

Spenser's *Prothalamion*

in

Context

By

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## I

The Material Context

In her book *Wittgenstein and Justice*, Hanna Pitkin, drawing on the work of Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell, discusses the role of context in the meaning of words.<sup>1</sup> The terrain is difficult. There are many difficulties in meaning that require a context to make sense clear or clearer. Some stem from the obvious difficulty of words having adjacent but related meanings, for instance, the sentence ‘I will inspect Roberts’ division’ becomes less ambiguous if it were to be ‘I will inspect Brigadier Roberts’ division’.<sup>2</sup> Other difficulties arise from the fact that some expressions, to make sense at all, are embedded in the situation in which they occur. Pitkin quotes Wittgenstein on intending, that it is ‘embedded in the situation, in human customs and institutions. If the technique of the game of chess did not exist, I could not intend to play a game of chess.’<sup>3</sup> She quotes Stephen Toulmin in summary, saying that language does not consist of ‘Timeless propositions, but of utterances dependant in all sorts of ways on the context or occasion on which they are uttered. Statements are made in particular situations and the interpretation put upon them is bound up with their relation to these situations.’<sup>4</sup> Pitkin’s book, published in 1972, relates the notion of the language game and the ‘form of life’ to the problems of political theory and political action. But it was also symptomatic of a growing interest in the importance of context in the examination of the practical use of language from Philosophy through Linguistics, History, Anthropology, Literary studies, to (in Ethnomethodology) the examination of how a resident of a Los Angeles probation hostel explains why he can’t organise a table tennis tournament.<sup>5</sup>

Of more influence in Literary Studies, the development of Structuralism by Ferdinand de Saussure and afterwards by Roman Jakobson, took what appeared to be a very different approach. The idea of the signifier and the signified, the arbitrary nature of language, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1962)

<sup>2</sup> See Pitkin Ch. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. By G E M Anscombe, P M S Hacker and Joachim Shulte, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) ¶ 337.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958) Toulmin argues that the growth of printing assisted in making words less context dependant. He points out that medieval logic dealt with context-dependant utterances rather than timeless propositions. p. 180.

<sup>5</sup> Don Weider, *Language and Social Reality* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974).

important development of the idea of difference, that the meaning of a sign is a function of its difference from other signs, were at the core of Saussure's work. The objective structure of signs which makes speech possible is the important object of study. This approach was developed by Jakobson in relation to literature and the structuralist analysis of texts became very influential. The influence of this theoretical perspective was almost entirely formalist in its direction of travel, but it ignored or de-emphasised the fact that the social and therefore contextual dimension to language was accepted by both Saussure and Jakobson. Saussure says, 'The arbitrary nature of the sign explains in turn why the social fact alone can create a linguistic system. The community is necessary if values that owe their existence solely to usage and general acceptance are to be set up.'<sup>6</sup> For Jakobson communication consisted of six factors, the sixth factor being a context to which the message refers.<sup>7</sup>

In Literary Studies, from the late 1970's onwards there was increasing interest in and focus on, the importance of context in the study of literary works. New Historicism and materialist criticism became much more important. In The United States Stephen Greenblatt and others developed an approach to literature which saw it as embedded in a network of ideas and assumptions which formed the ideological context within which the work was produced. This approach owed much to the work of Michel Foucault. In Britain materialist criticism related the material context of the work to its ideological content and was more left-wing in its orientation.<sup>8</sup> In all this, the beleaguered sub-discipline became the formal study of texts. On one hand formalism was seen to be bracketing off the most important questions about the production of a literary text. To simply concentrate on 'the words on the page', divorcing the text from its social context and any notion that it has got something to say about anything other than itself, was seen as ignoring the most important questions which were available to be asked about literary works. On the other hand, such an approach, which abandoned the notion of intentionality, was criticised for elevating the text to the status of a natural object, independent of the context of its production, capable of being dissected in a manner which becomes unbearably positivist.<sup>9</sup>

An interesting application of the process of adducing an historical context for a poem and then showing that poem as not simply a feature of that context, but as, in a sense, tethered to

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<sup>6</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* tr. Wade Baskin (London: Fontana, 1974) p. 113.

<sup>7</sup> Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, ed. by Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987) see especially pp.50 – 61.

<sup>8</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Myths of Power: a Marxist Study of the Brontes* (Basingstoke: MacMillan 1975, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn.1988).

<sup>9</sup> Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) p. 24.

that context, can be seen in Judith Owen's piece, *Commerce and Cadiz in Spenser's 'Prothalamion'*.<sup>10</sup> The main thrust of Judith Owens' argument is that 'Prothalamion is deeply interested, I contend, in the relationship between heroic and commercial ethoi' (p. 79). The piece is divided into four sections. Each section deals with the four main textual clues that enable Owens to develop her theme. However, the introduction clearly states the direction of travel, 'Prothalamion is a poem that expands its meanings the more thoroughly we remember its local material contexts.' (p. 79). Owens goes on to assert that it is important to keep the London setting of the poem in mind, even though, as she states, this may be an issue that 'the poem itself does not always overtly acknowledge.' (pp. 79 – 80). Well, the poem does acknowledge it because it is set on the Thames and landmarks on the banks of the Thames are mentioned, which make it quite clear that the action takes place in London (*Prothalamion* stanza 8). But this is not quite what Owens needs, it has to be the material context of the busy port of London that she is after, something which is quite absent from the poem, an issue which I shall discuss later.

The first section deals with part of the refrain of the poem, 'Sweet *Themmes* runne softly till I end my Song'.<sup>11</sup> Owens states that the usual interpretation of this line, that time should slow or that the river of life should flow gently and tenderly should be augmented with the sense that the Thames should be quiet. What Owens has in mind is not the interference from the sound of rushing water or some such consideration, but the noise of commercial London. Owens paints a highly developed (and lengthy) picture of the noise and bustle of the Port of London, the shouts of watermen, and The Cries of London, so distinctive as to be set to music by Orlando Gibbons. This London is a busy, prosperous and very loud place, leading Owens to conclude, 'Since reduction in foreign trade was largely offset by increased activity in domestic markets, and, as England became a nation of conspicuous consumers, rapid expansion of the import market, the soundscapes of the Thames remain viable indices to commerce and trade in Spenser's period.' Leaving aside how foreign trade can reduce at the same time as the import market was expanding, the notion of England becoming a nation of conspicuous consumers anytime close to the Elizabethan period is frankly risible. Conspicuous consumption, except for the very few, was a feature of the twentieth century. Owen's conclusion is that, 'To take literally the river setting of *Prothalamion*, to reconstruct

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<sup>10</sup> Judith Owens, 'Commerce and Cadiz in Spenser's *Prothalamion*', *SEL*, 47, 1 (winter 2007) 79 – 106. Further references appear in the text.

<sup>11</sup> *Edmund Spenser: The Shorter poems*, ed. by Richard A. McCabe (Harmondsworth: penguin Books, 1999), pp. 491 – 497.

the Thames of Spenser's day as a noisy conduit of trade and commercial prosperity, and to hear Spenser's refrain against that soundscape, is to introduce for analysis a dimension of the poem that can only deepen our appreciation of Spenser's poetics as thoroughgoing in its engagements –[...]–with the London of his day.' To summarise, the refrain 'Sweete *Themmes* run softly till I end my song' is to be taken as a request that all the noise of the commercial city should abate so that Spenser can be heard. Owens says, 'What emerges from this analysis in particular, is Spenser's reluctance to embrace London's commercial ethos as conducive to heroic values and achievements.' (p. 85).

The interesting question is how have we got here? The Thames is asked to run softly. This is taken as evidence that this is really about noise. Not the noise of the river, but the noise of the city and its accompanying commercial activity. The description of the commercial activity is emphasised, as a way of Owens showing that it is hard to argue that its presence in the poem should be ignored. Having established the 'material' context of the poem, Owens argues that in asking the Thames to run softly, 'Spenser is reluctant to embrace London's commercial ethos as conducive to heroic values and achievements.' (p. 85). This last statement can now be introduced for analysis because it has been shown to be the material context of the poem. The question must be asked, given that all poems have a material context (to say so is really to say nothing) the real issue must be, what is the relationship between the literary work and its material context?

However, we are not finished yet. The second piece of textual evidence concerns part two of Owen's piece. The phrase 'silver streaming *Themmes*', (*Prothalamion* 1,11.) 'furnishes another and related means by which to emphasise that Spenser remains consistently alert to how commercial, and mercantile pursuits compromise chivalric heroism.' (p. 85). Using a link to *The Faerie Queene*, (III, ix,45,2) Owens shows that Spenser 'readily imagines the Thames to be linked to London in its commercial aspects and its contributions to empire.' (p. 85). Therefore, this allows us to consider that the "' silver'" of the Thames does not only register color or glint but alludes as well both to the precious metal that by the late sixteenth century was more important than gold to European economies, including England's.' (p. 85). In addition, Owens introduces the notion of mercury, a key element in the refining of silver, and also the god of eloquence and commerce. This enables her to position Spenser as 'promoting the poet's role in generating a golden vision of empire – through supplanting alchemy's base pursuit of riches with the alchemy of the poet's imagination.' There then follows a lengthy discussion of the role of silver in the political economy of late Elizabethan

England which enables Owens to develop her theme further. The point is driven home in the following: ‘While the specific epic achievement in view here in this opening stanza may be *The Faerie Queene, Prothalamion*’s subsequent interest in the Cadiz expedition will invite us to extend to that event our sense that Spenser believes the relationship between court or sovereign and heroic enterprise to be one that is damaged by financial considerations. For Spenser, such considerations diminish heroic spirit.’ (p. 89). At this point it is important to note that we are starting to receive access to Spenser’s mind and intentions. Somehow, we know two things, that London is particularly associated with commerce in Spenser’s mind, and that ‘Spenser believes the relationship between court or sovereign and heroic enterprise to be one that is damaged by financial considerations.’ (p. 89).

The third section of Owens’ piece concerns the raid led by Essex on Cadiz. It is here that the carefully laid groundwork of the previous two sections is brought into the argument. It is taken as established that Spenser wishes to separate commercial considerations from heroic practices and it is in a consideration of the debate surrounding the Cadiz raid that Owens articulates Spenser’s apparently distinctive view. ‘[...] Spenser’s desire to distinguish heroic imperatives – his own and England’s – not just from mercenary and commercial *practices* but also from the *mentality* that cannot distinguish between heroic and mercenary (and self-promoting) enterprises.’ (p. 91). One crucial point is that Spenser’s desire to ‘silence the Thames extends to a desire to subdue the cacophony of voices accompanying the matter of Cadiz.’ (p. 91). This is so that Spenser’s own voice can be heard, a voice which whilst not appearing to stint praise for Essex, appears to Owens, in its syntax, to serve as a warning to Essex to eschew self-aggrandisement in favour of working towards the glory of England, and, more particularly, her queen. The stanza in question is interpreted as a warning to Essex ‘not to secure his own fame and glory, but to advance the queen’s. Essex must, that is, avoid the trap of self-promotion, must work so that “great *Elisaes* glorious name may ring” (10. 157).’ (p. 93). The interpretation of this stanza sees Spenser as at odds with other commentators. Owens mentions Edward Reynoldes and Francis Bacon, both supporters of Essex and quotes Reynoldes saying in a letter to Essex ‘yesterday ... poured forth one joy together for your lordships happy return, as those *that had thus long sat in darkness, to whom the sun once again appeareth.*’ (italics in the original). Owens includes Francis Bacon in the expression of these sentiments but does not explain the grounds for her doing so. This appears to cast Spenser as a voice that, uniquely, praises Essex in a conditional and exhortatory manner, and there is indeed a qualified tone to be found in this stanza. Alastair Fowler also considers

Bacon's relationship to Essex but appears to find in a letter that Bacon wrote to Essex on the Cadiz raid a tone very similar to the one Owens finds in Spenser's stanza on Essex.

'Panegyric here contains a suggestion as salutary, and possibly as unpalatable, as any in the cautionary letter which Bacon wrote to Essex in the same year: namely that he should stoop more from the height of ambitious greatness and merge his own in his country's life (symbolized by the Thames).'<sup>12</sup> Here Fowler compares Spenser's position with Bacon's, and appears to find them similar, while not at the same time regarding the Bacon letter as persuasive of his interpretation of Spenser. Fowler's grounds for understanding the conditional tone of Spenser's writing reside in the symbolism of the classical allusions with which Spenser peoples the stanza, 'The admonition is at once gravest and most covert in its allusion to Virgil's Pallas, who when he had bathed in Ocean's billows resembled the morning star, "qualis ubi Oceani perfusus Lucifer unda".' (p. 83). Owens finds the comparison of Essex to 'radiant *Hesper*' (*Prothalamion* 10. 164) significant in that Spenser compares Essex to a star, not a sun as Reynoldes does; a lesser heavenly body. For Fowler the significance of *Hesper* is that he is traditionally invoked in epithalamia, 'because his appearance was anciently the sign to light nuptial torches' (p. 83). It is curious that Owens finds a different attitude on the part of Bacon, and that she does not acknowledge or discuss Fowler's contribution to the debate. I will consider Owens' analysis of Spenser's poetics and the extent to which it supports her case, later.

