

Humanist Method and the Prophetic Office of English Poetry in the Works of Edmund Spenser  
and John Milton

by

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## Abstract

Erasmus's Renaissance humanist grammatical hermeneutics changed the way theology was conceived and practiced. The literary critical resources Erasmus brought to theology from the study of the classical poets, however, were not only powerful agents of change within Reformation theology. They were also retrieved for poetry by early modern authors. Key Erasmian concepts and perspectives relating to both *bonae litterae* and *sacrae litterae* as well as to secular pedagogy and rhetorical theology were assimilated by English culture and provided important foundational elements within the early modern prophetic poetics of Edmund Spenser and John Milton. Careful consideration of the manner in which these Erasmian concepts and perspectives were integrated into Spenser and Milton's understandings of both poetry and the poetic vocation provides important insight into the complex theological dimensions of these poets' work—particularly into the workings and significance of a number of Spenser and Milton's most challenging religious figures and into the prophetic claims related to their mimetic production.

## **Preface**

This dissertation is the original, unpublished and independent work of the author,  
Matthew Evans-Cockle.

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## Dedication

*For my mother,  
Whose care  
And travailing example  
Have staid me well  
Through all these works and days.*

## General Introduction

### The Christian Humanist Contribution to Early Modern Prophetic Poetics

In Renaissance and Reformation era England, towards the end of the sixteenth and on into the latter half of the seventeenth century, there appear a significant number of extra-ecclesial yet biblicizing poetic works of a markedly prophetic cast.<sup>1</sup> Exemplary among these, not only in terms of poetic achievement but also in terms of prophetic ambition, are Edmund Spenser's *The Fowre Hymnes* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The poetic works of Spenser (1552/3-1599) and Milton (1608-1674) and their near contemporaries were the products of an English Reformation culture suffused with the influence of Christian Humanism. Consistent with this influence, the markedly prophetic poetic works of Spenser and Milton share a number of significant features with the rhetorical theology exemplified, most particularly for English reading audiences, by the writings of the Dutch Humanist theologian Desiderius Erasmus.

While Erasmus's contribution to the English Renaissance and Reformation period was enormous—through his edition of classical *auctores* as well as early Fathers of the Church; through his Greek edition of the New Testament, with its Latin translation and its *Annotations*; and through his biblical *Paraphrases*, his classical *Adages* and his composition of school texts: in universities, grammar schools, and parish churches—he did not supply English authors with a brief on poetry. Erasmus appears to have had no intention of fostering anything like a prophetic poetic movement. Nevertheless, both the grammatical hermeneutics and the prophetic oratorical

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis is specifically concerned with the prophetic dimensions of works by Edmund Spenser and John Milton. Philip Sidney and Mary Sidney's psalm translations in the Sidney Psalter, George Herbert's *The Temple* and John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* are other notable late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century examples of English biblicizing poetic works in which the author effects a merging of poetic and prophetic utterance.

evangelism integral to his rhetorical theology may be largely described in terms of a Hieronymian *ars poetica* (poetic art).<sup>2</sup> The extent to which scriptural art and poetic art converge in Erasmus's rhetorical theology as well as in the rhetorical theology of Christian Humanism more generally, made it particularly suitable for appropriation by poets of powerfully theological inclination.<sup>3</sup>

Philip Sidney supplied the lacuna left by Erasmus. Book-ending a century of English Reformation culture thoroughly imbued with Erasmian influence, a coherent English poetics is given theoretical form in Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* (pub. 1595).<sup>4</sup> The central category of poet with which Sidney is concerned is the more or less secular "right poet" who partially resembles the Erasmian rhetorical theologian/preacher as the purveyor of an affective and morally transformative instruction that both edifies and moves towards right action.<sup>5</sup> Of secondary concern in Sidney's *Defence* is the prophetic category of Davidic poet. Sidney's Davidic poet more fully resembles the Erasmian preacher as *theodidaktos* (one taught by God).<sup>6</sup> In Sidney's *Defence* the Davidic poets are the revered pagan and Christian figures "chief, in both antiquity and excellency, [who] ...did imitate the inconceivable excellencies of God" (86).

With his *Defence*, Sidney provides the English Renaissance and Reformation period with a brief on poetry that appears to cultivate parallels between poetry (both secular and sacred) and

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<sup>2</sup> By "Hieronymian *ars poetica*" I am referring to the exegetical practice of the early church Father Jerome (347-420), which was a "scriptural art" in self-conscious imitation of the "poetic art" of Horace. I return to this topic in the latter part of this general introduction.

<sup>3</sup> As this general introduction will show, this convergence of poetic and scriptural art in Erasmus's theological method is not a bit of cultural esoterica but was a widely recognized phenomenon—and one for which Erasmus was continuously and fiercely censured—in Erasmus's own day.

<sup>4</sup> Completed sometime around 1579 and enjoying wide circulation in manuscript form, Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* was published post-humously in 1595 through the offices of Mary Sidney Countess of Pembroke.

<sup>5</sup> The term "preacher" is both accurate and misleading. Erasmus certainly operated as a "preacher" but he did so from a pulpit of letters.

<sup>6</sup> In many respects the right poet's gifts, functions, and province shade noticeably into those of the Davidic poet (see Anne Lake Prescott, "King David as a 'Right Poet': Sidney and the Psalmist").

Christian Humanist rhetorical theology. Yet Sidney neither conceives of nor endorses a generation of English Davidic poets operating outside of the ecclesiastically sanctioned generic precincts of biblical translation and sermon.<sup>7</sup> For all its technical virtuosity, the Sidneys' psalter—Philip Sidney and his sister Mary Sidney Countess of Pembroke's translations of the psalms<sup>8</sup>—remains a nominally scriptural and thus ecclesially circumscribed work. The *Defence* limits its prophetic poetic exemplars to the divines of antiquity and Sidney confines his own prophetic poetic activity to the ecclesially sanctioned and dependent genres of biblical translation and paraphrase. In other words, both Sidney's poetic theory and practice tend towards grounding the contemporary production of English poetry within the secular horizon. In the successive works of Spenser and Milton, however, a fully fledged English prophetic poetics has slipped the ecclesial tether and taken independent flight.<sup>9</sup>

This thesis grew out of my examinations of a pair of similarly enigmatic religious and poetic figures—Spenser's Sapience in *The Fowre Hymnes* and Milton's Wisdom and Urania in *Paradise Lost*. Spenser's Sapience and Milton's Wisdom and Urania are suggestive in many ways of elements found in the philosophy of the early church fathers, and this patristic detailing has not gone unnoticed.<sup>10</sup> Less attention, however, has been given to the manner in which these figures may be seen as illustrative of the principles of grammatical hermeneutics proper to

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<sup>7</sup> Sidney does wish for English right poets to sing the praises of God but such song does not appear to involve the type of divine participation that distinguishes either the Sidneian Davidic (prophetic) poet or the Erasmian preacher as *theodidaktos*.

<sup>8</sup> While I concentrate upon the work and persona of Philip Sidney in this introduction, I recognize Mary Sidney Herbert's determining role not only in her masterful completion of the work of psalm translation left half-unfinished at her brother's death but also in publishing Philip's work and thereby largely constructing and ensuring the posterity of his poetic persona.

<sup>9</sup> On the avian associations of Spenser's poetic persona, and Spenser's "careeric" and generic progress towards a prophetic and Christian voice in *The Fowre Hymnes*, see Patrick Gerard Cheney's *Spenser's Famous Flight: A Renaissance Idea of a Literary Career*.

<sup>10</sup> See most particularly the decades-long exchange of essays between Maurice Kelley and William B. Hunter.

Christian Humanist rhetorical theology. Considerable controversy has surrounded the orthodoxy or unorthodoxy of Spenser's Sapience and Milton's pre-existent sisters Wisdom and Urania in relation to either Patristic or Reformation era doctrines. This thesis, however, will seek to explain their fashioning, in relative isolation from doctrinal considerations, as something akin to the figural paraphrase of anomalous and/or marginalized aspects of biblical texts.<sup>11</sup> Spenser's Sapience and Milton's pre-existent sisters are emblematic of Spenser and Milton's own extra-ecclesial, prophetic poetics. At the same time, these feminine figures are figural elaborations of grammatical exegeses that embody the type of interpretative insights which were part and parcel of the radical revision of theology effected by Christian Humanist rhetorical theologians like Erasmus.<sup>12</sup>

The approach that I have taken in the present study is that of a classical historicism inflected with the reconstructive and empathic strategies of something like reader response theory. I operate under the historicist's assumption that the "general meaning of the world may

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<sup>11</sup> My contention, that Spenser's Sapience and Milton's Wisdom and Urania may be understood "in relative isolation from doctrinal considerations," may seem particularly strange, given the abundance of research that has gone into reconciling Spenser's figure of Sapience and Milton's figure of the pre-existent sisters Wisdom and Urania with contemporary Christian cosmology (Reformation era) or cosmology borrowed from the early patristic period. While I am taking an entirely different approach, I still believe that the cosmology and speculative philosophy of the ante-Nicene church fathers is an important source of ideas and influence for the works of both Spenser and Milton. The surest guide through this domain—and one commonly turned to by Milton scholars in attempts to explain the Christology on display in *Paradise Lost*—is Harry Austryn Wolfson's *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*.

<sup>12</sup> In this general introduction I concentrate exclusively upon the Christian Humanist rhetorical theology of Erasmus. This should not be taken to suggest that Erasmus was alone among Humanists exerting significant influence upon English culture in general or upon Spenser and Milton in particular. Rather, I take Erasmus as an important figure representative of a larger Humanist community and movement. As John N. Wall has written, "Instead of thinking of an 'Erasmian' party, we might instead want to envision a community of men with shared educational backgrounds, shared goals, and shared methodology, for which Erasmus loomed as the most articulate spokesman" (Wall, "Godly and Fruitful Lessons" qtd. in Dodds 8). Perhaps the most famous example of a grammatical insight with significant theological implications is Erasmus's recognition that St. Jerome's "*Verbum*," which appears in the latter's Latin translation of the Bible, was less apt than "*Sermo*" in rendering the original Greek term "*Logos*." The controversy sparked by "*Sermo*" in Erasmus's New Testament was of enormous consequence for the future course of exegesis. See Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, "*Sermo*: Reopening the Conversation on Translating John 1.1" and chapter 1 ("*Sermo*") of *Erasmus on Language and Method in Theology*.

be discovered by historians... [and that] ascertaining the general proceeds by scrutinizing the individual” (Howard 13). At the same time, I negotiate my interpretations in terms of an awareness “that all ideas and values are historically conditioned and subject to change” (Howard 13).<sup>13</sup> As the “world” that I am interested in discovering is primarily a textual world, I not only investigate texts, but through their investigation attempt to determine, enunciate and—to the extent that such determination and enunciation must include a historically approximative and subjective element—to participate in the reading habits they imply. In the reconstructive and participatory aspects of my approach I am following the examples of Elizabeth Biemann (in her *Plato Baptized: Towards the Interpretation of Spenser’s Mimetic Fictions*) and Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle (in her *Christening Pagan Mysteries: Erasmus in Pursuit of Wisdom*), and to a lesser extent Stanley Fish (in his *Self Consuming Artifacts, Surprised by Sin and How Milton Works*).

Some manner of reconstructive participation is a necessary supplement to a classical historicist method not only because of the lack of constants within historically conditioned cultural contexts but also, and more particularly, because, as Elizabeth Biemann writes, my “field of speculation... embraces meaningful experiences generated by the activity of interpretation” (4).<sup>14</sup> My aim is, as Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle writes, “not merely to convey and analyse information but also to induce an empathic experience of ... [my authors’] intellectual

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<sup>13</sup> In the introduction to *Religion and the Rise of Historicism*, Thomas Albert Howard provides the above working definition of classical historicism. The awareness of the temporal relativity of the meaning constructed through the historicist project Howard identifies with the “crisis historicism” of Ernst Troeltsch who holds that as a consequence of the vast historical knowledge at our disposal “all thinking is obliged to become in some measure historical... The consequence of this is, of course, a certain relativism, a mental complexity” (qtd. in *Religion and the Rise of Historicism* 13 n 50).

