

# Religion and temperance in the faerie queene book two



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The Faerie Queene Book Two, by Edmund Spenser, is a book entirely devoted to the concept of temperance and moderation. Espoused as a cardinal virtue in Plato's Republic, and referred to similarly in several other influential works from across many cultures, temperance encompasses myriad traits or characteristics. It is perhaps best described as refraining from excess; resisting temptations and impulses which otherwise might overcome one's control completely. That temperance is the main concern of Book Two is made clear by Spenser in the title of the work, being called The Legend of Sir Guyon OR Of Temperance. However, rather than simply being a story about a temperate knight, the nature of temperance itself is actually the subject of Book Two; specifically, whether or not it is possible to be continuously temperate. Book Two highlights the flaws in the concept of temperance, and this has wider ramifications when considering the social context, specifically regarding the Reformation and the perceived pitfalls of Catholicism over Protestantism (temperance arguably being considered unimportant in Protestantism, as Protestants believe in predestination). This essay will show, therefore, how Book Two of The Faerie Queene can be considered a religious commentary as well as an examination of the idea of temperance.

An important point to note, before looking at any particular stanza in detail, is that a word which continually recurs throughout Canto XII is "wanton", and this word perfectly encapsulates the dichotomy of the Bower of Bliss and the nature of sin. It is a word which can mean many things, and indeed its meaning throughout this Canto changes depending on the context in which it is used. First, it is used in the line "nature had for wantonnesse ensude" (2.

12. 59. 3) , which depicts it as a negative thing, or at the very least something excessive. However, when referring to the images of the boys on the fountain, the word – used in the line “ their wanton toyes” (2. 12. 60. 8) – implies playfulness. In stanza 61, when describing the flowers in the fountain, the word is again used negatively: “ Their fleecy flowres... seemd for wantones to weep” (2. 12. 61. 9). Finally, in stanza 63, the word is used in perhaps its most multi-layered context yet: the maidens in the fountain are said to “ wrestle wantonly” (2. 12. 63. 8). This could simply mean that their wrestling was carefree; however, the recurrence of the word (which occurs thirteen times in this Canto) as well as Guyon’s response to their wrestling, intermingles the ideas of excessiveness, playfulness, and sexual hedonism. The rather disparate meanings of the word “ wanton” imbue this Canto with an ambivalence regarding what, exactly, qualifies as sin, and highlights that evil doesn’t always look evil – something Guyon fails to notice, it seems, until the end of the book and his meeting with Acrasia.

Though this is a running theme throughout the book, it is arguably most evident during Canto Twelve, in which Guyon finally reaches the Bower. In stanza 58 of Canto XII, the Bower is described for the first time: it is termed a “ Paradise” (2. 12. 58. 1), even to the “ sober eye” (2. 12. 58. 2) of Guyon. It is not even, in fact, described in particularly lascivious or maleficent terms; instead, it seems to be a place of beauty, in which nature seems to be the defining characteristic. Spenser mentions the “ painted flowers” (2. 12. 58. 5), “ the hilles for breathing space” (2. 12. 58. 6), and “ the Christall running by” (2. 12. 58. 7) – imagery which is unequivocally positive. Additionally, the pleasures spoken about in this stanza seem to be universal, as “ none does

others happinesse enuye” (2. 12. 58. 4). The Bower does genuinely appear to be a paradise, and the final line of the stanza directly addresses this, saying “ The art, which all that wrought, appeared in no place” (2. 12. 58. 9). The dichotomy between what the Bower appears to be, and what it is according to Guyon’s view, is here laid out for the reader – he seems to expect brazen and wanton sin, and the obvious presence of magic or some supernatural source, but instead is presented with a glorious representation of nature. The comparison of the Bower (known to be a sinful place) with the majesty of nature, reproduced in all its glory, makes a statement about the connection between nature and sin, and arguably implies that what is considered sinful is also natural (created or predestined directly by God), a prominent Protestant argument – and a powerful argument against temperance as a permanent characteristic.