Finally, the reference to the Temple, former home of the Knights Templar and now the abode of lawyers is taken as another warning about the dangers of the decline from heroic achievements to commercial activity. The history of the building appears to be a case study in the conflict between chivalric and commercial values. The subject, in the past, of a great deal of legal wrangling, many leaseholders of the Templars refusing to hand over their leases to the Hospitallers at the dissolution of the Temple Order and therefore a case study in the decline of heroic values in the face of commercial imperatives. Owens concludes, 'Together, such historical details reinforce the supposition that behind the reference to the Templar Knights lies Spenser's understanding that a commercial ethos can only vitiate heroic endeavour of the kind that he sees as essential to English Protestant interests, at home and abroad.' (p. 99).

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<sup>12</sup> Alastair Fowler, *Conceitful thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1975) P. 83.

There are two main issues which must be considered. The first is, how does Owens' analysis of the poetics of the *Prothalamion* support her arguments that the poem contains a double warning to Essex to avoid commercial considerations in favour of heroic ones on the one hand, and to avoid self-publicising in favour of striving for the greater glory of Elizabeth I and England on the other. The second is, where does the idea of a conflict between heroic and commercial values come from, and how is it possible that Spenser should consider this undesirable? The first issue which Owens deals with is part of the refrain which forms the last line of each stanza. Owens states that there is a contrast between the two lines of the refrain, the first line is clearly iambic, but with the second line we encounter a string of three spondees which is arrested by the 'soft' of softly. Owens then states, 'the second half of the line resumes momentum but with now a gentler current. The warrant for reading the start of the second line as spondaic is that this variant is 'invited by the initial sibilant, the long "e" and the plosive "t" of sweet.' (p. 84). This does not convince. The 'e' is not particularly long and the 't' of 'sweet' is de-emphasised because it is run into the 't' of Themmes'. It seems to me that reading this line in the way Owens wants us to, is simply a matter of emphasis. It certainly is not iambic in the way the preceding line is, but it is not, in my view spondaic either. The statement that the second half of the line proceeds with a 'gentler current' is again a matter of emphasis. The interesting thing is that Owens has arrived at an understanding of the way the line works, that it is about slowing and quietening, while at the same time ignoring its most obvious feature; that all the words in the line are of single syllables except the word 'softly'. I shall return to this in my discussion of the poem.

Owens makes the point that the word 'fruitlesse' (1.6) at first appears merely conventional until we come to the description of the riverbank as 'paynted all with variable flowers,' and 'adorned with daintie gems' (*Prothalamion* 1. 13 – 14). Owens point is that we 'see that he has reversed expectations about the wealth of the Court and nature by applying nature imagery to the Court and courtly imagery to nature'. (p. 89). This 'suggests the courts cultural and spiritual poverty' (p. 89) and is interpreted as Spenser beginning 'to discredit the Court's role in promoting epic achievement by suggesting that the role is vitiated by financial motives.' (p. 89). It is clearly the case that Spenser wishes to make a contrast between the court and the riverbank. There is no warrant here to interpret the comparison in the direction in which Owens wishes to go. The Court is described in stereotypical terms, an experience characterised by long periods of waiting, boredom, lack of progress and disappointment. One has only to read *Prosopopoia Or Mother Hubberd's Tale* to understand Spenser's at best



ambivalent attitude to what goes on at Court. To go from this to see it as an argument in Spenser's attempt to 'discredit the Court's role in promoting epic achievement' (p. 89), is to appropriate the poem to a fixed idea, which at this stage at least, is only held by Owens. However, the contrast between the lines on the Court and the description of the river bank is striking. Its purpose, in my view is to signal the transition from the mundane and questionable world of politics and networking to a world of beauty and heightened unreality peopled by nymphs and swans who turn into brides. In other words, we are being prepared for action which the poem elevates above, and attempts to transcend, the mundane. It seems to me that here Spenser draws on the tradition of dream poetry, describing someone with virtually an altered state of consciousness, or at least a feverish mind, happening upon an almost visionary landscape. We are being cued to expect interesting things. I will discuss this feature more fully in part II.

On page 92 of her article, Owens states the following, '[...] – although Essex emerges as the culminating and presiding figure of the betrothal procession when he emerges from Essex House, [...] his emergence as this preeminent figure is syntactically suspended for nearly two stanzas of the poem.' 'there when they came' (*Prothalamion* 8. 132) does not, according to Owens, arrive at its principal clause until stanza ten, 'and even then, the subject "this noble Lord" (10.163) and predicate "descended to the rivers open viewing" (10. 166) are separated by two lines.' (p. 93). This syntactic delay is important because 'The delay, by opening a space for imagination and vision, makes those beams "glisten", turns in other words, the dross of harsh circumstance into gold. [...] Spenser's alchemy translates the dross of recent history – military, naval, national and courtly – into a golden vision of English heroes and empire' (p. 93). Owens' precise point about syntactical delay being a marker of equivocation in praise for Essex may be challenged both on the grounds that her understanding of the way the syntax works is not the most obvious one; the 'there when they came' (8. 132) can equally and more persuasively be seen as referring to the 'London' of the previous stanza, this is acknowledged by Owens on page 98. Secondly, it is difficult to see how this can be translated into a warning to Essex to eschew commercial considerations in favour of heroic ones. Owens has, however, pointed to a noticeable feature of the poem, that it employs suspensions of one sort or another in many of the stanzas. This will be discussed later.

In Owens' final piece of textual analysis, she points to the fact that line 134 coming before line 135 in the poem, where it in fact comes afterwards in historical time is a device in which 'the lawyers seem almost to subvert epic ends as they interrupt the identification of "bricky

towers” with the achievements of chivalry’ (p.98). It is, of course, possible to read the lines for what they are, a progression from the decay of the temple building to the present ‘stately place’ (*Prothalamion* 8. 137) next door, a symbol of renewal and the handing on of ideas and ideals through time.

The second issue is, where does the idea that there is a conflict between commercial considerations and epic or heroic considerations come from? The answer appears to be from *The Faerie Queene* and particularly the episode in Book Two where Guyon enters the cave of Mammon.<sup>13</sup> There are three references to this episode on pages 79, 86, and 88, but the first gives a representative picture of the way the argument works. Owens states, ‘*Prothalamion* is deeply interested, I contend in the relationship between heroic and commercial ethoi.

Evidence from *The Faerie Queene* (Mammon’s rejoinders to Guyon come immediately to mind) [...]’ (p. 79). The point here, is that the congruence between one set of ideas and the interpretation of an episode in a literary work seems to rely on an alarming level of orthodoxy in the interpretation of that episode. Put simply, The Mammon episode is evidence that Spenser sees a conflict between commercial and heroic value. This approach to the Mammon episode strikes me as very one-dimensional. An alternative view considers several aspects of the way the episodes in *The Faerie Queene* unfold and several key statements in the Mammon episode itself incline me to take a different view of the situation. To state briefly, there is a thread of ideas running in *The Faerie Queene* which can usefully be grouped under the idea of utility. This is introduced in the Mammon episode in the following ways. At II, vii,7,4, Guyon questions hoarding as contravening the principles of ‘right usance.’, at II, vii, 19,2, he refuses wealth ‘til I know it well be gott’. At II, vii,25, The idea is put forward that hoarding of wealth makes the wealth liable to force and fraud. In addition, the rejoinders by Mammon to Guyon that Owens refers to on page 79 are framed in such a way as to point up the way in which the obtaining of wealth by such ways as Mammon offers is contrary to God’s will. At II, vii, 33 Guyon answers that his happiness will come from following his calling, a key feature of Protestant thought. That this can be viewed as a discussion on commerce is perplexing. Hamilton’s note on stanzas 9 – 63 of the Mammon episode (p. 214) states that ‘Spanish control of the gold mines in the New World influences certain details of this episode.’. This comment can be expanded to see these stanzas as a critique of the Spaniards’ unproductive use of the gold plundered from its colonies in South America which

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<sup>13</sup> Edmund Spenser: *The Faerie Queene*, ed. by A. C. Hamilton, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2007).

resulted in severe inflation in western Europe at the close of the sixteenth Century.<sup>14</sup> At II, vii, 65 – 66, Guyon is exhausted and drained by his experience in the cave of Mammon. Despite all the riches on display, the life of those who aspire to virtue cannot be sustained by the hoarding of wealth. The theme of utility is further developed in the Malbecco episode (*FQ*, III, ix, 10), where his crime is clearly not that he possesses great wealth and a beautiful wife, but that he uses neither productively. Two points emerge from this, the notion that the Mammon episode supports Owen's assertions about commercial and heroic ethoi is highly questionable, but even if it were accepted, the lack of clear indications in *Prothalamion* itself, means that the poem is being interpreted in relation to ideas generated elsewhere. Owens' reliance on ideas garnered from *The Faerie Queene* does no justice at all to the complexity of the propositions contained in that work. In addition, Owens' view is opposed by Lawrence Manley's contribution to the *Spenser Encyclopaedia* where he says,

Though Spenser never considers 'the City' of London as a civic or mercantile community distinct from the court, he seldom divorces the court from the civic stability and commercial support on which he believes courtly power is based. Britain will be "sought/ Of Marchants farre for profits therein prayed" (II, x, 5), and throughout *The Faerie Queene*, the historic meaning of Troynovant emerges through an allegorical struggle with such civic and economic concerns as profit and loss, excess and deficiency, justice and injustice, strife, order, marriage, family, property, and inheritance.<sup>15</sup>

The poem is being interpreted in relation to a context developed in two distinct places, another text, and a general idea of the social and political situation in Elizabethan England. Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and R. H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* deal in considerable detail with the relationship between religion and commercial activity.<sup>16</sup> Their arguments make it clear that Owens' propositions in relation to Elizabethan England are unusual to say the least. Owens herself half manages to make this point on page 100 when she says that such a view 'runs largely counter to the prevailing ethos of the time.' Max. Weber points out that a distinctive feature of Protestantism is its attitude to worldly activity, and in particular, commerce. Its difference from Catholicism includes a shift from the 'Catholic ideal of Monastic life, whose object is to transcend the demands of mundane existence', to the 'this-worldly asceticism' of Puritanism as focussed

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<sup>14</sup> *Entangled Empires, The Anglo – Iberian Atlantic, 1500 – 1830*, ed. by Jorge Canizares – Esguerra (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> A. C. Hamilton, ed. *The Spenser Encyclopaedia* (Abingdon: Routledge, Paperback edn 2014) P. 440.

<sup>16</sup> Max. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1976) and R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969).

through the concept of the calling.<sup>17</sup> This included a change in the attitude to the accumulation and use of wealth. For the Protestant, personal asceticism was required because to spend money on oneself was regarded as sinful. However, to achieve success in commerce was regarded as a sign of God's grace. The accumulated wealth had to be used in commercial activity, not for personal pleasure or adornment. Within such a background (briefly sketched), one can see that the transfer of wealth from a Spanish port to an English one would be seen as the transfer from the kind of unproductive use described in *The Faerie Queene* II, vii, to a situation where money and treasure can be used to do God's (and England's) work. As A. C. Hamilton points out in his note to *F Q* II vii 11, the reference to Proverbs 8.15 in the stanza is glossed in the Geneva Bible, 'honors, dignitie or riches come not of man's wisdom or industrie, but by the providence of God.'. The financial success of the Cadiz raid can be interpreted as the providence of God. It is also important to ask, in what sense can the raid on Cadiz be regarded as commerce? Even if one rejects the argument put forward above, it is possible to argue that any idea that plundering Cadiz comes under the rubric of commerce is a little far-fetched. One might also question the notion of the heroic. Owens does not trouble to describe or define what heroic or commercial values are. 'Heroic values' is a rather vague term and can usually be identified when exemplified in the pursuit of something else, one's country, one's values and so on. On that basis the appropriation of wealth from Catholic Spain could well be regarded as heroic activity. The separation of commercial and heroic values by Owens takes an idea which became more clearly articulated during the development of mercantilism and early capitalism and the decline of the aristocracy. An attitude which can be seen, for instance, in the novels of Jane Austen. Owens applies this idea to an earlier period of history, and it is anachronistic. In addition, her typification of the political situation in Elizabethan England gives some cause for concern. Her reference to pirated Spanish and Portuguese cargoes (p. 87) ignores the Anglo – Portuguese alliance which started with the marriage of John of Gaunt's daughter Phillipa to King Joao I of Portugal, the oldest alliance in European history. It also ignores the attempt by the English to assist Portugal against Spain with the Counter Armada or Drake-Norris Expedition of 1589 in which Essex participated and which was, incidentally, run as a joint stock company with a

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<sup>17</sup> Quotations taken from the introduction by Anthony Giddens to *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*, by Max. Weber, p. xii.

capital of about £80,000 which was contributed by The Queen, Essex, the Dutch, and other noblemen, merchants and guilds.<sup>18</sup>

To conclude, I maintain that the point that Owens wishes to make about the relationship between heroic and commercial ethoi, and Spenser's attitude to it, is derived from a strained reading of part of *The Faerie Queene* which does not admit the complexity of the ideas contained in that work. This is then inserted into a discussion of *Prothalamion* which is augmented by a consideration of the immediate material context of the poem's setting. The textual warrant for this procedure is difficult to find and this results in what feels like some desperate measures. The material context which Owens describes as pertinent to *Prothalamion*, can equally be adduced in relation to any literary work produced in London at that time. What is distinctive about *Prothalamion* that makes this context particularly relevant? In addition, the wider context of the situation in relation to Spain and the raid of Cadiz is presented in a way which imposes a context on the poem which the poem does not appear to reflect, but which ties the poem to an anachronistic view of the relationship between commerce and the heroic. A situation is created, where the multiplicity of meanings and themes which *Prothalamion* engages are reduced to a materialist context which ends up transcending the poem. The poem is an instance of the things which Owens writes about at length rather than a poem which works to free itself from those constraints.