<sup>14</sup> The term “reconstructive,” as I follow Biemann in using it here, refers to Dilthey’s concept of “reconstruction” or “*Nachbildung*” which he “described... as a sharing between writer and reader of a ‘coherence experienced from within’” (Biemann 250 n 18). Biemann is citing *Pattern and Meaning in History*, ed. H.P. Rickman, p. 39.

life” (*Christening* xii). Anticipating those scholars who might imagine that empathic understanding implies the uncritical agreement characteristic of ‘fan fiction’, Boyle cautions that proper critique can only follow upon careful determination of the sense and potential for sense of a given text (*Christening* xii). The generative “activity of interpretation” within which and for which Renaissance poets like Spenser and Milton were writing—contrary, for instance, to the logic- and dialectic-based interpretative practices of Scholastic theologians—aimed at sapiential understanding.<sup>15</sup> As Biemann writes: “The Renaissance poets were scholars, of course, but the fruits of their poetic labours invite us primarily to taste and see. We may hope to taste more sensitively, and see more comprehensively, when we choose for a time to share vicariously in the tradition they embraced as a living whole” (8). *Sapientia*, sapience, or sapiential understanding connotes both knowledge and taste. Sapiential understanding is an embodied form of knowledge that is not merely intellective but affective as well and indivisible from the human life of feeling. It is an essential Renaissance concept which I first broach in my discussion of Erasmus within this general introduction and to which I return time and again in the course of my subsequent discussions of Spenser and Milton. The scholar’s main guides to the historically conditioned sense and potential for sense of a given “interpretive/discourse” community’s authors and texts are inevitably the authors and texts themselves.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the reconstructive and participatory

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<sup>15</sup> The Scholastics or Schoolmen receive short-shrift in this thesis as it is not they themselves, their methods, or their considerable accomplishments, but rather the perception and characterization of these by their Humanist adversaries that is of greatest significance to my arguments concerning early-modern English prophetic poetics. Thus, while the Scholastics do receive considerable attention within this general introduction, the descriptions offered of Scholasticism reflect the latter’s partial and negative description within the perspectives of Christian Humanism. In the most general and neutral terms, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “scholasticism” as, “The doctrines of the Schoolmen; the predominant theological and philosophical teaching of the period A.D. 1000–1500, based upon the authority of the Christian Fathers and of Aristotle and his commentators.”

<sup>16</sup> “Interpretive” (which elsewhere in this thesis I spell interpretative), is set alongside “discourse” to acknowledge the formulation of the same (or highly similar) concept in Fish’s essay “Literature in the Reader” which is appended in full to *Self-Consuming Artifacts*.

interpretative approach employed in this thesis not only follows the examples of Boyle and Biemann, but, in doing so, also seeks correspondence with and accommodation of the claims to sapiential sense of the texts under study.<sup>17</sup>

I am thus interested, with Boyle, Biemann and Fish, in the meaningful reading or “*potential and probable response*” that early modern authors could possibly have intended and that early modern readers could possibly have experienced (Fish, *Artifacts* 406-7). As a consequence of this interest in the potential and probable response of an English Renaissance readership, I am responsible for being, as Fish holds, an *informed* reader and therein for approximating (for myself and the readers of this thesis) the conceptual history that makes such reading possible. It is in this spirit that my general introduction fleshes out an account of both Erasmian rhetorical theology and its potential implications for theologically inclined early-modern poetics. This introduction “is devoted to supplying a new thread to lead us through the maze of [Spenser’s and Milton’s] texts by weaving strands of evidence that have not [yet] been brought together in just this way” (Biemann 5).

By reconstructing the activity of interpretation proper to Erasmus’s theology, as it offers itself to those concerned with poetic production, I bring the prophetic poetic horizon strangely shimmering upon the adiaphoric frontier of Reformation theology into clearer focus.<sup>18</sup> The

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<sup>17</sup> I refer to my authors’ “intention” to generate sapiential meaning only so far as abundant contemporary witness has established that such sense was then considered a distinguishing feature of poetic and/or rhetorical discourse. In my investigation of Spenser and Milton, however, I am specifically interested in prophetic poetic strategies that subvert established dogmas pertaining to complex yet adiaphoric passages of scripture in the interests of a theologically sophisticated poetic exegesis. Biemann’s approach with respect to Spenser’s “metaphoric and equivocal strategies” (12) is similar to that of Stanley Fish with respect to Milton’s “progressive decertaintizing” (*Artifacts* 384). [T]he value of such a procedure is predicated on the idea of *meaning as an event*” (*Arifacts* 387-89; original emphasis).

<sup>18</sup> *Adiaphora*—a term of considerable importance in Reformation culture—names those biblical topics of consideration that are indifferent to salvation and thus both unconstrained by dogmatic fiat and open to interpretation.

notion that divine inspiration and feigning artifice could be combined by early-modern poets without contradiction is not, in itself, new.<sup>19</sup> The novelty of my contribution lies in the explanatory value of key Christian Humanist concepts that, having become part of the common cultural discourse, make possible a powerful exchange of ideas and authority between early-modern poetry and theology. It is my contention in this thesis that a reading of Erasmus—one that adopts the interested stance of the English Renaissance poet exemplified, in the first instance, by the poetic, theological and theoretical production of Philip Sidney—opens up highly significant avenues of interpretation within the subsequent reading of Spenser and Milton’s poetic works.

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<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Biemann’s *Plato Baptized: Towards the Interpretation of Spenser’s Mimetic Fictions*, John Guillory’s *Poetic Authority: Spenser, Milton, and Literary History*, and Barbara Kiefer Lewalski’s “*Paradise Lost*” and the *Rhetoric of Literary Forms* (among others) offer interpretations of the integral importance of both belief and artistry within early-modern authorship.

## Chapter 1

### Participatory Poetics and the Grammar of Christ: From Erasmus through Sidney

#### The Erasmian Legacy

According to Gregory Dodds, whose *Exploiting Erasmus* is a recent and thorough-going examination of the Erasmian legacy in early-modern England, Erasmus “was arguably the most widely read author in early-sixteenth century Europe” (xi). Erasmus’s influence was a general European phenomenon but, in spite of the relatively short period of time he actually spent on English soil, it was especially significant within England. Erasmus resided in England on two separate occasions—the first from 1499-1500 and the second from 1509-1514. As Cornelis Augustijn writes:

His first visit to England brought Erasmus the recognition [as a gifted Christian Humanist scholar] he ardently desired. He had gone there as tutor of William Blount, Lord Mountjoy... later a tutor of Prince Henry, [who] proved to have connections in the highest circles. Erasmus made the acquaintance of Thomas More... he met the future king ... [and] also came to know John Colet. ... Erasmus’ second stay in England... was no less important... [H]e gradually won fame, much more than ten years before... [as well as additional patrons, among whom Erasmus praises William Warham, archbishop of Canterbury, as] “my incomparable Maecenas.” (32-35)

The welcome reception of Erasmus was also the welcome reception of his works. The important connections made in the course of his English residency assisted considerably in the wide dissemination of Erasmus’s extensive and eclectic oeuvre. As Margo Todd has noted, in Oxford and Cambridge book inventories between 1558 and 1603, 84% of the Oxford lists and 66% of

the Cambridge lists contained one or more Erasmian work, making Erasmus the most highly represented author in the inventories (67).<sup>20</sup>

In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England it was impossible to overlook Erasmus's influence as both biblical scholar and humanist educator. To the new generation of philologically oriented humanist scholars that he helped to produce, Erasmus left a vast collection of Greek adages; his Greek edition, Latin translation and paraphrases on the New Testament; and extensive Latin translations of Greek classical and patristic authors. As Augustijn notes, Erasmus's patristic production alone included "editions of Cyprian, Arnobius, Hilary, Ambrose, Augustine (in ten volumes), editions and translations of Chrysostom and Irenaeus, [and] translations of Origen" (100). Erasmus's Greek edition of the New Testament served as the basis for English New Testament translations from Tyndale onward through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Furthermore, as John Craig writes, "with Edward VI's royal injunctions of July 1547 ... at a stroke, the Crown had made compulsory the purchase of the English translation of Erasmus's *Paraphrases* by every parish in the realm, by almost every cleric and probably, albeit rather more obliquely, by every cathedral" (317-18).

As Todd's study of Oxford and Cambridge inventories has shown, Erasmus exerted considerable influence among scholars and theologians through his biblical and patristic scholarship in the universities. Through the physical presence of his *Paraphrases* in the churches and their use in church-services, Erasmus exerted a similarly considerable influence among the general and less learned population.<sup>21</sup> He also had a hand in molding the minds and investing the

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<sup>20</sup> Todd's inventories, as indicators of wide dissemination and thus likely exposure to the works of Erasmus, cover the period of Spenser's education. On Milton's "wide knowledge of Erasmus," see *The Milton Encyclopedia* Vol. 3, "Erasmus, Desiderius," pp.65-68.

<sup>21</sup> Dodds cites a 1551 Dutch Travel journal to the effect that "the regular [English] church service usually consists of a chapter or two from the English Bible and the Paraphrase of Erasmus in English translation" (14-15).

talents of English youth. Erasmus's friend and patron John Colet institutionalized a Christian Humanist educational paradigm in the founding statutes of St. Paul's Grammar School where an ideal of Christian eloquence was taught and pursued through the imitation of wise, virtuous and linguistically refined classical and Christian models in accordance with school texts composed by Erasmus himself. In the English grammar school as in the English university and the English parish church, Erasmus was one of the most recognized and often employed authorities within English Reformation culture.

As the central and coherent core of his copious oeuvre, Erasmus employed and propounded a rhetorical theology. The exegetical approach at the heart of this rhetorical theology was the grammarian's practice of textual criticism involving the "consistent application of the philological method used by the humanists in the study of texts from classical antiquity to biblical scholarship and the study of the Fathers of the church" (Augustijn 191). The theological revolution Erasmus effected was primarily one of method. Erasmus did not intend—in the manner of Luther and Calvin and other Church-founding reformers—to replace the old with a new and purified dogma. On the contrary, as Robert Coogan writes, Erasmus "steadfastly tries to dissolve the dogmatic accretions of the centuries that prejudice and restrict exegesis" (115-116). Contra the dogmatists, in Erasmus's estimation, many passages of the Bible manifest a divine intention to prevent clear understanding and the drive to translate such passages into fixed doctrine is therefore counter to the will of God. In his dedicatory letter to Charles V that served as preface to the paraphrase of the gospel of Matthew, for instance, Erasmus draws attention to passages in which "Jesus so mixes and adapts what he has to say that he seems to me to have wished to remain obscure not only to the apostles but to us" (*Paraphrase on Matthew* 4). Such passages, Erasmus holds, certainly merit contemplative study but they comprise *adiaphora*, that

is, things indifferent to salvation. According to Gary Remer's epitome, even while "various degrees of consensus may form on some doctrinal adiaphora... [Erasmus] still allows the learned to debate the matter among themselves, [holding that where] there is no universal consensus... scholars should not be prevented from exploring, reconsidering, and possibly abandoning widely accepted doctrines, so long as they are not fundamental to the faith" (97).<sup>22</sup> This position—that "Christians should maintain an adiaphoric flexibility in most areas of belief" (Dodds 34)—was championed with considerable success by Erasmus as well as by other later English Humanists and served to legitimate a considerable degree of personal freedom with respect to biblical interpretation while curtailing the authority of powerful religious factions.<sup>23</sup>

Erasmus's exegetical method could be employed to undermine the authority of received dogma and to open an adiaphoric scriptural horizon to the possibility of continuous interpretative renewal. It could also confer exegetical authority upon the individual practitioner. As the practicability of Erasmus's method was not determined by confessional doctrine, neither was the authority it might confer necessarily tied either to the particulars of confessional identity or ecclesial station.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, with respect to the potential authorizing of extra-ecclesial exegesis, the Dutch theologian Maarten van Dorp accused Erasmus of taking the side of the poets against the theologians. In Dorp's view, Erasmus's writings effectively authorized "the grammarians...

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<sup>22</sup> As Dominic Baker-Smith notes, Erasmus did not imagine a community of simple believers engaged in the personal interpretation of Scripture without any manner of exegetical guidance. On the contrary, he imagined a spiritual bishop whose "first duty is meditative study of the Bible... The bishop must, like Idythun, have risen above human desires, and be able to sing prophetically 'expounding faithfully the mystical sense of Scripture'... This would be Idythun, the Davidic type of the bishop" (lviii-lix). Idythun appears in Psalm 38 where he is chosen by David to make music for the Lord (lviii).

<sup>23</sup> This is most obviously seen in the case of the Latitudinarian movement of the seventeenth century that grew up around Benjamin Whichcote, Henry More, Ralph Cudworth and the other Cambridge Platonists. It is also manifest in the largely politically motivated establishment of the "*via media*" within early Anglicanism.

<sup>24</sup> As Dodds writes: "Erasmus' theological methodology was neither Catholic nor Protestant, but part of a position that had first emerged in a pre-confessional era prior to the divisions and fears sparked by Luther's popularity" (37).

[to] sit on the throne and act as censors of all the other disciplines” (*Letters* 298-445 160).<sup>25</sup> As Dorp well recognized, Erasmus’s theological method had the potential to undermine the authority of traditional theologians and canonical church-authorities while conferring exegetical authority upon the individual and the individual instance of a creative, if grammatically learned, exegesis.

Erasmus’s readership, however, was in no way limited to the disgruntled theologians whose indignation Dorp attempted to impress upon Erasmus. In England, not only were all parish churches under royal injunction to display and make use of the English translation of Erasmus’s *Paraphrases on the New Testament*, but according to Dodds, “English readers read Erasmus carefully and understood his religious vision, theological methodology, and rhetorical style” (xiii).<sup>26</sup> Widely read and often disputed, as Cornelis Augustijn points out, Erasmus’s influential works had clear confessional limitations: “no church developed from [Erasmus’s] ideas, as was the case with Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin. There, the structures formed a framework through which the founders’ continued influence over the centuries was guaranteed to a greater or lesser extent. This was not the case with Erasmus” (195-96). As a Catholic who imagined a unified church bound together by the commonly held values and goodwill naturally attendant upon his Humanist ideal of a universal Christian Latinity, Erasmus could not be fully

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<sup>25</sup> The letter is n.347, “Dorp to His Friend Erasmus” (1515).

