: An Introduction* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 188). This helps to explain Josef Pieper’s remark that “what distinguishes justice from love,” is that “in the relationship of justice, men confront each other as separate ‘others,’ almost as strangers…. To be just means to recognize the other as other; it means to give just acknowledgment even where one cannot love” (Pieper, “Justice,” in *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, trans. Daniel F. Coogan [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965], 54). The Aristotelian other, while undoubtedly, as Pakaluk suggests, an “other” in a specialized sense is not immediately evocative of much later conceptions of the other such as that of Levinas or, as Sparshott would specifically have it, Sartre’s *Autrui*. By the same token, otherness in Aristotle (to the minimal extent that we may speak of such a thing) is not to be confused with otherness in the context of post-personalist and existentialist European thought. On respect for difference and the otherness of others in Aristotle, see Frank, *A Democracy of Distinction*, 73-74, 93. On the pejorative meaning of “otherness” as it applies to strangers and outsiders in Aristotle’s political thought, see Engin F. Isin, *Being Political: Genealogies of Citizenship* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 80.


Hugh MacLachlan observes of Arthur’s remarks about the impropriety of knights expecting rewards for having done their due in II.viii.56 that his “argument is a theological one: The doing of good deeds does not enable man to receive salvation, and so Guyon has no right to expect a ‘meed’ for his acts.” MacLachlan, “The ‘careless heauens': A Study of Revenge and Atonement in *The Faerie Queene*,” *Spenser Studies* 1 (1980), 156.


Complaints about justice in the context of poetry are not necessarily moral in aspect. Herbert Grierson, for instance, implies that Milton did not do justice to his gifts as a poet when he set out to justify the ways of God to men in *Paradise Lost*. “The poet, the creative poet, in Milton is one thing,” he argues, “the opinionated thinker, bent on justifying the ways of God to men is another. The poem does not justify the
ways of God to our heart or our imagination… and this is why Satan holds the stage with such complete success.” Cross-Currents in English Literature of the XVIIth Century: Or the World, the Flesh & the Spirit, Their Actions & Reactions Being the Messenger Lectures on the Evolution of Civilization, Cornell University 1926-27(London: Chatto & Windus, 1948), 262.


48 Heaney, The Cure at Troy, 77.


51 For Nietzsche’s comments on Aeschylus’s justice, see The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), 70, 72. Heidegger (On the Way to Language, trans. Peter D. Hertz [New York: Harper & Row], 68) raises the question of whether a poem can “do justice to what is in the poet's nature.” More conventionally, the question of how poetry does justice has been thought to pertain to the relationship between poems and phenomena (including abstractions and collectivities) or persons other than the poet himself or herself, such that it can be said, for example, that a given “poem does justice to world, to self, to literary tradition, and to a culture” (Richard Wilbur, “Poetry and Happiness,” in Claims for Poetry, ed. Donald Hall [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982], 489) or that certain poets “striv[e] to do justice to difficult truths” (Helen Vendler, Last Looks, Last Books: Stevens, Plath, Lowell, Bishop, Merrill [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010], 240.


53 Thomas Rymer, The Tragedies of the Last Age, Consider’d and Examin’d by the Practice of the Ancients, and by the Common Sense of All Ages in a Letter to Fleetwood Shepheard, esq.; by Mr. Rymer Part I (London: R. Baldwin, 1692), 14.

54 To what extent, if any, may we still share Lilian Winstanley’s firm confidence that Sidney’s theory of poetic justice is “illustrated magnificently and at length in The Faerie Queene,” a poem wherein, to her mind, “poetic justice is always administered”? (“Introduction,” in The Faerie Queene, Book I [London: Cambridge University Press, 1920], lxvii). One might ask if Sidney’s own poetry “magnificently illustrates” his ideas about poetic justice in any uncomplicated way. On Sidney and poetic justice with respect to the task of “securing an inward state of justice for…readers,” see Robert E. Stillman, Sidney’s Poetic Justice: The Old Arcadia, Its Eclogues, and Renaissance Pastoral Traditions (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1986), 8. Winstanley’s claim aside, recent considerations of particular episodes in the poem may invite more qualified considerations of just what poetic justice means for Spenser. Is it the case, for instance, as Lesley Brill (“Hellenore,” The Spenser Encyclopedia, 352) suggests in passing, that Hellenore’s “happiness” with the satyrs (III:x:44-51) “comes as poetic justice of a sort, but it also testifies to the inevitable degradation of people who allow themselves to be overrun by their desires.” Leaving aside the question of under what circumstances, if any, Spenser envisions happiness as a uniquely apt punishment, what is of note here is that Brill identifies the consignment of Hellenore to a morally infelicitous mode of happiness as a sort of justice.


56 Ibid.

57 McCabe, Spenser’s Monstrous Regiment, 223.


60 Ibid.

61 Teskey, “Courtesy and Thinking,” 344.

The complicated nature of Artegall’s relation to justice is signaled early in Book V. Spenser makes it clear that his instructor in the discipline of justice, Astraea herself, is a petty thief and kidnapper (who, spotting Artegall as a “gentle” child playing with his friends, and seeing that he is “fit” and “with no crime defild” plies him with “gifts and speeches mild” and whisks him away to a “cave from companie exiled” (V.i.6). It has thus far gone unnoticed (even in the Hamilton edition of The Faerie Queene) that this kidnapping episode has unmistakable echoes of the episode in Hesiod in which Aphrodite kidnaps the young Phaethon as he is “thinking playful thoughts” and takes him away to serve as an attendant in her underground temple in a cave (Theogony 986-81), an allusion which I bring up (without knowing what to make of it) for the sake of calling attention to the oddity of Artegall’s education in justice.


Alpers, The Poetry of The Faerie Queene, 315. C.S. Lewis suggests that Spenser may feel pity for at least one of the poem’s dragons; see Lewis, Spenser’s Images of Life, 19.


Ibid.

Here, again, I am thinking of Lewis’s comment (mentioned in Note 25) that Spenser is concerned more with “life-long state[s],” than in the “moment of…choice.” See Lewis, Spenser’s Images of Life, 66.

As noted in Note 6 of VI.i.12 in Hamilton’s edition of the poem.


Jane Grogan suggests that Calidore’s quest is unique in that it is “non-teleological.” See Grogan, Exemplary Spenser: Visual and Poetic Pedagogy in The Faerie Queene (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 151. The failure to maintain penultimate ends that are achieved (such as the captivity of the Blatant Beast, which ends by design of “wicked fate” or “fault of men” [VI.xii.38]), however, does not negate their existence as ends. Calidore’s quest is characterized by mixed conventions of poetic emplotment.

Twice in Book I Spenser invokes the traditional trope that time is a medium of justice. In recounting the story of his upbringing to Una, Arthur suggests that “time in her iust terme the truth to light should bring” (I.ix.2). The use of “light” in this context suggests the extent to which time does justice by bringing truth out of some place in which was previously obscured by darkness and disclosing it to sight. There is no mention of time as the monitor of acts of injustice and the distributor of vengeance, punishment, or reward; rather, the sense is of time as something that brings forth what is needed when its moment has arrived.


The idea of one eye that sees as many evokes something that I think we may safely say that Nietzsche did not have in mind, namely, Marsilius of Padua’s claim that “The law is an eye resulting from many eyes.” See Marsilius, *Defensor Pacis*, ed. and trans. Annabel Brett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 60.

The “equall eye,” then, is not described as being akin to the sort of divine vision described in I Samuel 16:7: “For not as man sees [does the Lord see]; man sees only what is visible, but the Lord sees into the heart.”