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<sup>18</sup> For a further discussion of this see *Entangled Empires*, footnote 14 above.

## II

The Problem of Meaning in *Prothalamion*

*Prothalamion* has not received as much critical attention as Spenser's larger works, *The Faerie Queene* and *The Shepheardes Calender*, and has been considered by some to be inferior to his other later works, *Epithalamium*, *Fowre Hymnes*, and *Amoretti*.<sup>19</sup>

*Prothalamion* is Spenser's last work and many critics have been intrigued by what they detect as an elegiac tone in the poem, seeing it as demonstrably Spenser's farewell to poetry. In addition, the poem, by virtue of its wide-ranging references and changes of topic, has produced a wide range of interpretations. The poem, ostensibly to celebrate the double betrothal of two sisters, has been variously described as about the idealised marriage of The Earl of Essex and Queen Elizabeth I, as a meditation on the situation of the poet in relation to the events he is describing, as a poem on time and decay, as a discussion of the conflict between heroic and commercial values, as a numerological and zodiacal garland which meditates on stability and change and as a poem where the poet offers a defence of allegorical love poetry and an affirmation of humanism.<sup>20</sup> Many critics also maintain that clarity of understanding is achieved through paying attention to the sources and influences which Spenser may have drawn on, so that the poem is variously seen as modelled on Catullus 61, as owing a debt to the poetry of Propertius, that it owes much to the classical epithalamic tradition, that it is based on a particular classical form, the *Paraclausithyron*, that it is essentially Ovidian in its metamorphoses, and that it represents a return by England's great epic poet to the pastoral.<sup>21</sup> I do not intend to suggest that these various views of the poem are

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<sup>19</sup> For a brief review of this see M. L. Wine, 'Spenser's "sweete Themmes": Of Time and the River', *SEL*, 1500 – 1900, 2, 1 (1962), 111 – 117 (p. 111 – 112).

<sup>20</sup> Daniel H. Woodward, 'Some Themes in Spenser's "Prothalamion"', *ELH*, 29 (1962), 34 – 46. Harry Berger Jr., 'Spenser's *Prothalamion*: an interpretation', *ELH*, 15 (1965), pp. 363 – 379. M. L. Wine, (1962). Judith Owens, 'Commerce and Cadiz in Spenser's *Prothalamion*', *SEL*, 47, 1 (2007), 79 – 106. Alastair Fowler, 'Spenser's *Prothalamion*', in *Conceitful Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1975), pp. 59 – 86. Patrick Cheney, 'The Old Poet Presents Himself: *Prothalamion* as a defense of Spenser's Career', *SSt*, 8 (1990) pp. 211 – 238.

<sup>21</sup> Sandra R. Patterson, 'Spenser's *Prothalamion* and the Catullan Epithalamic tradition', *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 10, 1 (1979) pp. 97 – 106. Michael West, 'Prothalamia in Propertius and Spenser', *Comparative Literature*, 26 (1974) pp. 346 – 353. Thomas M. Greene, 'Spenser and the Epithalamic Convention', *Comparative Literature*, 9 (1957), pp. 215 – 228. Roy Eriksen, 'Spenser's Mannerist Manoeuvres: "Prothalamion"', *Studies in Philology*, 90 (1993) pp. 143 – 175. David Lee Miller, 'Fowre Hymnes and *Prothalamion*', in *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser*, ed. by Richard A. McCabe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) pp. 293 – 313. Paul Alpers, 'Spenser's Late Pastorals', *ELH*, 56 (1989) pp. 797 – 817.

mutually contradictory, indeed it is a measure of how intriguing the poem is, that it can generate such a wide variety of responses, all of which add something to one's understanding and appreciation of the poem. A feature of many of the pieces of criticism is that one can detect a line of influence which focusses on the understanding that time is a very important feature of the poem. Many writers refer to the feeling that the poem engenders, of Spenser's concern with time, its inexorable progress, mutability and the cycle of birth, death and renewal. M. L. Wine's discussion of Spenser's treatment of time, is drawn on by Harry Berger when he describes the Thames of *Prothalamion* as 'the river of life and time' Harry Berger's article is drawn on by Alastair Fowler, and David Lee Miller acknowledges the influence of Harry Berger; 'My account of *Prothalamion* is indebted throughout to this seminal essay' (David Lee Miller p.305). Judith Owens acknowledges the interpretation of the final line of each stanza as being about time, as at the same time arguing that it is also about sound.

A noticeable feature of these pieces of criticism is that they arrive at their view by attending largely to three things. Put simply these are the meanings of words, various treatments which are seen as metaphorical, and the structure of the poem, where the various characters who are introduced into the poem – Zephyrus, nymphs, Jove, Leda, Venus, the river Peneus, Cupid, Cynthia, Templar Knights, Lawyers, Hercules, Hesper, and The twins of Jove (Castor and Pollux) - are disposed in the poem in such a way as to create a background of meaning against which the action of the poem is described. An example of the first point, the meaning of words can be shown in line three, 'A gentle spirit, that lightly did delay'. Many writers have pointed to the use of the word 'delay' which seems to really mean 'allay', and some writers are perplexed as to why Spenser does not use this word. It is generally regarded as significant that Spenser uses this word here in order to announce that time is an important topic of the poem. From this beginning we are then prompted to see other aspects of the poem, such as the flow of the river Thames, as an indication of Spenser's concern with the passage of time. Other metaphorical aspects of the poem are also concerned with time. I have just mentioned the idea of the river Thames as time, and M. L. Wine says, 'One would like to see in the spelling Themmes for Thames a paranomasia or "elegant pun"- like several in the poem- on the name of the river and *tempus*, time.'<sup>22</sup> Indeed, but we should also note that a common name for the Thames is and was 'Father Thames' with its echo of 'Father Time'. A further example of the use of metaphor is the translation of the birds (swans) that start the

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<sup>22</sup> See M. L. Wine p. 114 footnote 9

journey, into brides as they approach Leicester house where they meet their intended bridegrooms, at the same time as the second half of the first line of the refrain changes from ‘which was not long’ to ‘which is not long’. The development of the birds -swans, but also a common pun on ‘brides’ - to brides as the poem itself moves from a reporting of the past to the poem existing contemporaneously with the events it is describing, pushes the reader to reflect on the contrast between the happy time of the river progress, feted by nymphs, a kind of innocent time, to the wedding ceremony ‘which is not long’ and the assumption of an entirely different role in adult life.<sup>23</sup> The significance of the references to characters from classical mythology is neatly summed up by Harry Berger when he says of one particular example, ‘The twins of Jove, on the other hand “emerge” from the rape of Leda in stanza 3, so that if one takes a poet’s mythological patterns seriously the twins represent both sons and lovers – the whole burden of fulfilment by which divine rape and self-surrender are justified, though only in the fulness of time’(Berger p.. 376). Judith Owens goes further and connects Castor and Pollux’s sister, Helen of Troy, who is not mentioned in the poem, to the founding of the second Troy, London (Owens p.95).

A common feature of all this is that the insights which are available in these papers all appear to have been arrived at by an examination of the words on the page; the meaning of the word ‘delay’, the significance of ‘Thames’ and time, and the examination of the relationship between ‘Leda’ and ‘the twins of Jove’, for instance. In none of these papers is there anything but a passing reference to three aspects of poetry which I think are also important, firstly what I would call Poetic Artifice; secondly, certain structural features of the poem which act as a cognitive instrument and thereby become part of the meaning, and finally an examination of the tone of certain passages which can help resolve what some commentators see as difficulties, and for some, shortcomings, in the poem. I do not suggest that the authors I have been discussing are in any way insensitive to these aspects, or that they do not notice them, but that they constitute an unacknowledged resource which has contributed to the establishment of sense in the various readings and which is traded upon in the production of an account of the poem. This is a shortcoming which I believe creates problems for criticism, because it enables what may be quite far-fetched ideas to assume the mantle of plausibility. An examination of what I shall call the formal properties of a poem may, I think, resolve certain difficulties in the interpretation of a poem and, additionally, serve as a tribunal of

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<sup>23</sup> See M. L. Wine p. 115 footnote 11



sense, particularly where some interpretations appear to rely to a large extent on arguments and contexts derived from sources external to the poem.

I do not intend to embark on an exhaustive analysis of all the instances of the three features mentioned above that are available for analysis. There is not the space. I shall put forward suggestions about the interpretation of certain aspects of the poem which, in my view, provide persuasive evidence for certain interpretations of the poem, supporting the views of certain authors and questioning the validity of the views of others. On the importance of time in the poem, a range of poetic devices can be examined to see what sense of the operation of time is being established at the non-verbal level. The first instance is a consideration of the last line of the refrain, ‘Sweete Themmes run softly till I end my song’. Judith Owens analyses this line as an iambic line and declares it heavily spondaic. I have already commented on this view in part I. It is undoubtedly the case that its partner in the refrain is an almost perfect piece of iambic pentameter, but the next line, ‘Sweete Themmes (etc.)’ is not. It is possible to read this as if written in quantitative metre, as a ten-syllable line with no accents. This relative flatness compared to the previous line highlights the contrast that takes place within the line. All the words in the line are single syllable, except for one, ‘softly’. The word ‘softly’ slows the line down very effectively, especially as the line is heard in the mind as lacking the propulsive character of the previous iambic line. That the word ‘softly’ is about slowing things down is clear from the way it operates in the line. In addition, we can then note that the meanings of the word ‘softly’ radiate out to include a sense of delay as part of the penumbra of meaning of that word.<sup>24</sup> This line does not, however, lose its charm, it is well known and has fascinated many readers.<sup>25</sup> Part of this is that it is a masterly example of Pope’s dictum that ‘The sound must seem an echo to the sense’, an ideal that, as Johnson points out, Pope’s example fails to fulfil.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> In Ireland a ‘soft day’ is defined as one where the drizzle is so fine that its falling to the ground seems suspended and the day seems to go on forever. <https://www.dailymed.ie/characteristics-of-a-soft-day-1108717-Oct2013/> accessed 25. 01. 2019.

The *OED* includes this, Old English *sōfte* ‘agreeable, calm, gentle’, of West Germanic origin; related to Dutch *zacht* and German *sanft*

<sup>25</sup> See Judith Owens (2007) P. 80. It was recently used as a banner headline in BBC’s country File magazine for an article on the Thames (No date on the publication).

<sup>26</sup> Alexander Pope, ‘An Essay in Criticism’, in *POPE, Poetical Works*, ed. by Herbert Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966. repr. 1983) pp. 62 – 85 lines 365 – 373.

From these lines laboured with great attention, and celebrated by a rival wit, may be judged what can be expected from the most diligent endeavours after this imagery of sound. The verse intended to represent the whisper of the vernal breeze, must be confessed not much to excel in softness or volubility; and the smooth stream, runs with a perpetual clash of jarring consonants. The noise and the turbulence of the torrent, is, indeed, distinctly imagined, for it requires very little skill to make our language rough; but in these lines, which mention the effort of Ajax, there is no particular heaviness, obstruction, or delay. The swiftness of Camilla is rather contrasted than exemplified; why verse should be lengthened to express speed, will not easily be discovered.<sup>27</sup>

Johnson's point here is that for the sound to really echo the sense, the sense, that is, the meaning of the words, should not influence the way we make or hear the sound. Spenser's line conforms to Johnson's further statement that, 'The representative power of poetic harmony consists of sound and measure, of the force of the syllables singly considered, and of the time in which they are pronounced. Sound can measure nothing but sound, and time can measure nothing but motion and duration.' (Johnson p. 135). In the case of Spenser's line, he straps us in with a line which, because it has no pronounced rhythm, can be said just one way. Because it relies on quantity rather than accent, it has an independence which gives its proposition additional force. It still, however, manages to sound a fitting cadence to the stanzas which it closes for two reasons; firstly, it is carried along by the iambic rhythm of the previous lines but the contrast with them adds to its effect, and secondly, it conforms to what Andrew Crozier has identified in relation to free verse, that whereas one may say that language is constitutive of reality, poetry exceeds this by being constitutive of our experience of reality.<sup>28</sup> We feel the truth of the line at the visceral level. In addition, we see that form, in the period in which this poem is written, is a metaphor for the structure of human reality.<sup>29</sup> The fact of the final line abandoning the constraints under which the rest of the stanza is constructed, is almost a metaphor for an attempt to break free from the constraints of mortal existence. As Andrew Crozier puts it, 'The most complex relationships between words appear at points of variation [or contrast] within a clear (i.e. traditional) form'.<sup>30</sup> I am not suggesting that here we see Spenser inventing free verse. Spenser had already been involved in experiments in quantitative metre and had included a poem in quantitative metre, *Iambicum*

<sup>27</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, ed. by W. J. Bate and Albrecht Strauss (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969) II p.129.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Crozier, *'Free Verse' as Formal Restraint*, ed. by Ian Brinton (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2015) p. 205.