<sup>26</sup> Dodds writes: “In 1548 Erasmus became an official part of the English Reformation when, in a royal injunction, Edward VI ordered the English translation of Erasmus’ *Paraphrases on the New Testament* [together with the *Great Bible*, the *Book of Common Prayer* and the *Book of Homilies*] placed in every church throughout the kingdom. The royal injunction also stated that clergy under the degree of B.D. were to ‘diligently study’ the *Paraphrases*” both in English and in Latin (xii). As Dodds further adds, “the injunctions were renewed seven times by Elizabeth I between 1569 and 1599” (269 n 6) and, under Elizabeth, “[t]he visitation articles also stipulated that all clergy below the degree of Masters of Arts had to acquire a personal copy of the *Paraphrases*” (12-13). Cf. Frere and Kennedy, *Visitation articles and injunctions*, Vol. 3, pp. 8-29, and John Craig “Forming a Protestant Consciousness? Erasmus’ *Paraphrases* in English Parishes, 1547-1666.”

assimilated to English Protestant causes.<sup>27</sup> Nor could English (or continental) Catholics claim Erasmus for their own: his theological method was increasingly seen, by factions on both sides of the confessional debate, as undermining faith in the sanctity of Church tradition.<sup>28</sup> In other words, Erasmus was a slippery fish whose flip-flopping influence had to be handled carefully within Reformation battles over confessional identity. For all their unarguable influence and power, the works and method of Erasmus seemed, ultimately, to threaten the authority of all who might claim it—all, that is, save the grammarian's clan of school-masters and poets.

While I am interested in Erasmus's theology and its influence, I am not primarily concerned with its impact upon confessional disputes and what might be termed official religious culture. Instead, in this general introduction, as in the greater thesis's examination of prophetic poetics in Edmund Spenser and John Milton, I seek to contribute to and substantiate scholarly appraisals, like the following by Gregory Dodds, to the effect that the "Paraphrases of Erasmus heralded a new era of biblical interpretation and *literary production*" (5; my emphasis).<sup>29</sup> Indeed, not only Erasmus's *Paraphrases* but his rhetorical theology as a whole, with its potential to exalt the grammarian above the theologian in scriptural matters, was especially well-suited to adoption by poets and to the fostering and authorizing of an exegetically sophisticated theological poetics.

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<sup>27</sup> Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle describes this Erasmian vision as follows: "Just as Christ, oratory incarnate, had divinely reconciled man to God, so the Christian orator might through similar persuasion reconcile man to man. ... Erasmus' programme to restore creation through oratory, in imitation of Christ who had restored it as oration, was not implemented by heroic gesture, but by scholarly attention to detail in the service of uncommon eloquence. Grammar was to foster this germination and maturation of humanity reborn" (*Language and Method* 46-48).

<sup>28</sup> In 1559, under the authority of Pope Paul IV, all of Erasmus's works were included within the Index of Prohibited Books. As Cornelis Augustijn writes of Erasmus' exegetical method: "he undermined the authority of the great exegetical compendiums of the Middle Ages, the *Glossa Ordinaria* and the *Postillae* of Nicholas of Lyra... In Erasmus' exegesis the tradition which had accumulated around the text of the Bible through the centuries was not respected and added to, but rejected in favour of a new beginning" (191).

<sup>29</sup> The reception and influence of Erasmus's *Paraphrases on the New Testament* has been explored in the collection of essays co-edited by Hilmar Pabel and Mark Vessey, *Holy Scripture Speaks: The Production and Reception of Erasmus' Paraphrases on the New Testament*.

I am concerned in the present study with the part Erasmus's theology may have played in, and the extent to which Erasmus's theology may be used to illuminate, prophetic developments within early-modern English poetics.

## **Rhetorical Theology**

For Erasmus, the message of Christ was rhetorical and the goal of exegesis was to facilitate the fundamental transformation that would result from scriptural persuasion. Erasmus, among other Christian Humanists of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, employed a grammatical hermeneutic, anchored primarily in rhetoric and philology rather than in logic and creedal dogma, to radically transform the practice of theology. Where Scholastic theology developed a technical Latin adapted to the rigours of Aristotelian logic, Erasmian rhetorical theology followed Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457) in striving to restore Christian *eloquentia* as exemplified by the Latin of Jerome and adapted to the practical goal of moral persuasion. In this section I provide a summary overview of Erasmus's rhetorical theology. I then proceed through discrete discussions of five integral aspects of this rhetorical theology and their relevance to poetics.<sup>30</sup>

Erasmus' Christian Humanist rhetoric-based practice of theology was diametrically opposed to the logic-based practice of the Scholastic philosophers whose work and interpretative method had dominated late medieval theology and continued to maintain a dominant place within university curricula in Erasmus's own time.<sup>31</sup> Imagining the conceptual truth of a God

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<sup>30</sup> These five integral aspects are Erasmus's opposition to Scholasticism, his cultivation of a grammatical hermeneutics, his near sacralising of *bonae litterae*, his participatory and sapiential conception of theological learning, and his favouring of *enarratio* as persuasive exegesis.

<sup>31</sup> Medieval theology was dominated by the highly conceptual and disputative exegetical method of the Scholastics' *quaestio* and *summa*: "The *quaestio*, 'question' or 'query,' proceeded from a theological question that was illuminated, as in a conversation, in dispute, by pros and cons from all sides and led to a conclusion, while the counter-arguments were then answered from the solution reached" (Augustijn 16). Scholasticism treated passages of

who appealed primarily to the ratiocinative reason of a philosophical symposium of the elect, the Scholastics sought to discover and abstract the principles of the faith buried in biblical narrative. In terms of Scholastic method, it was only through abstraction that the biblical message could be clarified and effectively understood. Imagining, contrary to the Scholastics, the copious discourse of a God who appealed primarily to the affective sense of common human colloquy, Erasmus sought to clarify not the ideas within but the language of biblical narrative itself. In terms of Erasmian method, it was essential to remain within the original language of biblical narrative for therein “the doctrine of Christ is more common and accessible than the sun” (*Language and Method* 95).<sup>32</sup> In privileging the affective over the ratiocinative content of Scripture, Erasmus was actually sharing the position of a number of late-medieval Scholastic theologians such as Giles of Rome, Alexander of Hales, and St. Bonaventure. Though similarly repudiated by Erasmus, these theologians differed markedly from other Scholastic theologians (like Thomas Aquinas) in considering the biblical message primarily in moral and affective terms.<sup>33</sup> They had further anticipated Erasmus in employing the grammarians’ tools—tools traditionally employed in the interpretation of the classical poets—to interpret the various generic modes within Scripture.<sup>34</sup>

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Scripture through the medium of its own technical language thereby both ignoring and effacing the original affective and persuasive features of the scriptural passages in favour of their conceptual content.

<sup>32</sup> Regarding the consequences of Erasmus’s revolutionary theological method, Augustijn writes: “the domination of systematic theology [would be] broken, and exegesis would be elevated to the place of honour. In other words, dialectic, the path to principles as it was called, would have to yield place to rhetoric. Theology would no longer be practised in accordance with the laws of strict logic. The whole scholastic method was in danger” (192). In the *Ratio*, Erasmus writes “the theological profession rests more on affections than on clever arguments” (qtd. in Hoffman 204).

<sup>33</sup> For these theologians’ understanding of the affective nature of the scriptural message see Alastair Minnis’s *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, 121-127. As Istvan Bejczy points out, however, Erasmus appears to have dismissed Alexander of Hales as roundly as he did that of the other Scholastics. The fact remains, that Erasmus’s affective and rhetorical approach to Scripture was not without antecedent, even among the Scholastics.

<sup>34</sup> See Alastair Minnis’s discussion of the biblical *forma tractandi* or *modus agendi* (modes of proceeding) according to Giles, Hales, and Bonaventure in *Medieval Theory of Authorship* pp. 119-130.

One of the most significant monuments of Erasmus's oecumenical grammatical hermeneutics was his *Novum Instrumentum*, a Greek edition of the New Testament with a parallel Latin translation. In its challenging of the dominant form of Scholastic exegesis, this work went far beyond that of the prior champions of affective theology. With his edition of the New Testament, Erasmus sought both to question and improve upon the Vulgate, the time-honoured Latin translation commonly attributed to Jerome. Erasmian exegesis, as demonstrated in both the *Novum Instrumentum* and its accompanying *Annotationes*, sought a basic clarification of the language of the scriptural text that would provide an adequate foundation for hermeneutic engagement at all levels—from the work of biblical scholars for limited circles of learned readers, to public sermons, to individual Christians' personal and private readings.<sup>35</sup> Yet for Erasmus, Scripture was not the only horizon of Christian revelation. For Erasmus the work of the ancient poets and *auctores* comprised a dispensation of Christian providence.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, the continuous hermeneutic engagement Erasmus imagined as the responsibility of every Christian involved not only scriptural exegesis but also the processing of *bonae litterae*, that is, good letters or classical literature.

Through a grammarian's philological interpretation of Scripture, the repudiation of medieval scholastic tradition, and an extensive archeology of the rich theological and rhetorical sources of antiquity, Erasmus sought to define a new type of theology and mould a new type of theologian. In the *Ratio verae theologiae* (the *Method of a True Theology*), which appeared in 1518 as preface to the second edition of Erasmus's New Testament as well as in a separately

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<sup>35</sup> Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle observes that although Erasmus's position wavered when he fell under heavy censure, in the *Paraclesis* (prefatory to the *Novum Instrumentum* of 1516) he expressed the wish "that his New Testament be available to commoners so that 'all can be theologians'" (*Language and Method* 7).

<sup>36</sup> This topic has been explored in Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle's brilliant book, *Christening Pagan Mysteries: Erasmus in Pursuit of Wisdom* (xi).

published edition, Erasmus proposes for the novice a “brief method for arriving at true theology.”<sup>37</sup> Erasmus’s “method” is both assimilative and participatory in conception. That is, he imagines a conversion and purification of the heart through the assimilation of Scripture. When the heart becomes a “library of Christ” participating in the Logos, it also becomes an instrument of the divine charity of providence. The heart is not only filled with the prophetic word, message, conversation, or sermon of Christ, but becomes capable of its further creative and personal expression.

In its didactic and pastoral expression, represented most distinctly by his gospel *Paraphrases*, Erasmus’s theological method centers upon the grammatical genre of “*enarratio*”—that is, exegesis as persuasive and elaborative paraphrase. Erasmus’s *Paraphrases* are a curious phenomenon. On the one hand, they are an example of ecclesially sanctioned intra-biblical story-telling within which scriptural fidelity is the highest good. On the other hand, they involve the insertion of a fictional first-person narrator into the scriptural text itself as well as considerable poetic license in rendering and intensifying the affective sense of scriptural passages. Indeed, as an elaborative and affectively intensified retelling of Scripture they are a (radically anti-scholastic) form of interpretation which enacts the pretense of non-interpretative transparency.

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<sup>37</sup> This phrase simply (and roughly) translates the full title of Erasmus’s work: *Ratio seu methodus compendio perveniendi ad veram theologiam*. The *Ratio* remains a difficult text to get hold of in English. Manfred Hoffman has provided a useful overview of the *Ratio* in *Rhetoric and Theology: The Hermeneutic of Erasmus* pp. 32-39 with discussion throughout. Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle’s discussion in chapter three, “Ratio,” of *Erasmus on Language and Method in Theology* is particularly illuminating. Passages cited here are from a PhD thesis by Donald Morrison Conroy: *The Ecumenical Theology of Erasmus of Rotterdam: A Study of the Ratio Verae Theologiae, Translated into English and Annotated, with a Brief Account of his Ecumenical Writings and Activities within His Lifetime*. The *Ratio* was a much expanded version of the *Methodus* (1516), which in turn was the third and final preface to the first edition of Erasmus’s New Testament.

Erasmus's Christian Humanist vision and theological program were thus quite radical. First, the grammarian—a scholarly representative of the tribe of poets and orators—appeared as classicizing schoolmaster to the benighted Scholastic theologians promising (or threatening) the affective and eloquent correction of their intellectual and barbaric errancy. Erasmus extolled the grammarian's expertise in rhetoric and the philological study of classical languages and literature as not only appropriate but essential to both biblical exegesis and translation. He further contended that the store of *bonae litterae* or classical literature—the extent of the grammarian's traditional purview—was itself a providential dispensation of Christ. Finally, Erasmus made an oratorical and poetic approach to scriptural exposition a central pastoral feature of “true theology.”<sup>38</sup>

### **Grammatical Hermeneutics**

Working as a grammarian, Erasmus pursued the elucidation of biblical language itself, rather than the concepts to which it might refer, as the means to discover the persuasive, affectively intelligible truths Scripture intends. As Cornelis Augustijn writes, “Erasmus wanted to put philological methods developed in humanism at the service of biblical scholarship and of theology in general. Opponents represented him scornfully as no more than a teacher of grammar, and Erasmus adopted the name” (105). Equipped with the critical apparatus of humanist philology and classical rhetoric, Erasmus championed the legitimacy, and demonstrated the power, of an interpretative method that conceived of the Bible as “*divinas*

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<sup>38</sup> As Dodds writes: “the *Paraphrases* were hardly simplistic narratives of the New Testament and, in a literary sense, combined elements of biblical translation, commentary, and fiction” (6).