Stanza 59 goes on to address this dichotomy, speaking of how skillfully the Bower seems to emulate nature, and how “ the art” and nature seem harmoniously intermingled, as in the lines “ So striving each th’other to undermine/Each did the others work more beautifly” (2. 12. 59. 5-6). It is as if the Bower itself somehow exceeds nature – the line “ that nature had for wantonnesse ensude” (2. 12. 59. 3) shows this. Interestingly, this is the first point at which negative vocabulary creeps into the articulation; in particular, the aforementioned lines, and the line “ Art, and that Art at nature did repine [chafe]” (2. 12. 59. 4). This idea of the jarring comparison between nature and the Bower’s magical representation of nature is not sustained, however, and indeed the stanza is prefaced with the words “ One would have thought...” (2. 12. 59. 1), so the Bower is not being directly described in

negative terms. Still, the reason for the inclusion of such ideas remains ambiguous; it could be simply to provide a sense of juxtaposition, or it could be making a point about the reader, telling them essentially that true beauty, and that which is derived from evil sources, are indistinguishable. This arguably makes the point that the pleasures offered in the Bower, while encouraging sin, are not in themselves sinful, as they are described as so aesthetically pleasing and even the narrator seems unaware of any way in which the Bower can be perceived as evil. The pleasing imagery is renewed throughout the remainder this stanza, with the ultimate impression of the Bower being that of “sweete diversity” (2. 12. 59. 8). That phrase itself, however, can be taken several different ways, two of which make important allegorical points. Firstly, that temperance itself is by comparison “unsweete”, as it is a mode of being which decries diversity, and instead encourages simply the metaphorical staying of one’s hand, rather than action, either good or bad. Secondly, and perhaps more crucially, this phrase implies that there is some symbiosis between nature and sin. This ties in with the Protestant idea that sin is ingrained in humans, and that they are foredestined to do so. Taken this way, this stanza hints at Guyon’s forthcoming lapse in control as a result, arguably, of what happens in the following stanzas.

The next stanza introduces perhaps the most important physical object of this Canto: the fountain. This item is significant both for its upcoming role in Guyon’s strongest temptation yet, but also because it relates back to a story told by the Palmer in Canto II - of a nymph fleeing the unwanted advances of Faunus by becoming a fountain, the water of which could never be sullied.

Indeed, in that Canto, the Palmer says “ secret vertues are infusd/In every fountaine” (2. 2. 5. 6-7), and the fountain in Canto XII seems to reinforce that fact. It is described as breathtakingly beautiful, made of “ richest substance, that on earth might bee” (2. 12. 60. 2), as well as “ pure” (2. 12. 60. 3) – an interesting word choice given the environment. While the majority of the words used so far to describe the Bower, with the possible exception of “ Paradise”, have been words which relate to aestheticism, the word “ pure” has different connotations, specifically holy ones. There is an inherent connection between Cantos II and XII here, in that divinity and lust are inexorably linked through the fountain – a connection which makes a wider allegorical point. The Palmer’s story in Canto II shows that lust is inescapable unless one becomes something else entirely, which is exactly what happens to Guyon at the end of this Canto. This again acknowledges the Protestant idea that sin itself is inescapable. A linked and salient point is that fountains are, as the Palmer says, connected with secret magic – an interesting oversight, then, when in stanza 58 there is the statement about “ The art... appear[ing] in no place” (2. 12. 58. 9). While this may be a reference to Acrasia specifically not being anywhere in sight, another interpretation is that Guyon himself doesn’t regard the fountain as magical. This is the first step towards his ultimate downfall, and again makes an important point – even when one is specifically warned about sin, one cannot expect to recognize it every time it appears, which goes some way towards refuting the idea of temperance as a permanent trait. How, this section implies, can one be temperate even when one is incapable of recognizing sin when one sees it.