<sup>29</sup> See particularly, Samuel Daniel, 'A Defence of Rhyme', in *Sidney's 'Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism* ed by Gavin Alexander (London: Penguin Books, 2004) pp. 205 – 236.

<sup>30</sup> Crozier p. 25 This is also discussed in Ivor Winters, *In Defence of Reason* (London: swallow press, 1960) pp. 57 – 58.

*Trimetrum*, in a letter to Gabriel Harvey. This poem uses the Latin rules of quantitative metre which rely largely on orthography rather than pronunciation and appears to be similar in its metre to Catullus 52. Now the final line of each stanza in *Prothalamion* is not a sudden switch to quantitative metre, it does not conform to the rules; it can be seen simply as a line which does not partake of the accentual stresses which are so pervasive in the rest of the poem. The line is, however, still carried along by the iambic rhythm established in the preceding lines.<sup>31</sup>

My second example concerns a combination of two effects, the metrical arrangements of the poem and the way Spenser organises spatial relationships in the poem. To take the second subject first, it is enough to observe that the brides start their journey (as swans) on the river Lea. They travel downstream until they meet the Thames where they travel against the current. This is not the first time Spenser has written about two rivers, he writes about the marriage of the Medway and the Thames in *The Faerie Queene* IV, xi, 8 - 53. The imagery of two rivers joining and flowing together as one does not require further comment. The Thames at this point is tidal, so it can be assumed that they travel up on the tide both in the poem and in reality. The tide is an important aspect of the poem. On the metrical arrangement of the poem, the poem consists of lines of iambic pentameter (or ten syllables anyway), except for the two that in every case precede the refrain, and single lines which appear at lines five and ten in each stanza. These are in iambic trimeter. This has the effect of creating a slowing down effect in each stanza, before momentum is once more established by the resumption of iambic pentameter. The effect is of a tide rising, remaining in suspension for a moment, and then flowing away again.<sup>32</sup> This effect is reinforced by the fact that in the final stanza the two trimeter lines are, 'Which at th'appointed tyde, / Each one did make his bride,'. Here is another example of Spenser expanding the meanings available in the poem by words which don't seem quite to fit but which open up further realms of meaning; 'delay' / 'allay', 'softly' / 'slowly', 'tyde' / 'time'. Obviously, the bridegrooms make their betrothed their brides at the

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<sup>31</sup> This is discussed more fully in Derek Attridge, 'Quantitative Verse' in *The Spenser Encyclopaedia* ed. by A. C. Hamilton (Abingdon: Routledge, 1996) pp.575 – 576 and in Derek Attridge, *Well Weighed Syllables* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974) and in Richard Helgerson, 'Barbarous Tongues: The Ideology of Poetic Form in Renaissance England' in *Edmund Spenser* ed. by Andrew Hadfield (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014) pp. 23 – 29.

<sup>32</sup> Woodward (1962) has the following quotation from David Daiches, assisted by w. Charvat, *Poems in English 1530 – 1940* (New York: Norton, 1950) pp. 650 – 651. 'Notice the effect of the varying line lengths, especially of the two short lines which precede the last two lines of each stanza. The effect is that of a wave curling in on itself before crashing over and spreading out'. I do not think that there exists any support for this observation in the text of the poem and its wider metaphorical purpose eludes me.

appointed time, but this will not allow us to see that the notion of events and fortune being to some extent contingent on a tide which ebbs and flows and can be either a help or a hinderance to the efforts of the individual is an important background to our understanding of the connections between the careers of the numerous characters, including the writer, who inhabit the poem. An additional feature is noticed by David Lee Miller in his piece where he says, of the formal properties of the first stanza of *Prothalamion*, 'Across the stanza, patterns surface and subside, without achieving dominance. [...] The balance this stanza evokes between hesitation and tentative forward movement will turn out to be at the heart of its subject matter' (p. 305) It is as if the tidal imagery has made its way into David Lee Miller's own writing, 'patterns surface and subside', but his observations can also be seen as part of the tidal metaphor which is being established in other ways. Closely related to Miller's observation is the observation that in many of the stanzas, a character or action is introduced, and then there is a hiatus when the action is suspended. An example of this is in the first stanza where 'I' appears in line five, but does not get a verb until line ten, 'walkt forth'. In nearly every stanza the forward motion of the action is arrested as Spenser turns aside, as it were, to embark on a detailed description, not without significance of course, of flowers in stanza two, of the whiteness of swans in stanza three, and the history of the Temple buildings in stanza eight. The very arrangement of the material generates a halting effect not unlike the lines of iambic trimeter which occur in every stanza. Now it can be argued that this is only incidentally a matter of rhythm and time. In some stanzas the fifth and tenth lines assume importance because, they appear grammatically connected, are often connected thematically, and when read together, contain a certain emphasis; 'When I whom sullein care, / Walkt forth to ease my payne,' (1). 'Did never whiter shew, / So purely white they were,' (3). 'Their wondering eyes to fill, /For sure they did not seeme', (4). 'An house of auncient fame. / Till they decayed through pride:' (8). This appears, from the examples given above to be an argument with some force, but it can be countered by the following. Firstly, it is not the case in every stanza, and the difference in the punctuation of these lines in the different stanzas, does not assist in revealing any regularity. In the first printed edition line 7.113 ends with a question mark. This is changed to a full stop by McCabe, in accordance with the text of the 1611 printed edition, but the rest of the punctuation is equally idiosyncratic and raises the question of whether the importance we are inclined to give punctuation, is justified in relation

to texts from this period.<sup>33</sup> Secondly, the opportunity offered by two relatively short lines, for some kind of connection, is one which can be made use of, where the opportunity presents itself, but it is clear that this does not work in every stanza. The conclusion presents itself that the lines are there, invariably in all the stanzas and have the important effect I have described. They are also used to make connections and to convey emphasis where this works. In addition, it should be stressed that to emphasise one function of the trimeter lines does not deny the existence of the other. As I discuss later, their function in stanza 3 at the grammatical level is particularly important.

Notwithstanding the thorough embedding of the tidal metaphor in the machinery of the poem, time can only slow, not be stopped. Early on in my acquaintance with the poem I noted that stanza six, the nymph's song to the brides, is reported speech, introduced in stanza five by 'Whil'st one did sing this lay,' and concluded in stanza seven by, 'So ended she;'. Despite being sung by a nymph, the stanza uses an identical metrical scheme to the other stanzas and uses the same refrain. The poem, with its forward motion, itself a metaphor for the river (it is, after all, carrying us all forward) and a device for pausing time, nevertheless moves on relentlessly, and emphasises the concerns of the poet with the decay and renewal in the passage of time, the ebb and flow of fortune, and the sense that an ending, an arrival, is also a new beginning. There is also a structural device that Spenser uses to increase the sense of the inexorable passage of time. It has been noted many times that Spenser has a facility to create pictures in the mind, and his placement of characters in this poem is a good example of his ability in this field.<sup>34</sup> One example relates to his establishment of the importance of the sense of time passing. The brides are generally agreed to start their journey to their bridegrooms on the river Lea, 'With that I saw two Swannes of goodly hewe, /Come softly swimming downe along the Lee; (*Prothalamion* 3. 37, 38).<sup>35</sup> However, the writer/narrator has previously described himself as on the banks of the Thames (1. 11). The picture created is of someone who stands at the place where the two rivers join, and watches it all go past him, down the Lea and up the Thames. He is land-bound, while everything floats past him. A more obvious metaphor for the sense of things passing you by is hard to envisage. Another example of the

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<sup>33</sup> A fascinating example of this is discussed in Alice Eardley, "'I have not time to point yr booke...which I desire you yourselfe to doe'" Editing the Form of Early Modern Manuscript Verse' In *The Work of Form* ed. by Ben Burton and Elizabeth Scott – Baumann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) pp. 162 – 178.

<sup>34</sup> See Donald Bruce, 'Spenser's Poetic Pictures: a vision of beauty', *Contemporary Review*, 288 (2006) pp. 73 – 87 and Judith Dundas, 'The Rhetorical Basis of Spenser's Imagery', *SEL 1500 – 1900*, 8 (1968) pp. 59 – 75.

<sup>35</sup> There is room for doubt. Spenser uses a similar phrase in *FQ* V. ii. 19. 1, 'His corps was carried downe along the Lee,' where it is definitely not the river Lea in London.

usefulness of attending to Spenser's pictorializing relates to the discussion in many papers of the place of the Earl of Essex in the poem. He is generally assumed to have commissioned the poem, but many critics find in the stanzas which refer to him, a rather embarrassingly obvious panegyric which looks very like a job application, as Berger says, '[...] the praise of Essex may still cause uneasiness because it is so conventionally hyperbolic and so blatant a piece of patron-seeking' (Berger p. 375). Owens modifies this view when she finds the praise lavished on Essex conditional and containing an element of exhortation rather than congratulation. Some aspects of this have been discussed in part I. An interesting perspective on this is discussed by Elizabeth Mazzola.<sup>36</sup> She points out that Essex is kept 'shut up' in Leicester House, while he is talked about, and then only briefly makes an entrance onto the stage of the poem in the last stanza, where he is swiftly eclipsed by the two bridegrooms and their brides; he is in Mazzola's words 'relegated to the margins' (p. 16). The conditional tone of praise detected by Owens (pp. 94 – 97), Berger (p. 375) and Fowler (p. 83) is underpinned by the way he is positioned in the poem. Essex may be the patron, but Spenser is the poet; as Mazzola puts it, 'Orpheus's powers are retooled by a poet who can control his loyalties and celebrate the hero yet also look away and discount this figure' (p. 16). What I maintain here is that the images which Spenser crafts in our mind as we read, act as a way of emphasising one way of understanding the poem. The praise of Essex is conventional, as Berger points out, and is used as an occasion to refer to characters in the cast of classical references which form such an important part of the poem. These references are not, it seems to me, to be read as particularly descriptive of Essex; as Alastair Fowler points out, they are appropriate to the theme and the fact that the poem is ending. (Fowler, p. 83) Their importance is in contributing to the drama of mythological and historical characters, which provides the moral backdrop against which the actual events are described. Essex's presence is kept to a minimum, headed off as it were, as a way of de-emphasising his importance, he is literally kept in his place.

A major difficulty with the poem, and one which is consequently ignored by many critics, is the issue of Spenser's references to his own difficulties. What on earth are they doing in a poem celebrating the double betrothal of two sisters? To frame the question in this way is somewhat disingenuous, because it seems clear to me that this immediately indicates that we need to look further than the words on the title page if we are to understand the poem fully. Berger presents this as a problem that can be solved by criticism, but it seems to me that an

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<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Mazzola, 'Merlin's Mirror at Leicester House', *Critical Survey*, 29,2 (2017) pp. 1 – 20.

understanding of the writings of the period on poetic art show Berger's argument as the imposition of an inappropriately modern attitude to an Elizabethan poem (Berger p.363). The intention of Prothalamion, if one can talk in such terms, is encyclopaedic. Sandra Patterson also starts her piece by emphasising the disunity of the poem (Patterson 1979 p.97). We should be prepared to expect more than one theme. As Berger subsequently points out, we need to see the poet reflecting on the events unfolding in front of him and the careers of the characters in the poem as a conscious process of integrating his condition and career into a canvas of ebb and flow, rise and fall, triumph and decay, at the same time as achieving a kind of inward mastery through the use of poetry which is also an acknowledgement of the limits of poetic art. The poem was likely to have been performed at the betrothal ceremony, and it also appeared in two printed editions.<sup>37</sup> Its status as a performance allows us to consider how that might enable us to see how certain apparently incongruous aspects of the poem can be integrated. The last line of the refrain refers to the poem as a song, a more self-consciously performed genre than a poem. In addition to its status as a performance, consideration should be given to the notion that poetry is fundamentally an oral art. Paul J. Hunter points out that many aspects of the appearance that poems have on the printed page are evidence,

That poetry is by nature a spoken and heard art – that it doesn't preserve or revive as well in its more abstracted, consciously warehoused forms and that it longs to be restored to its original and proper orality. Every century – and every generation – tends to regard the previous age or century as distinctly more oral and thus more truly poetic, so that the oral equates with pure and unspoiled and the written with fallen and impure.<sup>38</sup>

In the introduction to their recent volume, *Text and Field: Innovations in Rhetorical Method*, the authors consider the issue of the context in which someone speaks.<sup>39</sup> Of attendance at a speech given by the President of the United States, they draw attention to the importance of the context in which the speech is given. '[...] televised reproduction separates us from the

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<sup>37</sup> The two printed edition of 1596 and 1611 are discussed briefly in an appendix and full references given.

<sup>38</sup> Paul J Hunter, 'Poetry on the Page; Visual Signalling and the Mind's Ear' in *The Work of Form* ed. by Ben Burton and Elizabeth Scott – Baumann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) pp. 179 – 196. I am only mildly disposed towards this perspective. I wonder how Herbert's *Easter Wings* fits with this idea. However, John Wesley has recently argued for the importance of delivery in Renaissance literature, Richard Mulcaster, headmaster of Sidney's school, Merchant Taylors, one of its proponents. See John Wesley, 'Rhetorical Delivery for Renaissance English: Voice, Gesture, Emotion and the Sixteenth Century Vernacular Turn'. *RenQ* 68, 4 (2015) pp. 1265 – 1296. Richard Mulcaster was also concerned with early modern punctuation, the author of *Elementarie* (1582). See William H Sherman, 'Early Modern Punctuation and Modern Editions: Shakespeare's serial colon' in *The Book in History, The Book as History: New Intersections of the Material Text*, ed. by Heidi Brayman and others (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2016) pp.303 – 324.