*litteras*” (divine letters or literature) and approached biblical exegesis as it would the interpretation of any other “literary” text.

The study of *bonae litterae* was the domain of the grammarian. Late medieval teachers of grammar were responsible not only for instruction in the noble classical languages but also, therein, for moral instruction through the correct interpretation of the classical poets. As Minnis writes, the poets were considered to “direct themselves towards ethics” which is to say that their works pertained to “moral science, a branch of practical philosophy” (*MLTC* 14). Concerned with ethical persuasion and thus with interpretation as a guide to action, grammar “was an art of living as well as an art of language, and the single method of instruction was the explication of the poets” (*MLTC* 14). Theology, on the other hand, at least in terms of the dominant late-medieval, Thomistic Scholastic tradition, largely eschewed the study of Greek and Hebrew.<sup>39</sup> Jerome’s time-honoured Latin translation served as the Scholastics’ primary text and their exegetical method, anchored in logic, was practiced in a highly technical, non-classical Latin that largely negated the persuasive effects of biblical texts. Thus, the championing of an affective theology by Hales and others notwithstanding, the dominant practice of theology lay outside of the grammarian’s linguistic and ethical purview.

Erasmus echoed the affective emphases of grammatically-minded Scholastic forerunners but he presented a new and potent challenge to the way theology was practiced by insisting upon the primacy not only of the original biblical languages but of the grammarian’s philological expertise over the cumulative weight of tradition. In a private letter to Antoon Van Bergen, Erasmus wrote:

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<sup>39</sup> An important exception to this rule, in terms of Scholasticism as a whole, is the Franciscan Hebraist Nicholas of Lyra (1270-1349).

I can see what utter madness it is even to put a finger on that part of theology which is specially concerned with the mysteries of the faith unless one is furnished with the equipment of Greek as well, since the translators of Scripture, in their scrupulous manner of construing the text, offer such literal versions of Greek idioms that no one ignorant of that language could grasp even the primary, or, as our own theologians call it, literal, meaning. (*Letters* 142-297 25)<sup>40</sup>

Erasmus's extensive knowledge of Greek and Greek literature bore abundant fruit in his *Novum Instrumentum* and *Annotationes*. The *Novum Instrumentum* comprised a new Latin translation in parallel with Erasmus's edition of the Greek New Testament. The *Annotationes* lay out the principles and considerations in accordance with which Erasmus effected his translation.<sup>41</sup> As Robert Coogan notes, Erasmus's New Testament "requires [and demonstrates] a mastery not only of the Greek and Latin codices and the exegesis of the Greek and Latin Fathers but also an expert knowledge of secular Greek and Latin classical literature" (15). A triumph of the biblical humanist method, Erasmus's New Testament was key to enabling subsequent Protestant translations of the Bible into the European vernaculars.<sup>42</sup>

That the works of Erasmus carried significant authority within English Reformation culture is indisputable. The nature of this authority, however, remains something of an enigma. On the one hand, conservative Catholic theologians vociferously objected to Erasmus's presumption in correcting the Vulgate. This objection proceeded from the recognition that Erasmus's biblical humanism—his insistence upon the interpretative primacy of the original languages of Scripture—posed a near immeasurable threat to the cumulative authority of

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<sup>40</sup> The letter is n.149, "To Antoon Van Bergen" (1501).

<sup>41</sup> Erika Rummel singles out the *Annotations* as the most "impressive monument to [Erasmus's] biblical scholarship" (ix). She describes their content as "predominantly a philological commentary, recording and discussing variant readings and commenting on passages in the Vulgate... [and evolving, with subsequent editions, into] a mixture of textual and literary criticism, theological exegesis, spiritual counsel, and polemical asides" (vii).

<sup>42</sup> According to Augustijn: "The Greek text of the New Testament that Erasmus presented set the tone for the following centuries... We know that Zwingli transcribed the Epistles of Paul in Greek from Erasmus' New Testament, and that it was only in this way that he acquired a reasonable knowledge of Greek. There must have been many more like Zwingli" (94).

accepted Church tradition. As Coogan writes, “Erasmus insists that linguistic skills open the grammatical sense of the passage and that one discovers the spiritual sense neither by its traditional context in dogma nor—equally important—by allegorical conjecture until one has first established its philological coherence” (15). To accept the premises of Erasmus’s exegetical method not only involved the questioning of time-honoured practices, doctrines and even conciliar decisions but implied the principled rejection of the exegetical method and theological authority of Scholasticism as a whole.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, the English theologians who penned the introductions to the Englished *Paraphrases* of Erasmus were well aware that these same *Paraphrases*, which appeared by royal injunction in all English parish churches, “interpret[ed] key doctrines, such as predestination, in a manner that was inconsistent with Luther, Calvin, and the other reformers’ understanding of such key soteriological issues as grace, justification, atonement, and salvation” (Dodds 21).<sup>44</sup> While Erasmus’s English editors invested considerable effort in their introductions to either reconcile Erasmus’s theology with or subordinate it to their visions of English Protestantism, the fact remained that “[t]he *Paraphrases* themselves presented distinctive Erasmian theological doctrines and rhetorical methodologies that were at odds with parts of the Protestant Reformation, in general, and with English Calvinism, in particular” (Dodds 59). Erasmus’s textual presence thus constituted a ubiquitous yet strangely unassimilable authority: for theologians on both sides of the Reformation’s confessional disputes he was both unavoidable and, to varying degrees, unacceptable.

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<sup>43</sup> Practices, doctrines, and conciliar decisions questioned by Erasmus include, among many others, the practice of confession, the doctrine of original sin, and the decrees of the African church councils. These examples are cited within a larger selection by Coogan, p.19. See also Erica Rummel, *Erasmus and His Catholic Critics*.

<sup>44</sup> On first Nicholas Udall and then Miles Coverdale and John Olde’s successive strategies in framing and re-framing the *Paraphrases*, in smoothing over their interpretative discontinuities with reformation doctrine, and in outrightly subverting their arguments, see Dodds’ “Framing of the *Paraphrases*” in *Exploiting Erasmus* (15-26).

Neither Catholic nor Protestant theologians were comfortable aligning themselves with Erasmus's theology. That said, the objections levied by Maarten van Dorp against Erasmus's *prises de position* in his *Moria (Praise of Folly)*, and his anticipated editions of Jerome and the New Testament, do suggest one identifiable (if somewhat amorphous) group whose interests were consistently advanced by Erasmus: "the whole tribe of school-masters, poets, authors, and all the professed followers of the humanities" (*Letters* 298-445 156).<sup>45</sup> Significantly, this group's alignment is disciplinary rather than confessional. Dorp accuses Erasmus not only of bitterly attacking the faculty of theology through his "wretched Folly," but of composing his edition of Jerome exclusively "for people interested in grammar... the grammarians... the schoolmasters" (*Letters* 298-445 19; 160).<sup>46</sup> Dorp's letters are especially suggestive because in pitting Erasmus against the theologians they so clearly and so fully identify his position with that of the poets and scholars of poetry.<sup>47</sup>

Dorp's identification of Erasmus's poetic "tribe" might seem, at first, not to warrant special notice. That Erasmus openly identified his exegetical approach as that of a grammarian is well known. The implications of this identification, however, and the cultural resonance it might have had for a Reformation era audience, merit consideration. Dorp asks: "If the theologians are pestilent characters because they have not been initiated into the sacred rites of poesy, what about ... the pope himself, the cardinals, the bishops, and the abbots, why do they not lay it down that no one shall be promoted to their order without a recommendation from the Muses?" (*Letters* 298-445 158). The question is a rhetorical one and its tone of bitter hyperbole assumes

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<sup>45</sup> The letter is n.347, "Dorp to His Friend Erasmus" (1515).

<sup>46</sup> The citations are from Letters 304 and 347 respectively.

<sup>47</sup> Of Erasmus's early years Augustijn writes: "Erasmus and his friends wrote poems and felt themselves to be poets, with a feeling for language and a sensitivity to the music of words" (23).

the ludicrousness of its proposal. Yet Dorp evidently believes this is the very position which underwrites both Erasmus's biblical and patristic scholarship and his dismissal of the learning and labours of Scholastic theologians.<sup>48</sup>

In addressing Dorp's objections to his *Moria*, Erasmus confirms, however jestingly, the proposition that so exasperates his interlocutor. Theology is indeed better advanced through the mediating power of the Muses than through the misguided endeavours of contemporary theologians:

So if all this, [the history of *Folly's* conception] my dear Dorp, is ill-judged, your culprit owns up, or at least puts up no defence. Within these limits and in an idle moment and to please my friends [I composed *Folly*, and later allowed its publication, and in doing so] I judged ill, and only once in my whole life. Who can be wise all the time? ... What ill-judged things far worse than this I could produce by other men, even by eminent theologians, who think up the most frigid and contentious questions and do battle among themselves over the most worthless trifles as though they fought for hearth and altar! And they act their absurd parts, more farcical than the original Atellanes, without a mask. I was at least more modest, for when I wanted to show how ill-judged I could be, I wore the mask of Folly and... I myself acted my part in disguise. (*Letters* 298-445 116,117)<sup>49</sup>

The passage is both well-guarded and cutting. On the one hand, Erasmus claims to excel the "eminent theologians" only in "ill-judged things." He is not presuming to compare his work on Jerome or his translation and annotation of the New Testament to the greatest positive achievements of the theologians. Instead, he is merely referring to the "ill-judged" productions of both parties. On the one hand, Erasmus attributes to the *Moria* excellent ill-judgment and near-accidental publication ("from an imperfect as well as corrupt copy"). His Folly has been

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<sup>48</sup> In "Martin Dorp and Edward Lee," Cecilia Asso provides a pithy condensation of Dorp's accusation of Erasmus, in response to both his *Praise of Folly* and his work on the *New Testament*: "You have ridiculed the theological profession as a whole, denigrating them and lowering their prestige in the eyes of the people, and now you take on a task which is traditionally theirs. Would that not indicate that you desire to eliminate their *raison d'être*?" (171).

<sup>49</sup> In this and the following quotation I am citing Letter n. 337, "Erasmus of Rotterdam to Maarten van Dorp, The Distinguished Theologian" (1515).

conceived as an amusement, a joke to share with friends, a distraction from physical discomfort, the product of idle moments pending the arrival of his books (*Letters* 298-445 116). On the other hand, in describing the ill-judged product he ascribes to the “eminent theologians” Erasmus iterates his dismissive appraisal of the Scholastic method as a whole, with its “frigid and contentious questions... over the most worthless trifles.” In other words, Erasmus’s jesting admission of ill-judgement may be read as exalting his *Praise of Folly* over the “far worse” folly of the most highly respected Scholastic treatises and summas.

Even as the corpus of his patristic and biblical publications grew to shocking proportions and this work came to furnish the primary materials for an ever wider field of theological inquiry, Erasmus maintained his identification as a grammarian. This alignment with poets and scholars of poetry had seemed both alarming and obvious to the Dutch theologian Maarten van Dorp already in 1514. It seems highly unlikely that this same alignment would have failed to impress itself upon the succeeding generations of aspiring English poets—and specifically those, like Spenser and Milton, inclined towards biblical and patristic study—whose grammar-school formation followed Erasmian principles, whose university educations were imbued with his writings and whose parish churches exhibited copies of the *Paraphrases* from which their pastors read during church services. As Cecilia Asso writes, “[i]n his argumentation, Dorp links *The Praise of Folly* with Erasmus’ philological work on the New Testament and thereby puts his finger on the essence of Erasmus’ religious work: he sought to define a new type of theology and a new type of theologian” (171). But what type of theologian did Erasmus’s theology define? Throughout the sixteenth and on into the seventeenth century, English theologians, continental reformers and Catholics alike were constantly engaged in contesting the confessional orthodoxy of Erasmian positions. Few, if any of these, claimed an Erasmian faith. Erasmus’s influence,

however, did not depend upon the adoption of any particular confessional position. It was not Erasmian doctrine but Erasmian method that was of revolutionary importance within the Reformation. It was the method of one capable of besting the “eminent theologians” from behind the mask of a narrative fiction—the method of *the poet himself* acting his part in disguise.<sup>50</sup>

### **Importance of *Bonae Litterae***

One of the ways Erasmus’s Christian Humanism distinguishes itself is in conceiving a Christian *responsibility* to interpret and assimilate not only Holy Scripture but also classical *bonae litterae*. The assimilative hermeneutic process that Erasmus imagined mirrors the inaugural movement of Christianity which represented itself as the ongoing fulfillment, through interpretation, of the divine promise in the Scriptural history of the chosen people of Israel. Christianity, from its inception, had represented the value of Hebrew Scripture in terms of an evolving process of revelation. Within this perspective, the message of the Hebrew Scripture was twofold: in the first instance it encoded the Jewish law; in the second instance it contained the prophetic revelation of Christ. The second prophetic message of the Hebrew Scripture, however, *required* the interpretative labours of those for whom it was intended. Erasmus’s representation of classical culture as a providential dispensation of Christ sanctioned a vast expansion of the Christian’s interpretative labours. Indeed, within the new interpretative horizon that Erasmus imagined, the calling of a true theologian was no longer limited to scriptural exegesis but extended to a broader transfiguring of culture.