In stanza 62, the positive imagery is continued, with the “infinite streams” (2. 12. 62. 1) of the Jasper-paved fountain being described as “sweet and faire to see” (2. 12. 62. 2). Despite these statements, the fountain is perhaps the most potent representation of wanton excess (and, indeed magic) in the garden. While the streams of all fountains seem to be infinite, Spenser describes the basin into which they fall to as being increasingly filled, saying that the water “shortly grew... /That like a lake it seemed to be” (2. 12. 62. 4-5). This is a clear sign that the fountain is magical – if the streams were infinite, and the amount of water in the basin grew as it was watched yet the depth never exceeded three cubits, then clearly the fountain is magical as such a thing is impossible. Also, in stanza 63, it is made clear that this fountain is surrounded by laurel trees, which “defend” (2. 12. 63. 2) it from the sunlight – a potent word choice, as sunlight is inherently connected with the idea of heaven’s power. This word choice is followed by the sunlight itself becoming personified; it “[beats] on the billowes” (2. 12. 63. 3), implying the idea of a battle between light and dark. Very like, in fact, the one which is about to occur within Guyon himself (or, arguably, between Guyon’s inner self and the Palmer), when he sees the wrestling women in the fountain.

The description of these women, between stanzas 64 and 67, has a rather different hue from what has come so far. Spenser’s word choice in these stanzas is much more ambiguous. The women are not simply naked; their bodies are occasionally hidden by the water “as through a veile” (2. 12. 64. 6), and then suddenly exposed to all present and “th’amorous sweet spoiles” (2. 12. 64. 9) revealed to Guyon’s “greedy eyes” (2. 12. 64. 9). In other words, they are set up to be as tempting as possible, their “dainty

partes" (2. 12. 63. 9) being hidden, and then shown, over and over again.

The word "amorous" here is ambiguous and carries implications of bitterness, as does the phrase "sweet spoiles" - "spoils" of course meaning both "prizes" and "becoming rotten". Stanza 65 mentions "that fair Starre" (2. 12. 65. 1) - not only a reference to Venus - mentioned again in a following line as the "Cyprian goddess" (2. 12. 65. 3) - the Roman goddess of beauty, but also to evil, as Venus was also called "Lucifer" ("light-bringer"). Stanza 67 also makes a reference to Venus, as one of the women stands up and lets down her long hair, covering her body, so "that faire spectacle from [Guyon] was reft" (2. 12. 67. 6). This echoes the painting *The Birth of Venus* by Botticelli in which Venus's private parts are also hidden from the viewer by her long, flowing hair. These references comprise perhaps the clearest connection between beauty and evil so far, and yet, despite this potent symbolism, this is the point at which Guyon is drawn in, "his stubborne brest gan secret pleasaunce to embrace" (2. 12. 65. 9).

Without the intervention of the Palmer (the true representation of temperance in the book), this is the point at which Guyon would have lost his battle with temptation, as he has been shown throughout the book to have a weakness for beauty. In fact, Guyon's resistance to temptation seems to hinge on this very idea; he has very little trouble resisting the filthy, grubby Mammon and his piles of money in a gloomy glade, but when presented with things of genuine beauty - Philotime, the fountain, the wrestling maidens - his resolve wavers. Even his ultimate transgression - the "pitillesse" (2. 12. 83. 2) destruction of the Bower - is in part a response to beauty of Acrasia and her subversion of the handsomeness and power of Verdant. Guyon

seems to subconsciously resist the idea of beauty hypothetically being evil  
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throughout the book, and when he is finally confronted by (and subdued) the agent of the Bower - the beautiful seductress Acrasia - his lust for beauty turns to rage.

Having taken the moderate path throughout the book, and indeed even doing so in capturing Acrasia rather than killing her, Guyon's resolve breaks and he utterly destroys the Bower of Bliss in a manner incongruous with the idea of temperance. The reasons for this, in terms of Guyon's motivations and characteristics, are actually made clear by Guyon himself in Canto I; he says to Palmer that "raging passion.../robs reason of her dew regalitie" (2. 1. 57. 4-5). Throughout the book, Guyon is able to resist all temptations but shows a weakness for lust. In Canto VII, the only offer made by Mammon which is not dismissed based on temperance is his daughter's hand in marriage; the language used by Guyon in rejecting the offer is much less harsh, and is based on his self-perceived unworthiness and previous betrothal. This character flaw ultimately ends up inspiring Guyon's acts of violence in Canto XII, and shows that, with or without temperance (temperance being, as has been stated, embodied by the Palmer), Guyon was destined to sin. This can, therefore, be considered the dominant argument of Book 2 in general - that humankind is fundamentally flawed, and therefore cannot be expected to avoid sin through temperance.