<sup>39</sup> *Text and Field: Innovations in Rhetorical Method*, ed. by Sara L. McKinnon, Robert Asen, Karma R. Chavez, and Robert Glenn Howard (Pennsylvania, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016) p.10.

bodily experience of going through security checkpoints to be present, from the din of the Secret Service sirens as the cavalcade of black SUV's arrives, or from the reactions of other audience members.' The idea that this poem is performed in front of the very people it refers to, requires one to consider how this can be 'brought off'. Firstly, this is a poem to be performed at and about a betrothal. A consideration of the tone which one might expect such a poem to strike can lead to some interesting conclusions. Puttenham discusses the kind of poem that might be appropriate at a wedding.<sup>40</sup> Now a betrothal is not a wedding, but even so one might reasonably expect some jokes, some puns, some frivolity, some joy. The modern-day bridegroom's speech gives a good idea of the sentiments required at such events. There are two places where there are puns, these are at 4, 67 where there is a pun on Somers-heat and Somerset, and 9, 153 where 'and endlesse happinesse of thine owne name' is a pun on heureux and Devereux.<sup>41</sup> There are two further instances where it seems to me that some sort of humorous delivery is required. The first is when Spenser refers to himself. It is inconceivable that one stands at a presumably joyous occasion, and listens to the poet moan about himself, yet for the poem to work in the way Berger and Fletcher in particular, conceive it, these passages are required to give the poem coherence and cannot simply be regarded as incongruous, a lapse of concentration on Spenser's part. This is particularly so when you consider that the poet speaks the poem but is also a character in that poem. The rhetorical opportunities that this situation opens up are considerable. You can only get away with it if you adopt an exaggeratedly self-deprecating tone and speak with a smile on your face. The clue is in 8. 141 – 143, 'But Ah here fits not well/ Olde woes but joys to tell/ Against the bridale day, which is not long:'. We see the poet in the act of owning up to his faults, and in a sense, hoping to get away with it. There is a sense of self-deprecation and self-effacement, but it is also heavy with irony, there is an element of self-mockery, a quality which characterised irony for Aristotle, but also the understanding that something different is meant to what is said, irony's key quality according to Quintilian.<sup>42</sup> The episode of complaint in stanza 1 is another example, brilliantly bracketed by the syntax, as I have already noted, and this also enables the performer to make a point, but also to pretend that it is not important

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<sup>40</sup> See Chapter 10 of George Puttenham, 'The Art of English Poesy' in *Sidney's 'The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. by Gavin Alexander (London: Penguin Books, 2004) pp.97 – 100.

<sup>41</sup> Who knows what other puns there may be. The reference to flaskets (*Prothalamion*, 2,26) may be a reference to Marlowe's publisher, John Flasket. See Kirk Melnikoff, *Elizabethan Publishing and the Makings of Literary Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018) p. 141.

<sup>42</sup> See *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993) p. 634 and Harry Berger Jr. 'Narrative as Rhetoric in *The Faerie Queene*', *ELR*, 21, 1 (1991) pp. 3 – 47 (p 19).



whilst letting us know that it is. Another example of a section which contains humour, but which at the same time makes a serious point, is 3. 37 – 45,

With that I saw two Swannes of goodly hewe,  
Come softly swimming downe along the Lee;  
Two fairer birds I yet did never see:  
The snow which doth the top of *Pindus* strew,  
Did never whiter shew,  
Nor *Jove* himself when he a Swan would be  
For love of *Leda*, whiter did appeare:  
Yet *Leda* was they say as white as he,  
Yet not so white as these, nor nothing neare;  
So purely white they were,

Here Spenser discusses how white the swans are. At first sight this is ridiculous and might be accounted bad poetry, except for the fact that the two lines of trimeter, (5 and 10) connect with each other to emphasise the whiteness of the two swans on the river, a whiteness that cannot be excelled. These two lines save the whole thing from tipping into a parody.

Woodward (pp. 38 – 41) finds in it a discussion on morality and both Berger and Fowler go to considerable lengths to integrate it into a discussion on Leda, chastity, and fruitful love. (Fowler pp.81 – 82 and Berger pp. 371 – 373). This may be all those things, but it is also a joke. A foundational phrase in Aristotelean logic is ‘all swans are white’.<sup>43</sup> The proposition in inductive logic is that one may see any number of white swans, and that entitles you to the statement above; ‘all swans are white’. However, the observation of only one black swan can demolish this statement. This was a widely known piece of logic teaching and the phrase ‘as rare as a black swan’ was common in sixteenth century London.<sup>44</sup> Black swans were not known to Europeans until the mid-seventeenth century. The phrase comes from Juvenal, whose lines on the subject are strangely relevant to a betrothal, though it is perhaps as well that they are kept at arm’s length by a distant allusion.

Isn’t there a single one worthy of you in all that vast flock?  
Let her be lovely, gracious, rich, and fertile; let her exhibit her

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<sup>43</sup> See E.P Bos and B. G. Sundholm, ‘History of Logic: medieval’ in *A Companion to Philosophical Logic*, ed. by Dale Jacquette (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing) pp. 24 – 35 (p. 29) and Irving Copi, Carl Cohen and Daniel Flage, *Introduction to Induction* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2016) pp. 330 – 382.

<sup>44</sup> Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: the impact of the highly improbable* (2nd ed.) (London: Penguin books, 2010) p. 16.

Ancestors' faces round her porticos; be more virginal than the  
 Sabine women, with tangled hair, who ended war with Rome;  
 A rare bird on this earth, in the very likeness of a black swan;  
 Who could stand a wife who embodied all of that?

Juvenal Satires, VI: 161 – 166 <sup>45</sup>

The other thing that is going on here is that Spenser is demonstrating, in an amusing kind of self-effacing way, the superiority of poetry to philosophy, as claimed by Sidney in his *The Defense of Poesy*.<sup>46</sup> Anyone who has looked at a paint colour chart can see that philosophy really hasn't got a grip on the subject. There isn't just white, there are all sorts of white, and of course, all and different sorts of purity, as Fowler, Woodward and Berger discuss.<sup>47</sup> Spenser is demonstrating in an amusing way, the superiority of poetry as a means of engaging with the world. At the same time, he is making a comparison, through a discussion of whiteness, between the swans on the river and the characters of classical mythology. In this way Spenser demonstrates the ability of poetry to consider the world in a way which is subtler and more nuanced than philosophy can hope to achieve, a proposition that *Prothalamion* brilliantly demonstrates.

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<sup>45</sup> [www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/JuvenalSatires6.php](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/JuvenalSatires6.php). Accessed 25.01.2019.

<sup>46</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, 'The Defence of Poesy' in *Sidney's 'The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance literary Criticism* ed. by Gavin Alexander (London: Penguin Books 2004) pp. 1 – 54.

<sup>47</sup> This is not the first time Spenser discusses degrees of whiteness. See *F Q I. i. 4*, 1 – 4, 'A lovely Ladie rode him faire beside, / Upon a lowly Asse more white then snow, / Yet she much Whiter, but the same did hide/ Under a Vele, that wimpled was full low,'

## III

Context reconsidered

To begin, there are two issues in the kind of criticism which explores the relationship between a literary work and its context which I wish to explore; what is the nature of the relationship between the context and the literary work and how do you demonstrate the connection between the two.<sup>48</sup> On the first issue, the nature of the relationship between work and context, the situation can be clarified by comparing some examples of criticism with the work of Michel Foucault, on whose work the theoretical thrust of New Historicism is said to rest. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault traces the history of incarceration.<sup>49</sup> In the forward he makes the following important point. There is a change in the administration of punishment from a public spectacle which involves unspeakable cruelty – hanging, drawing and quartering, or breaking on the wheel, for instance – to what he calls carceral practice, the incarceration of the individual and the growth of the notion that the practice effects change in the individual prisoner through the ‘inspection of the soul’. This is linked to what Foucault develops in the main body of the book, which is the change, on many levels, from punishment as a ritualised extraction of revenge by the Crown for crimes committed against it, to the assumption by the State of the power to direct and control the interior life of its subjects, hence the title. This is, of course, connected to the development of the capitalist mode of production and the development of a new relationship between the state and its subjects. In the course of his argument Foucault is at pains to make connections between different social phenomena and to show that they are intimately and causally linked to

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<sup>48</sup> This discussion does not intend to include such historicist efforts as source studies, publication history and the like. ‘New’ historicism is situated in a different area of relationship between the literary work and its context.

<sup>49</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. By A. Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1997).

changes in the relations of production and the dominant ideology, they are an effect of it, but also part of it, a nuance that New Historicism would find particularly appealing. They are not just correspondences, there is a causal relationship.

If we turn to New Historicism or materialist criticism, in many cases we fail to find this relationship, that is, the relationship between the literary work and the context of which it is considered part, and which is thought essential for an understanding of it. To take two examples, in the case of Stephen Greenblatt's discussion of the relationship between *The Destruction of the Bower of Bliss* in *The Faerie Queene* and the attitude of Elizabethan society to such things as the New World, The Irish Situation, and the Puritan destruction of religious images, his tracing of the relationship stops at saying, 'It is not possible within the scope of this chapter to outline the dense network of analogies, repetitions, correspondences, and homologies within which even this one episode of Spenser's immense poem is embedded'.<sup>50</sup> Put rather crudely, this amounts to saying that certain things in fiction have a resemblance to real life, or rather Greenblatt's version of it. There are problems here also, as many of the extracts from contemporary accounts which Greenblatt uses to typify attitudes in Elizabethan England are mutually contradictory and some were published after *The Faerie Queene*. In the case of Judith Owens' *Commerce and Cadiz*, the difficulty is that there is a point in her text where one must ask, 'so if the last line of the refrain can be read as Spenser asking the City to be quiet through asking the Thames to run softly, what is the connection?'<sup>51</sup> There is no connection, or at least it is unsatisfactorily illuminated by Owens. It passes by default. On page 79 she says, 'We should also think carefully about issues that emerge when we take fuller account of the London setting, specifically its commercial aspects. *Prothalamion* is deeply interested, I contend, in the relationship between heroic and commercial ethoi'. On page 84 she says, 'In its wish for silence, the second line of Spenser's refrain [...] effectively subdues the noise of all this business'. On page 89 she says, '*Prothalamion*'s subsequent interest in the Cadiz expedition will invite us to extend to that event our sense that Spenser believes the relationship between Court or sovereign and heroic enterprise to be one that is damaged by financial consideration. For Spenser, such considerations diminish heroic spirit.' Of the extract from page 79, one can equally say that the poem does not particularly prompt me to think in the way Owens is suggesting I do. Of

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<sup>50</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980) p. 179.

<sup>51</sup> Judith Owens, 'Commerce and Cadiz in Spenser's *Prothalamion*', *SEL*, 47, 1 (winter 2007).

the extract on page 84 it is difficult to see how asking a river to run softly is a wish for silence, or that asking The Thames to run softly is a way of silencing the commercial hustle and bustle of London or the off-stage voices that are cheering Essex on which Owens discusses on page 91. In any event, if the Thames is like the Lee, it lacks a tongue and can only give signs, it cannot make noise (*Prothalamion* 7, 116). Wishing for silence would appear incongruous. A different interpretation is required. Of the extract on page 89 one can only say that this is barely sensible for the following reasons. Firstly, the degree and nature of the interest in the Cadiz expedition is a matter of doubt, and is amenable to other interpretations, as I shall show below. Its formulaic mention creates a sense of unease which I have already discussed, and it may serve a different purpose. Secondly, how we are to understand how it invites us to do anything is a mystery, and thirdly, how it enables us to have access to Spenser's beliefs is not clear. In the case of both Greenblatt and Owens the nature of the connection between the work and its supposed context is elided.

On the second question, how is the connection demonstrated: two things are placed side by side, the literary work and the contextual situation which we are being asked to agree is relevant to the work. What is operating here is a kind of parallelism; two things are placed side by side and we are supposed to see connections.<sup>52</sup> We are carried along by the wealth of detail of historical material and an innovative way of approaching a work, and as a result we are disinclined to stop and examine this matter clearly. A picture is painted in gorgeous tones and with considerable aplomb and we are swept along. My problem with this situation is that such criticism lacks rigour. If we do not attempt to understand the relationship between the literary work and its wider social, ideological, and political context, we dodge the responsibility to try and see to what extent literature can overcome the circumstances of its production. The operation of providing a meaningful context to a literary work ends up relying on plausibility. Both Greenblatt's work on the Destruction of the Bower of Bliss episode in *The Faerie Queene*, and Owens' work on *Prothalamion* provide a huge wealth of background information and demonstrate a consummate knowledge of the text, so that the connections between the background information and the literary work are presented as a naturally occurring state of affairs without the nature of those connections being adequately articulated. As I believe I have demonstrated in Part I this is not as obvious a connection as it looks.