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<sup>50</sup> In his Letter to Maarten van Dorp, Erasmus cites the example of Plato’s Socratic Dialogues as precedent for his narratorial fiction: “when I wanted to show how ill-judged I could be, I wore the mask of Folly and, like Socrates in Plato, who covers his face before reciting an encomium on love, I myself acted my part in disguise” (*Letters* 298-445 116-7).

Erasmus conceived the supreme eloquence of Christ as Logos. For those conservative theologians who insisted upon the rustic simplicity of the gospels this might have made little sense. Erasmus, however, considered classical learning to be a providential dispensation of Christ and defined the Logos as “the *total* oration of the Father” (Boyle, *Language and Method* 25; original emphasis).<sup>51</sup> The relative plainness of New Testament Greek notwithstanding, there was thus nothing inherently contradictory in Erasmus’s vision of an essentially eloquent Christianity. In Erasmus’s vision, the cultivation of Christian eloquence is not only the process by which one comes most fully to understand the language of Scripture; it is indivisible from transformative theological attainment. Erasmus’s God has chosen to reveal himself as Logos or copious discourse. To know this eloquent God one must assimilate his Scripture and to properly assimilate his Scripture one must first acquire the practical eloquence of linguistic proficiency by assimilating the providential dispensation of classical *bonae litterae*. As Erasmus conceives it, this process of interpretative assimilation is transformative not merely of the intellect but, via the *affectus*, of the whole person.

Erasmus was favourably inclined towards the pagan wisdom of classical learning in a way that other Humanist theologians and educators—from his most bitter antagonist Martin Luther to one of his most admiring patrons John Colet—were not. His perspective on classical learning effected a radical rapprochement of biblical revelation, on the one hand, and the ancient pagan wisdom preserved by the classical poets and other *auctores*, on the other. Referring to

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<sup>51</sup> Boyle connects Erasmus’s translation of *Logos* by *Sermo* and the latter’s definition as the total oration of the Father to a prior formulation of Irenaeus: “In his polemic *Contra haereses*, which Erasmus edited in 1526, Irenaeus teaches that ‘this Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, through his word which is his Son, through him reveals and publicises everything which he reveals’” (*Language and Method* 25).

arguments developed within Erasmus's *The Antibarbarians*, Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle gives a succinct statement of the distinction at issue:

It is one theological idea that Christians may perceive that classical learning, with its profoundest truths about God borrowed from Hebrew Scripture, is their inheritance which they may adopt and convert to the glory of Christ. It is another idea entirely that Christ himself has ordained that pagan learning to his own glory and that Christians must appropriate it if they are to be faithful to the divine economy. (*Christening* 11)

Traditionally, the literate theologian had espoused the first view and tended to consider classical pagan learning as more or less tainted. The Apologists of the early Church bequeathed to future generations a legacy of hesitant integration of pagan learning either as the “spoils of the Egyptians”—which God commanded the people of Israel to carry away with them at Exodus 3:22<sup>52</sup>—or as wisdom derived from earlier Hebrew sources to be reacquired. For Erasmus, not only had the pagan culture of antiquity achieved the “thing nearest to the highest good, that is, the summit of learning,” but they had done so in accordance with the decree of divine providence (*Antibarbarians* 60). In other words, while affirming the traditional patristic rationales for assimilating pagan learning, Erasmus moved beyond them to affirm the providential character of the pagan inheritance in and of itself.<sup>53</sup>

Erasmus promoted the study of *bonae litterae* as both propaedeutic to and co-extensive with the study and practice of theology. As a prior dispensation of the eternal and divine reason (Logos), pagan wisdom already participated in Christian truth. His words safely conveyed

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<sup>52</sup> See Origen's “A Letter from Origen to Gregory” in *Ante Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 385*.

<sup>53</sup> Tracing the evolution of Christian accounts of the value and sources of pagan wisdom from the Apologists through to Erasmus, Boyle notes the significant contribution (unacknowledged by Erasmus) of Scholastic philosophy: “It is historically, if ironically, true that because scholastic theologians could argue that reason establishes not only the existence of God but the method by which his attributes can be derived from this *esse*, Erasmus needed no longer attribute pagan wisdom about God to their reading of Hebrew Scripture” (*Christening* 16).

through the persona of Batt within the dialogue-form treatise *The Antibarbarians*, Erasmus writes:

Everything in the pagan world that was valiantly done, brilliantly said, ingeniously thought, diligently transmitted, had been prepared by Christ for his society. He it was who supplied the intellect, who added the zest for inquiry, and it was through him alone that they found what they sought. Their age produced this harvest of creative work, not so much for them as for us. (60)

The ancient dispensation of pagan wisdom was a crop produced for the reaping of later harvesters. Not only was it perfectly in keeping with the nature of a reasonable God that “the best religion should be adorned and supported by the finest studies” (*Antibarbarians* 60), but as a gift from Christ the wisdom of pagan antiquity could not be lightly dismissed. Erasmus was not merely seeking to elevate the study of *bonae litterae* and the cultural station of the classical poets. His arguments in *The Antibarbarians* effectively made the evaluation and integration of pagan learning a requirement of Christian historical consciousness.

That Christians owed a debt of responsibility for the assimilation of pagan wisdom was not the only contentious proposal made within *The Antibarbarians*. Through the remarkably unrestrained arguments advanced within the safe precinct of the latter work’s fictional dialogue, Erasmus imagines a radical revaluation of Christian priorities. If Christian tradition has tended to extol an ideal of ascetic sagacity tending naturally towards either the utmost simplicity of expression or the absolute silence of the martyr’s self-sacrifice, *The Antibarbarians* argues for the greater worth of charitable learning and eloquence. Of the conservative and linguistically barbaric theologians who like to cite scriptural authority as they proudly declare themselves the enemies of eloquence and learning, Batt asks:

Why do they not produce those words of David: “Teach me goodness and judgment and knowledge, O Lord.” Or of the wise Ecclesiasticus: “The wise man will seek out the wisdom of all the ancients, and will be occupied with the

prophets. He will keep the discourse of men of renown, and will enter in among the subtleties of parables. He will seek out the hidden meaning of proverbs, and be conversant in the dark sayings of parables. (99)<sup>54</sup>

Batt's arguments cut unrepentantly and unreservedly against the grain of a long tradition. The mistrust of learning propagated by conservative theologians constitutes a perverse championing of ignorance. Ultimately, those who make a habit of objecting to divine wisdom and eloquence are childish, mad, and hypocritical. Indeed, they are "so far removed from any wisdom, either human or divine, that they need to be tied up like lunatics rather than coaxed by rational argument" (121).

In advancing the cultivation of learning and eloquence, Erasmus's *The Antibarbarians* had to grapple with well-known scriptural and patristic common-places—in particular, Paul's distrust of knowledge and Augustine's rejection of eloquence. Batt offers no apologies as he lays waste to the objections of "born fruit-eater[s]" and hypocritical rustics (100, 102). Paul's statement that "knowledge puffs people up" must be set against the indisputable fact of the wisdom of Paul, an apostle "most highly instructed in all branches of literature" (*Antibarbarians* 113). Yes, Paul warns the Corinthians that knowledge without charity is dangerous, but this is not the end of the matter; this is merely a peripheral aside. Paul's message is naturally consistent with what we know of his person: "knowledge is good, charity is better. If you see that the one is combined with the other, you will achieve a perfect result" (*Antibarbarians* 73). As for Augustine's rejection of pagan learning, for the Erasmian interlocutor this is a matter of wilful misinterpretation: it was not pagan learning but merely pagan superstition that Augustine repudiated (*Antibarbarians* 97). Far from dismissing human learning, "he wrote that those

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<sup>54</sup> Batt is quoting Psalms 119.66 and Ecclesiasticus 39.1-4.

disciplines which were discovered by human minds, like dialectic, rhetoric, natural science, history, and so on, seemed to him marked out with gold and silver, because men themselves did not produce them but dug them out like gold and silver from what might be called the ore of divine providence, which runs through all things” (*Antibarbarians* 97-98). Learning and its eloquent expression are not contrary to the interests of the Church and Christian tradition. On the contrary, the Church and Christian tradition owe more to the charitable expression of the “very few” scholarly Christian doctors than to the glorious sacrifice of the “plentiful supply” of martyrs. Indeed, Batt goes so far as to suggest that these martyrs “would have shed their blood in vain for the teaching of Christ unless the others had defended it against the heretics by their writings” (*Antibarbarians* 83).

*The Antibarbarians* extols the contribution to Christianity of the eloquent authors who have defended the teaching of Christ against heretics. Moreover, by its own lights, *The Antibarbarians* is itself such a defense. It is a defense against those heretics who repudiate the divine dispensation of pagan learning. It is a defense against those heretics who impute to the message of Christ an antipathy to either knowledge or eloquence. But more than a defense, it is a re-consecration. Wisdom belongs to Christ, *The Antibarbarians* argues, and both the path of learning and the cultivation of eloquence are appropriate to His seekers and celebrants. But who is the champion of Christian wisdom within the pages of Erasmus’s *The Antibarbarians*? Who so fearlessly lays waste to the heretical promulgators of malignant ignorance and vain-glorious rusticity? Who is it, in this fictional dialogue, whom Erasmus represents as the “frenzied” (101) defender of learning and eloquence? Curiously, the hero of Erasmus’s dialogue is the effusively ranting Batt, clerk of Bergen and, what’s more, that most eloquent of creatures—a poet.

*The Antibarbarians* contains a single, brief exchange concerning the relation of poets and theologians. This exchange occurs between the town doctor Jodocus and Batt at the tail end of the latter's interpretation of the Pauline message concerning learning and charity:

“Why Batt, whoever would have believed that a poetic fellow like you would have so much theology in him? I swear by the favour of your Muses, you seem to me to have explained Paul's meaning most accurately, and as far as I can see no theological term escapes you; from what I have heard I should think you would make a beautiful preacher...”

Batt laughed and said, “...What an impudent fellow you are, to be surprised at theological knowledge in me, a poet... If I were a theologian, that would not mean that I was straying from the domain of the poet. In ancient times poets and theologians were held to be the same people...” (74)

In relation to the path (*via*) of theological learning Erasmus sets out in the *Ratio*, Boyle notes that it corresponds to the “*via antiqua*” of the ancient Fathers, “the well-travelled road of antiquity,” in stark contrast to the “*via moderna*” of the Scholastics (*Language and Method* 66). When considered in relation to the exchange concerning poets and theologians in *The Antibarbarians*, it is compelling to read the *Ratio* as announcing a method for arriving at the theology of ancient times, when “poets and theologians were held to be the same people.”

By identifying himself as a grammarian, Erasmus denies being a theologian after the manner of contemporary theologians, those who follow the *via moderna*, but he does not ultimately deny being a theologian. Erasmus presents himself as a grammarian seeking to re-invest Christianity with the eloquence and wisdom of the early Church supplemented by the providential dispensation of classical learning. He proposes thereby to revivify the message of Christ. This is indeed the calling of a theologian, but a theologian who follows the *via antiqua*. The destination of Erasmus's *via antiqua* is an eloquent and convivial Christendom in which, as they were long before, the poet and the theologian are one and the same.

## Participatory Method

For Erasmus (as for “affective” theologians of the thirteenth century), the “sapiential” character of theology corresponded to the primacy within Scripture of moral meaning, conveyed through persuasive language and addressed to the *affectus*, or affective faculty connected to the will.

Considered as a sapiential science, a *scientia ut sapientia*, theology sought the cultivation of a wisdom correspondent to the pathos, and the moral questions and responsibilities of embodied experience. This concept of sapiential wisdom was also integral to Erasmus’s conception of transformative Christian eloquence. The Latin term *sapientia* is derived from the verb *sapere*, meaning both to “taste” and to “know.” The physiological connotation links the term—commonly translated as wisdom—to corporeal existence and therefore to the embodiment of wisdom in the mystery of the incarnation. As Dominic Baker-Smith notes, Erasmus takes pains to impress the corporeality of this conception of acquired spiritual wisdom upon his readers: “Our stomach is our inner disposition [*affectus*]; if we love what we have learned and believe it, we have sent food to our stomachs. And if we have begun to practise through acts of charity what we have received, then by vigour and activity we show that the food has become the substance of the spirit” (xxxii). Erasmus’s reader is exhorted to engage in the assimilative incorporation of sacred texts. These texts are invested and possess their readers with a sapiential rather than an intellectual wisdom. Sapiential wisdom is participatory wisdom: having tasted, ingested, ruminated the Logos, the spirit itself becomes integral to the copious discourse (Logos) of God.