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<sup>52</sup> This is what Paul Cantor calls 'argument by anecdote'. See Paul A Cantor, 'Stephen Greenblatt's new historicist vision' *Academic Questions*, 6, 4. (1993) 21 – 37 (p. 22).

The idea that the connection between work and context relies to a large extent on plausibility, leads to further difficulties for work which attempts to make links between a literary work and some aspect of the historical context. Plausibility refers to the fact that a connection seems to be appropriate. Put another way, we feel there is some mileage in the idea put forward, we are comfortable with the basic proposition. In the case of Greenblatt's piece, he employs some ideas from Freud on society's need to control sexual impulses to draw connections between the Destruction of The Bower of Bliss and the untamed world of Elizabethan Ireland and The New World. In Owens' case she relies on the notion of a distinction between commercial and heroic values to show Spenser sounding a warning to Essex and The Court about the inadvisability of confusing the two. Both these papers rely on concepts which were developed after the period in question. There is no evidence that the concepts in question were recognised in the period in question and no attempt is made in the pieces to demonstrate this<sup>53</sup>. We then have a situation where the meanings and understandings proposed by Greenblatt and Owens would not be recognised by Spenser or his contemporaries. This is ultimately teleological. The literary work must await the arrival of the future for its meaning to become clear. This is not the same as saying that the meaning of the literary work must be that which the author controls, but that it cannot be accepted that a literary work can contain ideas which were not available at the time the work was written. To do so would be to run the risk of seeing the author as some version of a visionary of the future, developing ideas ahead of his or her time, a sort of prolepsis. This in turn runs contrary to the general direction of historicist criticism, which sees literary works as, if not embedded in, at least significantly part of the culture from which they spring. From this it is possible to see that one of the difficulties in this kind of criticism is the paradigm which is present in the head of the literary critic, but which exists as an unexamined resource in the project of making connections between the work and its context. As an example, Owens' piece on *Prothalamion* would be more plausible if she was able to demonstrate that conflicts between heroic ideals and commercial considerations were a seriously considered issue at the time. There appears to be no evidence of any sort that this was so, and Owens does not

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<sup>53</sup> Greenblatt defends his position in 'Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture' in *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, ed. by Patricia Parker and David Quint (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986) P. 221. In this Greenblatt makes the case for some indications in renaissance writing of ideas that would eventually come to be identified as psychoanalysis. This is not addressed in his piece on 'The Destruction of the Bower of Bliss', published some six years earlier. William Kerrigan describes this as 'Putting the subsequent into the prior'. See William Kerrigan, 'Individualism, Historicism, and New Styles of Overreaching' in *Philosophy and Literature*, 13, 1. (1989), 115 – 126 (p.116).

address this point. We now see that this notion is one that appears to be imposed on the poem, it does not appear to be drawn from it. To support it, certain aspects of the poem – words, lines, phrases – are extracted and squeezed to find meanings which support the idea. The paradigm is shown to be in charge here, not the poem. In the case of the Owens' piece, the main thrust of the argument comes from the last line of the refrain and the phrase 'Silver streaming *Themmes*'. The rest of the poem goes its own way.

A more fundamental problem occurs particularly in relation to the piece by Judith Owens. I start with a consideration of the issue of the meaning of a literary work and of our understanding of it. Owens point is that an understanding of the material context of the poem can yield what the text means. She goes so far as to employ Spenser's intention in buttressing her argument, 'Spenser proffers his vision against what he felt to be the compromises of commerce and venture capital'. (Owens p. 90) In this, Owens proposes that an understanding of the context of the poem enables us to both understand the poem and to appreciate its meaning. This approach makes the mistake of regarding 'understanding' and 'meaning' as in some senses two sides of the same coin, and in doing so makes exaggerated claims for the ability of contextualisation to deliver the goods. J. L. Austin has pointed out that to fully understand a linguistic act one must grasp not only its meaning but what Austin called its illocutionary force.<sup>54</sup> The point emerges that a study of context can give us an explanation of a particular piece of writing, but that this is not the same thing as providing a way of understanding it. It certainly does not allow us access to Spenser's mind or intentions. The context of the production of a literary work can help us to explain it, or aspects of it, but that is not the same thing as understanding its meaning, although it might feel like it. This difficulty can also be seen in Greenblatt's piece where the context he adduces for the episode of The Destruction of the Bower of Bliss in *The Faerie Queene* can be regarded as explaining it, but it can be argued that it does not help us to understand it. As I have pointed out elsewhere, an examination of the way the episode is positioned in Book II of *The Faerie Queene*, and other issues that become clear from a study of the text, shows that a very different meaning is being striven for. To approach the illocutionary force of a work, it is necessary to engage with some notion of intentionality.

In the first part I discussed the article by Judith Owens and in the second part I discussed some insights into the poem which can be gained from a different approach, one which is

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<sup>54</sup> John Langshaw Austin, *How to do Things With Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press (1962, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn 1980).

almost entirely context free. I wish to compare these two approaches to determine whether one or the other approach can be regarded as a better strategy for understanding a poem. As a way in I offer the observation that a poem differs from other writing. Some writers would maintain that criticism which does not take this into account, that does not start at those features which make something a poem, is missing the point.<sup>55</sup> Leaving that aside, it is important to accept that poetry is distinctive. As Terry Eagleton points out, discussing the work of Yury Lotman, the use of what are collectively known as poetic devices results in a text which is semantically saturated and in which there is less redundancy.<sup>56</sup> What this means is that the critic needs to attend to all aspects of a poem and also, to the poem in its entirety. There is no such thing as getting the gist of a poem, that is to ignore what makes it a poem.<sup>57</sup> There are two observations which follow this in relation to the two approaches which I am discussing. The first is that it is a matter of importance to attend to all aspects of the poetic communication, so that such matters as line length, syntax, rhythm, metaphor, parallelism, enjambment and other features must be examined to see what they are communicating. This is both part of and in some senses separate from what one might call the apparent message of the poem, what Paul Alpers calls its paraphrasable content.<sup>58</sup> Alpers makes the point that a lack of coherence between different aspects of a poem amounts to a failure of poetic artifice. ‘If structure, meter, imagery and diction go their separate ways and are not closely interrelated, then we cannot feel that as elements of the poem they are sufficiently *motivated*’. (Alpers p. 117). A similar view is taken by Paul de Man in his essay ‘Form and Content in American New Criticism’ where he states that the employment by New Criticism of an approach which ignores the intentional structure of literary form results in an approach to the text which objectifies it and ignores its status as an act.<sup>59</sup> The continuity between depth and surface, between style and theme, is legislated out of existence. Paul de Man says that examining New Criticism of the last 30 years ‘would always reveal the more or less deliberate rejection of the principle of intentionality. The result would be a hardening of the text into a sheer surface that prevents the stylistic analysis from penetrating beyond sensory

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<sup>55</sup> Veronica Forrest-thompson, *Poetic Artifice*, ed. by Gareth Farmer, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Bristol: Shearsman Press, 2016).

<sup>56</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008) pp. 88 – 89.

<sup>57</sup> My comments here are not meant to include what one might describe as everyday conversation, ‘So, what is *The Faerie Queene* about?’ ‘Well, it’s about these knights who have quests which are also virtues, sort of’. (etc.).

<sup>58</sup> Paul Alpers, ‘Learning From The New Criticism, The Example of Shakespeare’s Sonnets’ in *Renaissance Literature and its Formal Engagements* ed. by Mark David Rasmussen (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002) pp. 115 – 138.

<sup>59</sup> Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) pp. 20 – 35.



appearances to perceive this “struggle with meaning” which all criticism, including the criticism of forms should give an account’ (p. 27). The upshot of the above is that there should be a coherence in different aspects of the poem which, as it were, corroborate one another and that this coherence should be interrogated. I have tried to demonstrate how many of the poetic devices in *Prothalamion* provide support for the general direction of interpretation offered by Alastair Fowler, Harry Berger Jr, M. L. Wine, and Daniel Woodward, and provide unequivocal support for an interpretation based on the themes of time and mutability. Secondly, any context offered as of relevance to an understanding of a poem, should be able to find resonance in the body of the poem. Judith Owens’ piece relies on an overwhelming amount of context, a consideration of a very small proportion of the poem and what is in my view a generally unsuccessful attempt to incorporate aspects of the poetics of *Prothalamion* into her programme of making the poem (and Spenser) mean what the context says.

The problem that I have been examining is one where, in the two examples I have discussed, the contextual tail is wagging the poetic dog. One aspect of this process is that the characterisation of the context, itself an issue of considerable controversy, imposes a meaning on the literary work. One of the characteristics of poems, generally speaking, which results in part from their semantic saturation, is that poems are never just about one thing. This does not mean that anything goes. To take the example of *Prothalamion*, I do not think it is about the things which Judith Owens discusses. I do think it celebrates a betrothal, but it is also about expectation, success, failure, heroic behaviour and renewal. It is a complex and complicated piece of writing. The multi-faceted nature of much poetic writing appears to be ignored by this type of criticism. Two examples can be given from the examples I am discussing. In her paper, Judith Owens draws on The Cave of Mammon episode in book two of *The Faerie Queene* to buttress her argument about Spenser’s attitude to heroism and commercialism. Her reference to this episode gives the reader the impression that it contains the views she describes. This can be refuted. As I argued in part I, things are much more complicated than that. In Stephen Greenblatt’s piece, his interpretation of The Destruction of the Bower of Bliss is not one I would agree with, but it is required by what he is saying about the force of the ideas which he maintains are at large in Elizabethan England. In this way it is possible to see that a similar process is taking place to that described by Paul de Man in his discussion of the intentional fallacy; the literary work is treated as an object, it is hypostasized in just the same way, but for different reasons, as a literary work studied by Wimsatt and the New

Critics discussed in Paul de Man's article. This situation is discussed by Roland Barthes in *Critique et Verite*, and he makes the following point,

In declaring on the one hand that the work offers itself to be deciphered (in this lies the symbolic character conceded to it) but on the other hand in undertaking this deciphering using a discourse which itself is literal, without depth, closed off, charged with the task of halting the infinite metaphor of the work to possess its 'truth' in this standstill: of this type are symbolic modes of criticism with scientific intentions (sociological and psychoanalytic). In both cases it is the absolute disparity between the languages, that of the work and that of the critic, which causes the symbol to be missed.<sup>60</sup>

Such criticism suffers from the problem that it works with one discourse in terms of another. Barthes points out that it cannot 'translate' the work. Meaning is left untouched. It can only hope to attach a coherent set of signs to it. This view is also expressed by Pierre Machery when he says that such criticism has a 'tendency to slide into the natural fallacy of empiricism, to treat the work (the object of criticism) as factually given, spontaneously isolated for inspection.'<sup>61</sup> As Wittgenstein might have said, such criticism 'leaves everything as it is'.<sup>62</sup>

I have referred in passing to the fact that many of the most successful and highly regarded pieces of criticism of *Prothalamion* construct a unity in the poem from what appear to be many different, and in some cases apparently incongruous, threads. This impetus is eloquently summed up by Alastair Fowler, 'All these elements contribute to a meditation on changed estate and the generation of new forms. Growth and renewal; the balance of the old and new in national and individual life; time's giving and taking: these are ultimately what *Prothalamion* is about.'<sup>63</sup> In *Prothalamion* this is a unity in the poem which the poem invites the critic to produce. Pierre Machery has pointed out that there is also a different kind of disunity in literary works, the disunity between what the work says and what it does not. This is not, he points out, to talk about 'what it refuses to say', but what it cannot say (p. 87). Machery compares this absence with Freud's concept of the unconscious, 'To reach utterance, all speech envelopes itself in the unspoken' (p. 85). This idea is discussed by Catherine Belsey and expanded to include the idea that the unspoken can also be viewed as

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<sup>60</sup> Roland Barthes, *Critique et Verite*, Trans. By Katrine Pilcher Keuneman (London: Athlone Press, 2007) p. 37.

<sup>61</sup> Pierre Machery, *A Theory of Literary Production*, Trans. By Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) p. 13.

<sup>62</sup> Paul Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. By G E M Anscombe, P M S Hacker and Joachim Shulte, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) ¶. 124.

<sup>63</sup> Alastair Fowler, *Conceitful Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1975) p.84.

those aspects of the contradictory nature of the ideology within which the text is produced that result from false consciousness.<sup>64</sup> How can this idea be approached in terms of practical criticism? Machery makes the following point.