There is thus, in addition to the philological rigour of his grammatical hermeneutic, a quietly mystical and Eucharistic dimension to Erasmus’s conception of scriptural interpretation. The *Paraclesis* appears as preface to Erasmus’s 1516 Greek and Latin edition of the New

Testament. Towards the end of this preface Erasmus makes a remarkable claim: “[T]hese writings bring you the living image of His holy mind and the speaking, healing, dying, rising Christ himself, and thus they render Him so fully present that you would see less if you gazed upon Him with your very eyes” (108).<sup>55</sup> In participating in Scripture (via assimilative study) one also participates in “the living image of His holy mind and the speaking, healing, dying, rising Christ himself.” In other words, Erasmus envisions exegesis as a prophetic mimesis of Scripture which is also Eucharistic participation in Christ.<sup>56</sup> Part divine grace and part laborious scholarly diligence, this understanding of Scripture is the investiture of the *theodidaktos* (one taught by God).

For Erasmus, revelation is experienced within and not beyond Scripture. Neither conceptual nor reducible to doctrine, it is the affective transformative experience of being persuaded and possessed by what has been diligently tasted, ingested, and ruminated in the process of devout study. This revelation of God within Scripture is not the end of endeavour; it is not a passive beholding of truth as visionary reward for the Christian’s triumphant progress. On the contrary, Erasmus’s understanding of revelation is fundamentally productive. The copious discourse of the Erasmian Logos is that of an ongoing conversational dialogue between God and his faithful:

[M]ake your heart itself into a library of Christ...From it, like from the provident householder, you can bring forth “new things and old” as they should be needed. For these things which come forth from your own heart, as it were, practically

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<sup>55</sup> As Manfred Hoffman writes, it was not in the life of Jesus but rather “in the New Testament writings where Christ assumed the fullness of his stature in terms of God’s final revelation to humankind... [f]or the New Testament has been written after the resurrection and therefore encompasses the complete circle symbolizing the perfect harmony of Christ’s person, teaching, and life” (83).

<sup>56</sup> As Michael J. Heath writes, “in his *Ecclesiastes* Erasmus suggestively refers to Christ, the Word, as *enarrator* of the mind of God, [LB V 77 2D] so that the accommodation of the divine and the human in the second Person of the Trinity is a model for the work of exegesis” (“Introduction” xvii-xviii in *CWE* 63).

alive, penetrate far more vividly into the souls of your listeners than those things which are gathered from a hodgepodge of other authors. (*Ratio* 341)

The texts thus assimilated diligently and painstakingly through Erasmus's grammatical hermeneutic are not merely understood—they are made productive. Through their proper assimilation, their reader becomes capable of generating further utterance invested with their original power. From this Erasmian perspective, the prophetic power to participate in revelation and speak the word of God does not arise through Plotinian or Pauline rapture, let alone poetic fury. Instead, it results from the anabolic assimilation of the words of Scripture through the long and diligent practice of a grammatical hermeneutics.

Within the perspective of Erasmus's rhetorical theology, the theologian or preacher strives to fill himself with the eloquence of Scripture in order that he may be made capable of its revitalizing recitation. To utter prophetic speech for the benefit of one's hearers is to participate *in Scripture* in such a way that its *imitation*, as intra-Scriptural utterance, emerges organically from one's self as something both new and old, but most importantly as something living. This living utterance, as a prophetic act of imitation, is the individual Christian's participation in the Logos: it is the individual Christian's participation in the *Sermo* or conversation through which and as which God has chosen to be revealed.<sup>57</sup> The sapiential science of theology, as Erasmus conceives it, is thus an *art of imitation*.<sup>58</sup> If the eloquent, participatory *imitation of the Christ-Logos* is the ultimate aim of theology it is also the ultimate act of poesis.

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. Gary Remer's discussion of Erasmus's *Sermo* as the rhetorical genre of "conversation," and more particularly that of "dialogue" in *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration* (26-41).

<sup>58</sup> In the *Defence of Poesy*, Sidney provides the following Aristotelian definition as an accepted premise from which to begin his discussion of poetry: "Poesy therefore is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word mimesis, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth—to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture—with this end, to teach and delight" (*Defence* 86).

## Poetic Exegesis

In his *Ecclesiastes*, Erasmus's formulation of the "*officia* of the [eloquent] preacher are *docere*, *delectare*, and *flectere*," which is to say, to teach, to delight, and to move to action (Hoffmann 47).<sup>59</sup> This formulation echoes the well-known Ciceronian definition of the eloquent orator as adapted in Augustine's *On Christian Teaching*: "It has been said by a man of eloquence [i.e. Cicero], and quite rightly, that the eloquent should speak in such a way as to instruct, delight, and move their listeners. ... A hearer must be delighted so that he can be gripped and made to listen, and moved so that he can be impelled to action" (117-18). Erasmus's definition of the preacher was thus consistent with a rhetorical tradition of eloquent teaching that had already been assimilated to Christianity.<sup>60</sup> The most significant distinction between the Ciceronian-Augustinian model of the eloquent teacher/preacher and that of Erasmus was the nature of the latter's pulpit. The advent of printing allowed Erasmus to preach before an audience of unprecedented scope from behind a pulpit of letters.<sup>61</sup>

Central to Erasmus's particular vision of Christian teaching is the grammatical genre of *enarratio*. The primary association of *enarratio*—which was the classical Latin term for interpretation—was not with scriptural exegesis, but with the interpretation of the poets (*enarratio poetarum*).<sup>62</sup> For his reconfiguring of the theological project in the terms of literary

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<sup>59</sup> The full title is *Ecclesiastes sive de ratione concionandi* translated as *The Evangelical Preacher* in Vol. 67 of the *Complete Works of Erasmus*.

<sup>60</sup> As Hoffman notes, Erasmus exalts eloquent Christian teaching to such height that "if used to persuade, exhort, console, counsel, and admonish, teaching constitutes an ecclesiastical office higher than the administration of the sacraments, prayer, adjudication, and ordination" (224).

<sup>61</sup> Vessey characterizes Erasmus's *Paraphrases* as "the work of a man who was making the printing press his pulpit and who would always rely on others to give physical voice to the gospel message as he phrased it" (*Holy Scripture Speaks* 3).

<sup>62</sup> For further discussion of the relation between *enarratio*—"[i]n classical usage... a grammatical genre applied principally to poetic texts"—and the exegetical practice of Jerome, see Mark Vessey, "The Tongue and the Book" in *Holy Scripture Speaks*.

interpretation, Erasmus could cite the authoritative examples of Jerome as well as Augustine. Indeed, Erasmus explicitly enlisted Augustine as precedent through an editorial sleight of hand. As Mark Vessey notes in “The Tongue and the Book: Erasmus’ *Paraphrases on the New Testament* and the Arts of Scripture,” “[t]he generic title under which we now read the series of Augustine’s (partly) preached discourses on a poetical text of Scripture, the ‘*Enarrationes*’ in *Psalmos*, was assigned to it by Erasmus, himself the author of a similarly titled but unpreached series” (51 n 9).<sup>63</sup>

In the *Ratio*, Erasmus writes that it is the particular aim of theologians to wisely interpret divine letters/literature (“*sapienter enarrare divinas litteras*”).<sup>64</sup> The phrase is simple, yet heavily laden with connotative significance. In its didactic and pastoral expression, this “sapientially” wise interpretation of Scripture as “divine letters”—an interpretative expression enabled by the tasting, ingesting, and ruminating of Scripture—took the form of *enarratio*. A story-teller’s retelling of Scripture, Erasmus’s *enarratio* in his *Paraphrases* involved the sustaining of a mediating fiction in which the author merges his voice with that of the biblical narrator.<sup>65</sup> As Mark Vessey notes:

In order to make the apostolic teaching dramatically present and ‘applaudible’ to an otherwise unreceptive audience, Erasmus would ‘play the fool for Christ’ as Paul had done. That meant acting the Apostle, speaking as if with his voice, so that nothing and nobody—no (other) book or expositor—should seem to come between the reader and the Word of God. (“Tongue” 34)

As Erasmus conceived it, to be truly effective, the preacher’s *enarratio* ought to involve the participatory re-production of the copious discourse of Scripture in a new and coherent form.

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<sup>63</sup> For the “unpreached series” of Erasmus, see the *Collected Works of Erasmus*, Vols. 63-65.

<sup>64</sup> Erasmus’s *Ratio* appears in Vol. 5. in *Omnia Opera Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*.

<sup>65</sup> That the *Paraphrases* may be identified as central to Erasmus’s own theological project is borne out by his declaration “Here I am in my own field” (as cited in Vessey, *Lingua Christi* 74).

This new utterance would lend the power of a living, personal understanding to the essence of the original.

Vessey relates Erasmus's fictional narrative voice in the *Paraphrases* to that of Folly in *The Praise of Folly* (the *Moria*) as well as to the patristic precedent of Jerome's ventriloquism of "female paraphrasts... a select cast of essentially silent women... who are heard only when he, Jerome, throws their voices in his letters and prefaces, yet who also bespeak his works as a biblical writer" ("Tongue" 33). In the preface to his edition of the letters of Jerome,<sup>66</sup> Erasmus stressed the close link between Jerome's oeuvre and the classical poetic tradition: "There is no class of author anywhere and no kind of literature which he does not use whenever he likes... Like a bee that flies from flower to flower, he collected the best of everything to make the honey stored in his works" (CWE 3 ep.396 261:215-220). Erasmus stresses the importance of both eclectic learning and copious invention time and again in his preface to Jerome's letters. The preface's re-iterative focus upon Jerome's impeccable syntheses of style and substance is tantamount to an authorizing of all poetic strategies—so long as their orchestrator is fit for the task of fitting them to Scripture. Indeed, as Vessey notes, "playing on Horace's prescriptions for *an ars poetica* [poetic art]," Jerome had described his "exegetical discipline" as an "*ars scripturarum* [scriptural art]" ("Tongue" 30). In other words, the rules of Erasmus's Hieronymizing biblical paraphrase were, in their inception, as much those of a "scriptural rhetoric" as they were of a "scriptural poetics" ("Tongue" 32).

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<sup>66</sup> This preface is a dedicatory letter to William Warham, Archbishop of Canterbury, which introduces Erasmus's contribution to Froben's complete edition of the works of Jerome.

Of all the Fathers it was Jerome in particular who served as Erasmus's primary model of Christian eloquence. Lisa Jardine sees Erasmus's own characterization of Jerome as emblematic of the syncretistic ideal of Christian Humanism as a whole:

Erasmus's 'Jerome' [the edition of Jerome's correspondence] is exemplary precisely because it proves impossible to separate secular from sacred letters in his oeuvre. Nor, I suggest, is this choice of Jerome as model Father of the Church other than an extremely careful one. The printed remains which surround the four volumes of Erasmus's *Letters* of Jerome amount to a programme for installing Jerome as a vivid and vital figure—scholar-saint/saint-scholar—at the centre of the canvas depicting a spiritual exegesis in which pagan and sacred are fused in the act of textual attention. (*Erasmus Man of Letters* 63)

The *Antibarbari*, *Colloquia*, *Epicureus*, *Moria*, and *Paraphrases* all attest to Erasmus's predilection for both an eclectically assimilative and fictionalizing narrative style in support of the threefold aims of eloquent instruction. According to Boyle, it was in fiction—whose primary association was with secular letters—that Erasmus “excelled as pedagogue and mystagogue. Fiction allows him... to honey the lesson with pleasure, in adherence with his humanist conviction about persuasion by delight” (*Christening* 72). Erasmus stopped short of offering counsel for the right use of poetry independent of ecclesiastical office. Nonetheless, the general example of his grammarian's exegetical method and the particular example of his explicitly poetic works like the *Moria*, together with his trumpeting of Jerome as the ultimate embodiment of Christian learning and eclectic eloquence, established a powerfully influential precedent for adapting the poet's art to theological teaching.

### **Right Use of Poetry**

Looking back from the early decades of the sixteenth century to Jerome, the sainted scholar and paragon of Christian eloquence, Erasmus pressed for the inauguration of a new type of poetic

theologian. Book-ending the same century, Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* provided an English Renaissance and Reformation poetics with features bearing significant resemblance to those of Erasmus's rhetorical theology. The distinctly theological aspects of Sidney's poetics were further exemplified by the Sidneys' psalter. The following section explores correspondences between the "poetic art" of Erasmian rhetorical theology and the "scriptural art" of Sidneian poetics—correspondences that are consistent with the further development of prophetic dimensions and claims in the works of Edmund Spenser and John Milton.<sup>67</sup>

Looking back from the latter half of the sixteenth century to David, the prophetic psalmist and imitator of "the inconceivable excellencies of God," Sidney exhorted his fellow English poets to heavenly employment in the inauguration of a new era of liturgical and celebratory Christian poetry. The terms in which Erasmus's new type of poetic theologian and Sidney's new type of theological poet were invoked differed considerably more than the offices of their anticipated employment. In *The Defence of Poesy*, Sidney trumpets the poet as monarch of all sciences. He claims this distinction for the poet in view of the latter's unsurpassed ability, in imitation, "to delight and teach" (95) and thereby both "to move men to take that goodness in hand which without delight they would fly as from a stranger, and ... to make them know that goodness whereunto they are moved" (87). The seductive didactic poetics theorized in Sidney's *Defence* are anticipated by the fictionalizing *enarratio* of Erasmus's Hieronymian rhetorical theology. Similarly, the poet whom Sidney describes as monarch of all sciences carries forward the offices and eloquence of the Erasmian preacher.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> On Erasmus's awareness of the links between hieronymizing exegesis and Horatian poetic art see Mark Vessey, "The Tongue and the Book: Erasmus' *Paraphrases on the New Testament* and the Arts of Scripture," p. 30.

<sup>68</sup> To iterate, Erasmus's employment of fiction was not limited to works like the *Moria* and *Antibarbari* but was also integral to the intra-scriptural *Paraphrases*.

Sidney's poet, like Erasmus's preacher, is one who "doth not only show the way, but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way, as will entice any man to enter into it" (*Defence* 95:9-11). This phrase, of course, need not indicate a specifically Erasmian tribute. Sidney is exalting the poet in terms of the rhetorical tradition of eloquent teaching. Because both Erasmus's preacher and Sidney's poet are fashioned after a Ciceronian and Augustinian ideal of eloquent instruction,<sup>69</sup> however, they are functionally consistent (and to some extent interchangeable) even in the total absence of direct lineal descent.

Two things in particular lent Sidney a ready platform for championing the cultivation of a Christian English eloquence and right Christian use of poetry.<sup>70</sup> First, the Protestant Reformation had produced a demand for vernacular translations of the Bible. Most particularly, there was a demand for translations of the psalms consistent with the interpretative approaches of Christian Humanist rhetorical theology and with its vision of an essentially eloquent and copiously open-ended Logos.<sup>71</sup> Second, the Christian Humanist emphasis upon the role of affective language and poetic strategies in Scripture had made rhetorical and grammatical study (the Horatian *ars poetica* initially appropriated by Jerome) the *sine qua non* of scriptural interpretation. This

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<sup>69</sup> Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* seems to apply to poetry the general Augustinian (and ultimately Pauline) ethos of the right use of the world. In the *De Doctrina Christiana* (*Christian Teaching*) Augustine differentiates "use" and "enjoyment": "To enjoy something is to hold fast to it in love for its own sake. To use something is to apply whatever it may be to the purpose of obtaining what you love" (*Christian Teaching* 9). For Augustine, the right use of the things of the world is to use them to obtain the things of heaven.

<sup>70</sup> In spite of the use to which he is often put in apologies for poetry, Augustine himself was not one of poetry's apologists. On the contrary, he was troubled by his youthful enjoyment of the rhetorical arts in and of themselves, and remained mistrustful even while recognizing eloquence as a natural complement of scriptural truth.

<sup>71</sup> The idea that the affective and conversational presentation of Scripture establishes the conversational nature of Christ (*Logos* as *Sermo*) is one of the characteristic commonplaces of Erasmian Christian Humanism. Christian Humanist commonplaces gradually acquired the status of received ideas and thereby faded into the woodwork of the general cultural context. Cf. Gary Remer's discussion of dialogue (as a subset of *sermo* or conversation) as particularly appropriate for Erasmus's approach to the indefinite philosophical (moral) questions proper to scriptural understanding in *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration* pp.13-41.

privileging of the role of “poetic art” within exegesis had also, to some extent, normalized the poetic treatment of scriptural texts and topics.<sup>72</sup>

Over the course of the Middle Ages, the Psalms had acquired a central importance for Christian education. As Hannibal Hamlin notes,

Traditionally the Psalms had been regarded as a microcosm of the whole Bible.... The use of the Psalms in Latin as a first reader for children had been established by the eighth century. Later in the Middle Ages the Primer, in which texts of psalms predominated, came to serve a dual function as a devotional manual and as a school text. (30-31)

With the rise of Christian Humanism and its attention to the rhetorical *modi agendi* of scriptural texts, the importance of the Psalms was only magnified.<sup>73</sup> Not only did “[t]he Book of Psalms retain... its traditional function in sixteenth-century curricula,” but subsequent to the Reformation “no biblical book was translated more often or more widely” (Hamlin 138, 1).<sup>74</sup> In Sidney’s day, the Psalms were not only seen to represent the paramount ethical and doctrinal teachings of Scripture (as a “microcosm of the whole Bible”) but were also imagined to comprise a Hebrew model of the divine poetic eloquence by which scriptural truth was most effectively communicated.

In the *Defence*, Sidney complains that his fellow English poets miss “the right use of the material point of poesy” and thus fail to cultivate

that lyrical kind of songs and sonnets: which, Lord, if He gave us [English poets] so good minds, how well [poetry] might be employed, and with how heavenly fruit, both private and public, in singing the praises of the immortal beauty, the

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<sup>72</sup> To the extent that exegesis discovers a poetic treatment of topics within Scripture, the further poetic treatment of scriptural topics comes more and more to resemble simple imitation and less and less to risk the charge of impertinence.

<sup>73</sup> As mentioned above, a number of late medieval Scholastics—among whom, Giles of Rome, Alexander of Hales, and St. Bonaventure—had also stressed both the affective nature of the scriptural message and the importance of poetic *modi agendi* in the Bible.

<sup>74</sup> According to Rivkah Zim, “[m]ore than seventy different, new versions in English were printed during the seventy year period from the publication of [George] Joye’s psalter [in 1530] until the end of the century” (*English Metrical Psalms* 2).

immortal goodness of that God who giveth us hands to write, and wits to conceive; of which we might well want words, but never matter; of which we could turn our eyes to nothing, but we should ever have new budding occasions. (113)

Sidney represents such epideictic poetry (poetry of praise) as ideally realized by the prophetic authors of the five “poetic” books of the Old Testament.<sup>75</sup> While abundantly represented in Scripture (and above all in the Psalms), Sidney laments that such poetry of divine praise is altogether remote from contemporary English practice.

Sidney’s complaint regarding English poets’ poor employment of heavenly gifts bears considerable resemblance, at its hortatory core, to Erasmus’s interpretative paraphrase of the parable of the talents in *The Antibarbarians*:

The prodigal son, who had spent all his substance on harlots, pimps, and cookshops, [the Lord] joyfully welcomed back; but the servant who returned to him even an undiminished talent was bitterly reproached. God, our parent, imparted to us, as seeds of fine skills, intellect, understanding, memory, and other gifts of the mind, which are talents put out to usury, and if we double them by practice and study, our Lord on his return will praise us as industrious servants and give them to us for our inheritance. (84)

For Erasmus, the right use of the “seeds of fine skills” that God has imparted to those who wish to know Him lies in making the heart a “library of Christ” from which to bring forth, like “the provident householder,” living utterances that “penetrate... vividly into the souls of... listeners” (*Ratio* 341). For Sidney, the “right use of the material point of poesy” is in the production of imitations that “strike, pierce, [and] possess the sight of the soul,” infusing it with the grace of a transformative power beyond that of the fallen will (*Defence* 90).

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<sup>75</sup> The “*quinque libri poetici*,” as they were called in the Tremellius Junius Bible, are Psalms, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and Job.

The violence of Sidney's language in describing the right use of poetry at this point in the *Defence* is consistent with the governing structural parallel he draws, throughout the treatise, between the art of poetry and the martial art of equestrianism. At the same time, however, it may also be indicative of the pervasive influence of Calvinist perspectives in late sixteenth century England. Sidney's images of a material point that strikes, pierces, and possesses, in contrast with Erasmus's images of library, householder and penetrative utterance, are suggestive of the emphasis within Calvinist rhetoric upon the moral incapacity of the fallen human condition. Sidney imagines that the right poet's readers must be overwhelmed. The description of the poet's special ability to "strike, pierce, [and] possess," is commensurate with the corrupt state of readers' "degenerate souls, made worse by their clayey lodgings" (*Defence* 88). In terms of the Calvinist perspective on fallen humanity that the *Defence* appears to incorporate, it is not of their own corrupted volition that "degenerate souls" will bear the "heavenly fruit," of either virtue or divine praise (113). The sight of their souls must be struck, pierced, and possessed, because without such aggressive intervention nothing good may come of human nature.

If the degenerate picture the *Defence* paints of the base-line state of the soul is more or less aligned with then-contemporary English Calvinism, the same cannot be said for Sidney's picture of the right poet who appears to be exempted from the barrenness of the human will. Indeed, after the manner of the Heavenly Maker, "with the force of a divine breath he bringeth things forth far surpassing [Nature's] doing" (*Defense* 86). Kimberley Coles claims that "Protestant theology simply does not admit the 'divine breath' that is the source of Sidney's model of inspiration" (85). The rhetorical theology of Erasmus, on the other hand, had indeed insisted upon an assimilative and participatory process whereby the sapiential interpretation of

Scripture led (through tasting, ingesting, and rumination) to the transformation of the interpreter. While Erasmus employs digestive metaphors and Sidney the metaphor of inspiration via divine breath, the processes that distinguish both Erasmian preacher and Sidneian poet from the fallen and spiritually incapacitated individual are functionally analogous.

The likeness in which both Sidney's right poet and his Davidic poet are formed is that of the Creator. Thus, speaking of the true poet as maker, Sidney exhorts his reader to "give right honor to the Heavenly Maker of that maker, who, having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature" (*Defence* 86). Similarly, as Dominic Baker-Smith writes, "in his *Ecclesiastes* Erasmus suggestively refers to Christ, the Word, as *enarrator* of the mind of God, so that the accommodation of the divine and the human in the second Person of the Trinity is a model for the work of exegesis" (*Expositions of the Psalms* "Introduction" xvii-xviii in *CWE* 63).<sup>76</sup> Sidney's true poet, in his transformative imitation, participates in the power by which God wills Creation. Erasmus's true theologian, in his transformative imitation, participates in the utterance through which and as which the Logos wills to be known.

The poets' ability to affect and alter their readers' will, as Sidney well knew, made poetic language especially threatening. *The Schoole of Abuse*, Stephen Gosson's polemical anti-poetic tract dedicated to Philip Sidney, characterized the offerings of poets as enchanting but ultimately malignant concoctions: "where honie and gall are mixt, it will be hard to sever the one from the other. ... These are the cuppes of Circe, that turne reasonable creatures into brute beastes" (10). A similar sentiment is expressed by Calvin, in his "Letter to the Reader" prefatory to the Geneva

Psalter, in relation to the dangerous potency of song: “venom and corruption are distilled to the depth of the heart by the melody” (96). By exhorting his fellow English poets to “sing... the praises of the immortal beauty, the immortal goodness of... God,” however, Sidney recalls Calvin’s further characterization of the particularity of the Psalms as “spurs to incite us to pray and praise God” (Letter 96).<sup>77</sup> In other words, Sidney is encouraging English poets to compose devotional poetry that does not aim at a merely imitative mimesis but rather at an affective participation that will distill heavenly things “to the depth of the heart.”

Sidney’s Davidic poet is one who creates in imitation of the divine maker. Yet Christ is both pre-existent divine maker and incarnated human interpreter. As an imitator of the divine maker Sidney’s Davidic poet is one for whom heavenly things have been revealed and revelation is co-extensive with illuminated interpretation. For Sidney’s divine maker as for Erasmus’s divinely instructed preacher, this revelatory process is not primarily the intellectual experience of having learned, or deciphered, or abstracted some piece of repeatable doctrine—though intellectual application is still required. The illuminative revelation with which Sidney, like Erasmus, is primarily concerned is the affective experience of being transformed by what is heard, or read, in such a way that one becomes capable of further transformative utterance. Addressing himself to the Christian reader who wishes to participate in the prophetic communication of holy Scripture (having first conceded that prophecy “is a gift of the Eternal Spirit”), Erasmus writes: “You should prepare your heart for this gift so that you may also be worthy to be called by the prophetic word *theodidaktos* [one taught by God]. Simple and dovelike let the eye of faith be that perceives nothing but the things of heaven” (*Ratio* 76). The

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<sup>77</sup> Calvin’s *Letter to the Reader* appears in Elsie Anne McKee’s, *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 91–97. See also Zim’s discussion of the same passage in *English Metrical Psalms* p.151.

Erasmian idea of scriptural participation involves a necessary conjunction of, on the one hand, grammatical erudition and moral, affective purification in the reader, and, on the other hand, divine, generative power in the utterance of the original biblical *auctor*. The Sidneian poet's prophetic ability to possess the reader's sight in figuring forth the divine majesty involves a necessary conjunction of, on the one hand, the diligent cultivation of poetic gifts and moral, affective purification,<sup>78</sup> and on the other hand, his assimilative contemplation of that "unspeakable and everlasting beauty, [which is] to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith" (*Defence* 84).