To know the work, we must move outside it. Then, in the second moment, we question the work in its alleged plenitude; not from a different point of view, a different side – by translating it into a different language, or by applying a different standard – but not entirely from within, from what it says and asserts that it says. Conjecturally, the work has its margins, an area of incompleteness from which we can observe its birth and production. (Machery p. 90)

*Prothalamion* presents itself as a poem containing disparate elements which it is the critic's job to reconcile. Fowler makes the point that this difficulty is in part because the poem is an occasional poem, written for a particular event, and the fact that we are not party to that understanding makes the meaning of the poem obscure to us. Thom Gunn maintains that this difficulty is easy to over emphasise. He writes, 'Yet in fact all poetry is occasional: whether the occasion is an external event like a birthday or a declaration of war, whether it is an occasion of the imagination. [...] The occasion in all cases – literal or imaginary – is the starting point, [...].'<sup>65</sup> But this is not what Machery is talking about. Is there something on the margins of the poem, its unconscious, its false consciousness, which cannot be resolved by such criticism? A different *Prothalamion* on the margins?<sup>66</sup>

The first point is quite simply that in a poem to celebrate the double betrothal of two sisters, there are a lot of references to rape. This strikes me as a more inconsistent aspect of the poem than the ones that have been discussed so far. It is the case that these references are oblique, but they are there nonetheless, and it is worth examining them to establish their significance. Firstly, there is the reference to 'Sweete breathing *Zephyrus*' (*Prothalamion* 1, 2), a formulaic way of referring to a westerly wind, but at the same time the person who captured and raped Chloris, afterwards marrying her and making her the deity (Flora) who protects flowers.<sup>67</sup> Flowers are an important feature of the second stanza, so this reading can hardly be considered idiosyncratic. In addition, in the first stanza, McCabe's notes are prepared to find

<sup>64</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Routledge, 2002) pp. 98 – 99.

<sup>65</sup> Ben Johnson, *Poems Selected by Thom Gunn* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974) p. ix.

<sup>66</sup> It is important to emphasise that Machery's focus is in the literary work. 'Moreover, we shall be looking within the work itself for reasons for moving beyond it'. (p.94).

<sup>67</sup> Ovid, *Fasti* 5. 197. These references are also all in McCabe's notes to the poem in *Edmund Spenser: The Shorter Poems*, ed. by Richard McCabe (London: Penguin Classics, 1999) pp. 727 – 733. McCabe provides an Ovidian source for line 13 also.

sexual innuendo in many of the terms employed. For instance, line 3; ‘*lightly*: gently (with a possible play on wantonly)’. Line 12; ‘*Hemmes*: encloses, restrains (but with a play on the hem of an embroidered garment).’ (McCabe p. 730). In stanza 2 we meet a ‘flocke of Nymphes’ with their reputation for lascivious behaviour, who appear ‘With goodly greenish locks all loose untyde, / As each had bene a bryde.’<sup>68</sup> McCabe describes ‘all loose untyde’ as having erotic undertones, but the following line seems to make it more explicit than an undertone. In Stanza 3, in a passage that I have already discussed in section II, Jove’s rape of Leda is referred to, and although Leda’s offspring Castor and Pollux are referred to in stanza 10, it may be unwise to pursue the connection in the way Harry Berger Jr does, as they are not both the twins of Jove, they are only twins when translated into heavenly bodies.<sup>69</sup> Of possible interest may be the fact that Leda also lay with her husband that night. Finally, there is a reference to the river Peneus in stanza 5. As Davis Lee Miller points out, ‘this was the landscape through which Apollo chased Diana.’<sup>70</sup>

This is the last reference to rape. The Nymphs sing their bridal song and then three things happen; there is a change from birds (swans) to brides, the wedding day stops being ‘was not long’ and becomes ‘is not long’ and we reach London. David Lee Miller says of this, ‘The subliminal presence of these rapes strengthens the sense of reluctance and adds resonance to the refrain, where ‘*Against the brydale day*’ means ‘in anticipation of’ and ‘in preparation for’, but also ‘in opposition to’’. The poet seems to empathize with the sense of imminent violation’. (p. 307) I do not see these as subliminal, and I do not share his understanding of the idea of ‘imminent violation’. The sense is of a river journey taking place in a sort of dream world where danger appears along the way.<sup>71</sup> The procession is joyful, but the text is punctuated by references to a wild world. In Werner Herzog’s film *Aguirre, Wrath of God*, the Spanish explorers of South America are on a large raft going down a river. They are followed on the shore by some of the local population. The Spanish ask their guide and interpreter what the locals are saying to one another. He answers, ‘They say meat is floating down the river’. The references to rape are liminal rather than subliminal. They are dangers

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<sup>68</sup> See Arlene Okerlund, ‘Spenser’s Wanton Maidens: Reader Psychology and the Bower of Bliss’, *PMLA*, 88,1. (1973) 62 – 68.

<sup>69</sup> Harry Berger Jr, ‘Spenser’s Prothalamion: an Interpretation’, *EIC*, 15 (1965) 363 – 379.

<sup>70</sup> David Lee Miller, ‘Fowre Hymnes and Prothalamion’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser*, ed by Richard McCabe, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2010) pp. 293 – 313 (p. 308).

<sup>71</sup> Harry Berger discusses this idea of ‘danger’ from a different perspective. Berger (1965) pp. 371 – 373.

that exist on the margins of their journey to London. When they arrive, these dangers disappear.

*Prothalamion* was not the only river journey to be published in book form in 1596. Sir Walter Raleigh's account of his voyage of discovery to Guiana was also published in 1596.<sup>72</sup> In it, Raleigh describes a river journey which is punctuated by danger from both the local population and the wild and savage state of nature they encounter. A flavour is given in this extract,

Upon this river there were great store of fowle, and of many sorts: we saw in it divers sorts of strange fishes, & of marvellous bignes, but for *lagartos* it exceeded, for there were thousands of these ugly serpents, and the people call it for the abundance of them the river of *Lagartos*, in their language. I had a *Negro* a very proper young fellow, that leaping out of the galley to swim in the mouth of this river, was in our sights taken and devoured with one of these *Lagartos*.<sup>73</sup>

Raleigh is an important presence in many of Spenser's works. Spenser describes his visit to the court of Queen Elizabeth In *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, lines 358 – 363, introduced there, it would appear, by Raleigh. Raleigh features in several episodes of *The Faerie Queene* and his poetry is praised in *The Faerie Queene* III. Proem.5.5-9. In addition, Judith Owens and James Nornberg find evidence for Raleigh as Faunus in *The Mutabilitie Cantos*.<sup>74</sup>

I do not need to re-iterate the close connection between Spenser and Raleigh. After the Throckmorton affair, Raleigh's stock at court is reduced and his activity in Ireland is curtailed. He embarks on a voyage of discovery on 6<sup>th</sup> February 1595 but is back in time to be at Cadiz with Admiral Howard and, of course The Earl of Essex, from the 30<sup>th</sup> June to the

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<sup>72</sup> 'THE DISCOVERIE OF THE LARGE, RICH AND BEWTFUL EMPYRE OF GUIANA, WITH a relation of the great and Golden Citie of Manoa (which the Spanyards call El Dorado) And of the Provinces of *Emeria*, *Arromaia*, *Amapaia*, and other Countries, with their rivers, adjoining' *STC* (2nd ed.) / 20634.

<sup>73</sup> *The Discoverie of the Large, Rich and Bewtiful Empyre of Guiana by Sir Walter Raleigh*, ed by Neil L. Whitehead (Manchester: Manchester university Press, 1997), p. 163.

<sup>74</sup> James Nohnberg, "Britomart's gone abroad from Brute-land, Colin Clout's come courting from the salvage Ire-land: exile and the kingdom in two of Spenser's fictions of 'Crossing Over.'" *Edmund Spenser: new and renewed directions*, ed. by Julian Lethbridge (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh-Dickinson Press, 2006), 214-85. And Judith Owens, 'Professing Ireland in the woods of Spenser's Mutabilitie.' *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 29,1 (2003), 1-22.

15<sup>th</sup> July of 1596. Raleigh seems to be the absent presence in this poem. Raleigh is not at court (he is not at court again until 1597). No wonder Spenser experiences long delay and expectation vain. This is a contrast to the previous occasion when Elizabeth ‘[...] to mine oaten pipe enclin’d her eare, /That she henceforth therein gan take delight,’ (*Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, lines 360, 361). The other significant publication of 1596 was Part II of *The Faerie Queene*. In it the predicament of Raleigh, in the form of Timias, is given full treatment (*F Q*, IV, vii). The complaint Spenser makes in stanza 1 of *Prothalamion* is not just on his own behalf. If Judith Owens wishes to find a warning to anyone in *Prothalamion*, it may not be to Essex, but to the whole court, which disregards the loyalty of its most fervent supporters. The praise of Essex with its conditional tone, as many writers have noticed and which I discussed on page 22, may be an implicit reference to all others, such as Raleigh, responsible for this significant success. The raid resulted in Spain becoming bankrupt and was accounted a great success.<sup>75</sup> The report which Raleigh wrote of his voyage of exploration may well have been read by Spenser, in print or manuscript, and forms an extra-textual backdrop to the poem. The brides are on a river journey which carries them from a situation where there are threats and dangers to a place of security and safety. While on this journey, their exceptionalism is emphasised, they are whiter than anything else mentioned in stanza 3. Perhaps the paranomasia that M. L. Wine is looking for is in ‘silver streaming *Themmes*’ (*Prothalamion*, 1, 11) with its echo of *silvestrus* meaning ‘wild’. The river can be entreated, it cannot be controlled.<sup>76</sup> It is also a journey in time. We move from a world that is partly imaginary, but also partly a journey through the past, peopled by nymphs and threatening characters from classical mythology, to the bang up to date. The glorious future that awaits the brides is first signalled by the ‘bricky towres’ (*Prothalamion*, 8, 132). The use of a new and, at that time, relatively uncommon building material signifies the future; a future where Lawyers have taken over from Knights who ‘decayed through pride’.<sup>77</sup> A world where the

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<sup>75</sup> See Owen’s discussion of this in *Commerce and Cadiz* (pp. 91 – 94). Also, Jerry Leath Mills, ‘Raleigh’ in A C Hamilton and others, *The Spenser Encyclopaedia* (London: Routledge, paperback edn 2014) pp. 584 – 585.

<sup>76</sup> Discussions with various classicist members of my family indicate a Virgilian source for this, but none could be positively identified. *The Georgics* not surprisingly, is the main suspect. On the problem of source studies see Laurence Lerner, quoted in Douglas Bruster, ‘Shakespeare and the Composite Text’ in *Renaissance Literature and its Formal Engagements* ed. by Mark David Rasmussen (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002) pp. 43 – 66 ‘There is one preliminary problem in discussing the presence of Ovid in sixteenth century poetry; the difficulty of detecting it. If you absorbed Ovid, not perhaps with your mother’s milk, but at any rate with your schoolmaster’s rod, you – and your readers – might not know when you were using him’ p. 54.

<sup>77</sup> London had, until Tudor times, been built with ragstone brought from parts of The Weald. Bricks were a relatively recent innovation. See <https://brickarchitecture.com/about-brick/why-brick/the-history-of-bricks-brickmaking> accessed 23.2.2019.

rule of law and contract contrasts with the rule of abduction and rape. When Judith Owens finds an element of disparagement in Spenser's reference to the lawyers, she should consider that Raleigh had been a student at the middle temple from 1574 – 1576. This is the Troynovant of books III and IV of the *Faerie Queene*. It is the true successor to ancient Rome. The descriptions of Essex's heroics and 'great *Elisaes* glorious name' (*Prothalamion*, 9, 157) signal the new dispensation. Elizabethan England is the future, a protestant state where heroism is harnessed to the glory of the realm and where the rule of law obtains. The eschatological tone is amplified by the fact that this will be a standard which may be glorified in ages following (*Prothalamion*, 9, 158 – 159). The tidal metaphor with which the poem is infused is also a comment on the fact that for the nation, the queen, the brides, but not the poet, the future is glorious. The tide has come in. As well as a meditation on change, decay and renewal, we see an affirmation of the view that the individual must subordinate their personal ambitions to that of the glorious protestant future that awaits England.

I have attempted to look at what is on the margins of the poem, what David Lee Miller calls the subliminal and what I prefer to think of as liminal presences to see if there is at work a sense of what the text is saying and not saying that enables us to see a disunity in the work that exposes its contradictions. It is my view that, on the contrary, if one accepts my propositions, Spenser takes us right back to the centre of the work. The theme which I have outlined links and makes coherent one of the most strikingly incongruous aspects of the poem. Can the approach of Machery and others be a valid one in relation to a poem such as this? Catherine Belsey applies the work of Machery to the work of Arthur Conan Doyle and shows how fruitful such an approach can be, but she is there dealing with a story which will display the ideological contradictions of capitalism and which is precisely the kind of text Machery had in mind when he wrote *A Theory of Literary Production*.<sup>78</sup> Alun Swingewood, the Marxist literary scholar, describes the Epic as being produced in 'the organic community with its unquestioned value system'.<sup>79</sup> There are grounds for believing that we cannot make the same assumptions about the literature of Elizabethan England as we can about the literature produced under capitalism. Despite all its incongruities, *Prothalamion* seems to drive or even strain towards unity, but it is a unity which is never quite achieved, there is no end time. As McCabe says of Spenser, '[...] he shunned dialectical closure in his pastoral verse as thoroughly as he avoided narrative closure in his epic – or, for that matter, emotional

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<sup>78</sup> Catherine Belsey (2002) pp. 101 – 108.

<sup>79</sup> Alun Swingewood, *The Novel and Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1975) p. 25.

closure in his love poetry.’<sup>80</sup> McCabe points out that Spenser was always the poet who wanted the court and the nation to be better than it was. His satires such as *Prosopopoia. Or Mother Hubberds Tale* betray this sense of disappointment and consequent bitterness.<sup>81</sup> This example indicates the difficulty of understanding a text written in a different age. The assumption of the utility of values, concepts and theories developed in a different ideological context, to the study of a poem like *Prothalamion*, or any poem by Spenser, must be questioned. This includes Greenblatt’s use of Freud to understand the destruction of the bower of bliss, and the use of concepts like heroic and commercial values to add another dimension to *Prothalamion*.

When I first read the poem at the age of 16, I was impressed by the realistic description of the day in the first stanza. I was a pupil at Henley Grammar School (founded 1604) and spent a lot of time on the river. The description of a stultifyingly hot day which was relieved only by the merest breeze, struck me as a brilliant evocation of precisely the kind of summer day one could experience in the Thames Valley. What I now know is that the first stanza is not just an accomplished evocation of a summer’s day on the Thames, it does much more than that, but it is clear from reading the criticism that this aspect of Spenser’s art hardly figures in any appreciation of the poem. My point is that all the things that have been discussed as what the poem does and what it is about, need to consider that the poem is quite beautiful. This is important because as Sidney points out, a willing and enchanted reader is a more receptive reader.<sup>82</sup> But there is more to it than that. The poetic devices which Spenser employs create beauty at the same time as they create meaning.<sup>83</sup> This requires the reader or listener to attend to the poem in a way which is open to this possibility. It can be argued that this is simply to expect too much. The saturation of meaning means that one cannot absorb all that is being

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<sup>80</sup> Richard McCabe (1999) p.xiv.

<sup>81</sup> Richard McCabe (1999) pp. xi – xxi and the entry on Raleigh by Jerry Leath Mills in *The Spenser Encyclopaedia*. Spenser’s attitude to the queen and court will always be a subject for debate. It appears that the dedication to Queene Elizabeth in the 1590 *Faerie Queene* was a late addition, ‘[...] some extant copies lack the dedication to the queen on the verso of the title page; the dedication itself, remarkably, was a stop-press correction to the inner forme of the outer sheet of gathering A.’ The author goes on to point out that ‘as Andrew Zurcher has shown, the poet’s politics, not least his attitude towards the queen, were marked by anxiety, hesitation, and revision.’ Thomas Festa, ‘*Spenser’s Thaumaturgy: “Mental Space” and the Material Forms of The faerie Queene (1590)*’ in *The Book in History, The Book as History: New intersections of the Material Text* ed. by Heidi Brayman and others (New Haven, NJ: Yale University Press, 2016) p. 153.

<sup>82</sup> See Sidney’s ‘*Defence of poesy*’ and *Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism* ed by Gavin Alexander (London: Penguin Books, 2004) pp. 1 – 54, (p. 16).

<sup>83</sup> Giorgio Agamben provides a succinct discussion of the relationship between enjambement and cognitive processes in, Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose* trans. By Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (Albany: State University of New York, 1995) pp. 39 – 41.



said, one is over-supplied with information. This is discussed by Mark Womak in relation to the difference between the experience of a Shakespeare play by what Harry Berger Jr has called ‘the slit-eyed analyst and the wide-eyed Playgoer’. Womak quotes Berger saying, ‘When Shakespeare is staged and you hear his language at performance tempo you are always haunted by the sense that you are receiving more information than you can process, and you wish you could slow the tempo down or have passages repeated or reach for a text.’<sup>84</sup> Part of the problem with this approach is that Berger, the slit-eyed analyst, is not in his element as the wide-eyed playgoer and in my view misses an important aspect of a play by Shakespeare or a poem by Spenser, that much of the communication takes place sub-consciously or even at the somatic level. To give two brief examples, the trimeter lines in *Prothalamion* do their work without the reader/listener having to recognise it, and the way Spenser plays with the substitution of words, delay / allay, softly / slowly, and so on, pass into the consciousness of the reader/listener without having to be recognised. The sense of arrival, of something eventuating in *Prothalamion* is almost felt, before it is understood. This is an aspect of the poem that a focus on context de-emphasises.

I have argued that Historicist criticism runs the risk of failing as criticism on two fronts. These are linked but need to be considered separately. Firstly, in its tendency to privilege the context which is being discussed, it ignores the fact that the literary work is a struggle with meaning. In *Prothalamion*, this would include a consideration of the way Spenser approaches the problem of historical time and individual biography in his use of the metaphor of the river journey. In addition, it runs the risk of making the literary work into an effect of ideology and closes off consideration of the possibility that it is an attempt to question the boundaries of that mode of thought. Looking in the other direction, so to speak, the focus on context as an explanation of a literary work, objectifies the work and robs it of its status as an act. In his forward to *The Work of Form: Poetics and Materiality in Early Modern Culture*, Nigel Smith, writing about the growing interest in formal studies writes, ‘Nothing I have spoken about so far broaches outright ‘decontextualization’ but the spectre of it is now there.’<sup>85</sup> This statement is not written as a warning, but it should be. A decontextualized reading of *Prothalamion* leads to both the naive response to the poem which I had as a sixteen-year old

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<sup>84</sup> Mark Womak ‘Undelivered Meanings: The aesthetics of Shakespearean Wordplay’ in *Renaissance Literature and its Formal Engagements* ed by Mark David Rasmussen (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002) pp. 139 – 158 (p. 153).

<sup>85</sup> *The Work of Form: Poetics and Materiality in Early Modern Culture*, ed. by Ben Burton and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) p. xiii.

and the rather vague speculations which close reading can engender and which I discussed in relation to the comment by David Daiches in part II (footnote 32), as well as the kind of analysis which takes the poem apart and analyses individual aspects of it microscopically. As Isobel Armstrong points out, this can get you further away from the text than even Judith Owens' history lesson or Greenblatt's exercise in psychoanalysis. Armstrong writes, 'Despite the anti-positivist language of so much modern criticism and theory, the text is seen as *other*: it is object to a Kantian subject who stands over against the world in a position of power.'<sup>86</sup> An important aspect of the context of any poem is the recovery of the aesthetic assumptions which can be shown to operate in the production of the literary work. It is mistaken to think that in doing this we can end up reading like an Elizabethan. Neil Whitehead puts the matter concisely when he says of New Historicist approaches to historical documents,

None the less an unreliable historicist ambition, just as with the literary 'new historicists', drives this type of analysis – that is the illusion that the past and others might be understood 'in their own terms'. The simple fallacy of logic that this illusion involves is shown by the fact that if historicism indeed achieved the aim of understanding a past culture 'in its own terms' the result of course would be totally unintelligible.'<sup>87</sup>

However, to attempt it enables us to confront the distance between our assumptions and those of the period. J. Paul Hunter says of recovering the assumptions of a period not our own, 'Without being able to argue that they are recoverable, I want to defend the attempt as a necessary process for noticing and confronting difference, and for creating the double consciousness necessary to any reading of a text written by someone else [...].' He is referring to the problem of the eighteenth-century rhyming couplet, but the consideration applies equally well to the encyclopaedic assumptions of Spenser.<sup>88</sup> In Chapter one of her book *The Language of Allegory*, Maureen Quilligan examines the ways in which Spenser

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<sup>86</sup> Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) p. 87.

<sup>87</sup> *The Discoverie of the Large, Rich and Bewtiful Empyre of Guiana by Sir Walter Raleigh*, ed by Neil L. Whitehead (Manchester: Manchester university Press, 1997), p. 34.

<sup>88</sup> J. Paul Hunter, 'Sleeping Beauties: Are Historical Aesthetics Worth Recovering?', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 34 (2000), pp. 1 – 20 (p. 2).

instructs the reader how to read *The Faerie Queene* in the process of telling the story.<sup>89</sup> The same thing happens in *Prothalamion*. One way in which this is done is by Spenser providing for us the context within which he wants us to read or hear the poem. The visual structure that he works with and the poetic artifice of the poem collaborate in the production of a context within which meaning emerges. A river journey through a dream time/landscape where characters from Greek myths give us the consciousness of danger and threat, to a triumphant present where the celebration is not just of a betrothal but of the time and place where the brides are travelling to. This journey does not stop there. A betrothal is always partly about the future and the poem incorporates this feeling both in the flow of the river onward and the expectation that in the wider context a poet will still sing ‘To ages following’ (*Prothalamion* 9, 160).

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<sup>89</sup> Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979). The problem of providing the context within which a work may be appreciated is discussed by Michel Foucault and Pierre Boulez in relation to ‘new’ music; that ‘new’ music, lacking an immediately recognisable form (Concerto, Sonata, Tone Poem etc.) the listener must be inducted into the rules in the process of listening. Although he reaches, almost self-consciously, back in time, Spenser was also producing ‘new’ literature. In the light of this, Quilligan’s discussion acquires greater significance. See Michel Foucault & Pierre Boulez, ‘Contemporary Music and the Public’, *Perspectives of New Music*, 24 (1985) pp. 6 – 12. See also the comments of Kirk Melnikoff on the collective project of creating a new ‘national’ literature in Kirk Melnikoff, *Elizabethan Publishing and the Makings of Literary Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018) pp. 19 – 26.

## Appendix on Textual Matters

Richard McCabe writes, ‘As its title-page indicates, *Prothalamion* was published in 1596 to mark the double wedding of the two daughters of the Earl of Worcester, Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset. What the poem celebrates, however, is not their marriages but their betrothals and it must therefore have been composed sometime between mid-August, when the Earl of Essex returned from the Cadiz expedition, and 8 November when the wedding took place at Essex House.’<sup>90</sup> It was published by William Ponsonby, described by McKerrow as ‘The foremost publisher of the Elizabethan age’.<sup>91</sup> In fact, according to his publication record in Early English Books Online, Ponsonby published eight volumes in 1596 and of these five were of poetry by Spenser, including the second part of *The Faerie Queene*.<sup>92</sup> A year previously he had published Sidney’s *The Defense of Poesy*, which had gone to two printings.<sup>93</sup> The inclusion of *Prothalamion* in such a large printed output of Spenser’s work, printed as a separate volume, makes one wonder whether Alastair Fowler is correct in his assumptions about the occasional character of the poem and its consequent difficulties.<sup>94</sup> It seems that a wider audience is being sought for the poem, so a reasonable assumption must be that it has things to say of wider application than just a betrothal.

Spenser died on 13<sup>th</sup> January 1599 and *Prothalamion* was included in the first folio of Spenser’s *Works* in 1611. Both the 1596 and the 1611 versions are available for inspection on EEBO and the differences are small. The *STC* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn) numbers are respectively, 23088 and 23077.3.<sup>95</sup> The punctuation is more obviously erratic in the 1596 edition although as Ernest de Selincourt puts it, ‘F [the 1611 folio of Spenser’s works] makes one or two obvious corrections, and is unusually profuse in commas.’ (Ernest de Selincourt p. xxvi see footnote

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<sup>90</sup> Edmund Spenser: *The Shorter Poems*, ed. by Richard McCabe (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 727.

<sup>91</sup> *A Dictionary of Printers and Booksellers in England, Scotland and Ireland, and of Foreign Printers of English Books 1557 – 1640*. General Editor R B McKerrow (London: The bibliographical Society, 1968) p. 217.

<sup>92</sup> EEBO has some limitations, thoroughly discussed in Ian Gadd, ‘The Use and Misuse of *Early English Books Online*’, *Literature Compass*, 6, 3. (2009) pp.680 – 692. This information appears sound. I am indebted to Ruth Gooding, Special Collections Librarian at Lampeter, for drawing my attention to this article.

<sup>93</sup> R B McKerrow (London: The bibliographical Society, 1968) p. 217.

<sup>94</sup> Alastair Fowler, *Conceitful Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1975), p. 59.

<sup>95</sup> *A Short-title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, & Ireland and of English Books Printed Abroad, 1475-1640*, first compiled by A.W. Pollard & G.R. Redgrave, 2nd edn, revised & enlarged, begun by W.A. Jackson & F.S. Ferguson, completed by Katharine F. Pantzer, 3 vols (London: Bibliographical Society, 1976-91), Vol. 1 A-H (1986); Vol. 2 I-Z (1976); Vol. 3 A Printers’ & Publishers’ Index, other Indexes & Appendices, Cumulative Addenda & Corrigenda, by Katharine F. Pantzer with a Chronological Index by Philip R. Rider (1991).

8). Of the available editions for the modern reader, there are three main options. The first to consider is edited by Andrew Hadfield and Anne Lake Prescott. This volume contains some useful articles on the poems, but it strays further from the original typographical practices.<sup>96</sup> It does not use italics in the same way as the first edition and its practice of providing a glossary on the same page as the poem distracts from and interferes with the way Spenser's intentional ambiguities work. The edition of Spenser's *Minor Poems* by Ernest de Selincourt dates from 1910. It is careful, it annotates all the differences between the first three editions of the poem and contains a glossary. A new edition was published in 1921 and this was reprinted in 1960.<sup>97</sup> It is now available as a reprint from many publishers and is available in hardback. It is the best volume to handle and read. It is also typographically close to the original. The Richard McCabe edition of the shorter poems is the best for study (see footnote 1). *Prothalamion* is based on a 1596 edition in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, but the textual apparatus, which is thorough, notes all the differences between the early editions. In addition, McCabe's notes and introductory essays are a model of scholarship and very useful. The only problem is that it is a Penguin paperback. The paper is of poor quality and as a result my copy is already in a deplorable condition.

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<sup>96</sup> *Edmund Spenser's Poetry*, ed. by Andrew D Hadfield and Anne Lake Prescott (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968).

<sup>97</sup> *Spenser's Minor Poems*, ed. by Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960).

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