As preparation for the prophetic office of the *theodidaktos*, Erasmus counsels the participatory assimilation of Scripture such that the heart becomes a library of Christ capable of providential dispensation. The sacred texts of Scripture are invested with and transform their readers through an affective power. The proper reception and assimilation of this power (in Erasmus's paradigm of the assimilative heart as library of Christ), requires the sapiential approach of tasting, ingesting and ruminating on Scripture. The Sidneian Davidic poet is involved in a similar process of discovery. Much like Erasmus's provident scriptural interpreter, Sidney's Davidic poet has been struck and pierced (has tasted, ingested and ruminated), and been thereby possessed (transformed) by the Logos. And in being so possessed or transformed the

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<sup>78</sup> Sidney's claim that the poet possesses the "force of a divine breath" suggests that the poet is in some way intrinsically special and/or blessed. Sidney also encourages English poets, whom he holds of no account, to adopt a discipline of constant witnessing in singing the praises of God in celebration of "ever... new budding occasions" (*Defence* 86, 113). This suggestion and the low estimation in which he holds contemporary English poets suggests that Sidney's poet is only as good as the object of his participatory imitation.

Davidic poet like the provident interpreter becomes capable of generative mimetic participation in the “unspeakable and everlasting beauty” of God’s utterance.<sup>79</sup>

Erasmus championed the perception of classical letters and learning as the providential dispensation of Christ prior to the incarnation. This meant that it was possible for the prophetic, participation of the Christian *theodidaktos* to involve the sapiential assimilation of pagan literature. The *theodidaktos* possessed the power to generate new utterances that participated in and constituted the copious discourse of the Logos. Similarly, the devotional program that Sidney proposed to English poets in the *Defence* was not restricted to scriptural translation. Although the lyric mode of praise and prayer does indeed correspond to his own psalm-translations, Sidney suggests a far wider interpretative and generative horizon when he refers both to the genres of “songs and sonnets” and the never ending “budding of occasions” for the celebration of God’s “immortal beauty” and “immortal goodness.”

Sidney proposes the poetry of divine praise as a neo-Augustinian “right use” of the “ever... new budding [of] occasions” provided by the phenomenal world upon which the poet’s eyes cannot help but turn.<sup>80</sup> He thereby alludes to the Pauline requirement that God’s creatures glorify their Creator in his Creation, “For the inuisible things of him, that is, his eternal power and Godhead, are seene by the creation of the worlde” (Romans 1:20, GNV). By the same token, he suggests the identification of the Sidneian poet’s role with this same Pauline office of witnessing and glorification. The lesson that Augustine had derived from Romans 1:20 is that it is not lawful for the Christian to enjoy the things of the world for themselves, but only for their

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<sup>79</sup> The Sidneian poet is made by the “Heavenly Maker... to His own likeness” not only as “man” but as “maker.” Within this likeness, a parallelism is implied between the mode (striking and piercing) and effect (possessing the sight of the soul) of the human and the heavenly makers’ utterance.

<sup>80</sup> The revelatory nature of the created phenomenal world to which Paul draws his hearers’ attention at Romans 1:20 makes hymnic song both a perpetual possibility and a perpetually renewed responsibility.

participation in God. In perfect accord with this precept—and not unlike Jerome’s ability, abundantly praised by Erasmus, to make use of the whole scope of his learning in the service of Scripture—Sidney’s poetic program involves the poet’s exemplary conversion of the things of the world into occasions for the celebration of God’s immortal beauty and goodness.

Being both witness to and participant in God’s revelation, the Sidneian poet assumes responsibility for its further representation. This poet, who merits being called *theodidaktos* in accordance with Erasmus’s definition, produces vivid and vivifying images for a more dimly sighted audience—images that are “practically alive,” as Erasmus writes, with the power, as Sidney writes, to “strike, pierce [and] possess the sight of the soul.” In the prophetic model of the *Ratio*, and as exemplified in the composition of the *Paraphrases*, Erasmus’s divinely instructed interpreter engages in the imaginative invention of a mediating and living text.

The emphases of Erasmus and Sidney are distinguishable. David the psalmist appeals to Erasmus as a poet who interprets and generates the copious and participatory discourse of God. He appeals to Sidney as a poet whose divine gifts both authorize and demand a right use of poetry. This difference in emphasis notwithstanding, Erasmus’s poetically inclined theologian (as per the *Ratio*) and Sidney’s theologically inclined poet (as per the *Defence*) share a common participatory labour which is the assimilative interpretation and celebratory utterance of the copious discourse of God.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> This is an extension of Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle’s conclusion regarding Erasmus’s refusal in the *Moria* and *Antibarbari* to “allow a division of labour” between the theologian and the poet (*Christening* 30).

## The Sidney Psalter

The psalm translations of the Sidney Psalter are the proving ground for the divine participatory poetics laid out in the *Defence of Poesy*. Consistent with the deep-searching personal meditation that psalm-reading ideally entailed for Reformation Protestants, “the ambiguous ‘I’ of the Psalms leaves a space for the reader [and, by the same token, for the poetic translator] to insert a personal voice” (Hannay, Kinnamon and Brennan 8).<sup>82</sup> In addition to this participatory mechanism built into the genre, the mysterious poetic status<sup>83</sup> of the psalms made it possible to openly foreground the poetic talents of the translator and to engage in nearly any manner of poetic variation without thereby forfeiting the poem’s intra-scriptural status.<sup>84</sup> As Hamlin writes:

English translations of the Psalms held a different status than English translations of either classical literature or vernacular works in other European languages... They were holy Scripture and, as such, had a unique function being *used* by English Christians every day, or at least every week, of their lives ... Because of the central place of the Psalms in English daily life, and their vital functions within the body of English culture, they were thus, in a powerful if peculiar sense, *English* works. (*Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature* 6)

The Sidney Psalter—illuminated by the Sidneian poetics outlined in the *Defence*—signals a major moment of transition within English Reformation and Renaissance culture. The Sidney

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<sup>82</sup> Hannay et al. draw attention to Anne Lake Prescott’s observation (in “King David as a ‘Right Poet’: Sidney and the Psalmist”) that within the Psalms “David’s infolded voices express Christ and ourselves as well as his own circumstance” (*ELR* 19 134 qtd. in *The Collected Works of Mary Sidney Herbert Countess of Pembroke* 8). In other words, “participation” is essential to the basic *modus operandi* of the psalms as a poetic genre.

<sup>83</sup> Mysterious to the extent that the rules of Hebrew prosody had not yet been apprehended by English scholars and instead of any real and measured insight there was a rather long and wild tradition of speculation as to their nature.

<sup>84</sup> In this connection, Hamlin cites two often-repeated commonplaces: Richard Hooker’s question, “What is there for man to know that the Psalmes are not able to teach?” and John Calvin’s definition of the psalms as an “Anatomy of all the partes of the Soule” (qtd. In *Psalm Culture in Early Modern English Literature* 2). Both of these excerpts belong to a long tradition that appears to go back at least as far as the famous letter from Athanasius to Marcellinus in which the psalms are discussed. For an interesting discussion of the tradition in relation to Sidney, with excerpts from an English version of Athanasius’s letter circulating in Sidney’s day, see Anne Lake Prescott’s “King David as a ‘Right Poet’: Philip Sidney and the Psalmist.” Discussion of Athanasius’s letter appears at pp. 136-9.

psalms lie midway between the work of earlier Christian Humanist rhetorical theologians and that of later Christian Humanist prophetic poets. In the moment before the Sidney Psalter one is witness to Erasmus's production of unequivocally intra-scriptural works enjoying varying degrees of royal/ecclesial sanction. In the moment after the Sidney Psalter one is witness to the ambitious prophetic poetics of equivocally intra-scriptural works claiming for themselves varying degrees of extra-ecclesial prophetic status.<sup>85</sup>

The Sidney Psalter represented the high-water mark for literary psalm-translation in the English Renaissance. On its poetic importance within English Renaissance culture, Hamlin writes:

In the *Arte of English Poesie*, George Puttenham discusses the "Arte" of what would now be called English accentual-syllabic verse in terms of five types of proportion: the number of lines in a stanza, the number of syllables in the line, the choice of rhymes, the spacing and patterning of rhymes, and the use of lines of different lengths to make visual shapes. The full potential of all of these proportions was explored by Philip and Mary Sidney, countess of Pembroke, in the Sidney Psalter, making it in essence a source-book for English poetic form" (*Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature* 118-9).

To a modern audience, the Sidney psalm translations can appear at times to be little more than pretexts for formal poetic experimentation. Their startling level of literary sophistication, however, does not appear to have invited dismissive critique as a trivializing of Scripture.<sup>86</sup>

Within the then-contemporary cultural context, the copiousness of the Sidneys' psalm-translations had traditional sanction in "[t]he widespread assumption, based on patristic writings,

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<sup>85</sup> As the subsequent parts of this thesis will show, both Edmund Spenser's *The Fowre Hymnes* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* contain abundant claims to prophetic status. The precise nature of these works' prophetic status, the contours and objectives of their biblicizing projects, and the character of the Christian *eloquentia* these works promote, however, are all radically different.

<sup>86</sup> The absence of such critique is also, no doubt, a consequence of Mary's initial confinement of the Psalter's readership "to her circle of acquaintance" (*Sidney Psalter* xvi). Such control, however, has limits beyond which it can no longer determine the nature of the work's general reception: "By the mid-seventeenth century... the Sidney *Psalms* had passed into wide manuscript circulation" (*Sidney Psalter* xvi).

that the Hebrew Psalter represented a cornucopia of verse forms, lyric genres and modes, and was perhaps even the source of classical prosody” (Hamlin 14).

Unlike *The Whole Booke of Psalmes* (the Sternhold and Hopkins Psalter), and other relatively simple metrical translations, the Sidney Psalter did not lend itself to liturgical use.<sup>87</sup> The formal sophistication of the Sidneys’ psalms precluded the further metrical arrangement required for them to be sung in public worship. Similarly, the extensive development of self-reflexive narratorial personae within many psalms by both Philip and Mary tended to militate against their adoption by readers for private devotional use.<sup>88</sup> To all intents and purposes, in other words, the Sidney Psalter was “an essentially literary work... a book of poems, rather than... a psalter... of liturgical or devotional purpose” (Hamlin 131). Even as “a book of poems,” and a “source book for English poetic form,” however, the Sidney Psalter did not forfeit its prophetic status as holy Scripture.

In the *Defence*, Philip styles himself one of the right poets, a divine maker, yet significantly below the fully prophetic category of Davidic poet in both ambition and expression. Mary, however, by completing and then circulating the Sidney Psalter in concert with her publication of Philip’s *Defence*, styles her brother a Davidic poet. As Mary’s dedication poem “To the Angel Spirit of the Most Excellent Sir Philip Sidney” that prefaces the Sidney Psalter makes clear, one of Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke’s major “works” is the

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<sup>87</sup> On the status of the Sternhold and Hopkins psalter “as the semi-official singing psalter of the Church” (Hamlin 30) in the latter half of the sixteenth century see Hamlin pp.24-50.

<sup>88</sup> As Hamlin writes, “Psalm 73 is a powerful instance of the creation of a persona, of a psychological state, through the development of a particular poetic voice” (123). The principal strategy by which the psalm is individualized, in Hamlin’s account, is the intensification and repetition of elements that contribute to a coherent representation of meditative, internalized and iterative consciousness. “The tone of Pembroke’s translation is unusually colloquial, deliberately aiming at the style of direct, informal speech... Her speaker interrupts and corrects herself, with phrases beginning with “nay,” “Most true,” and “it seems,” as she works the problem out in her mind” (125).

posthumous construction of her brother Philip as the exemplary English poet in the Davidic kind—that of the “kingly prophet” (Sidney-Pembroke *Psalter* 8:14). It is an artifice of the finished Sidney Psalter that Mary writes in the shadow of her brother’s greater muse:

To thee, pure sprite, to thee alone’s addressed  
This coupled work, by double interest thine:  
First raised by *thy blest hand*, and what is mine  
Inspired by thee, *thy secret power* impressed.  
So dared my Muse with thine itself combine,  
As mortal stuff with that which is *divine*. (8:1-6; my emphasis)

In other words, Pembroke confers upon Sidney the authority of a new English Protestant prophetic poetic station which, by the artificial terms of that same conferral—the exclusive particularity of his special blessing, secret power to inspire, and divine Muse—she herself is unable to claim.

Mary Sidney’s conferral of prophetic poetic authority upon her brother’s authorship was repeated and magnified by John Donne. In his poem, “Upon the Translation of the Psalms by Sir Philip Sidney, and the Countess of Pembroke, His Sister,” Donne refers to Philip and Mary as “this Moses and this Miriam” (l.46) and praises God for the gift of the Sidney Psalter:

...as thy blessed Spirit fell upon  
These Psalms’ first author in a cloven tongue  
—For ‘twas a double power by which he sung  
The highest matter in the noblest form—  
So thou hast cleft that Spirit, to perform  
That work again, and shed it here, upon  
Two, by their bloods, and by Thy Spirit one[.] (ll.8-14)

Donne accords the English psalms of the Sidney Psalter the status of divine co-authorship. They are not the Davidic but the “Sidneian Psalms” (l.50), the product of a second divine dispensation from the same Spirit that inspired the original Hebrew psalms.

Mary's construction of her brother Philip Sidney as a non-clerical yet prophetic English Protestant poetic type owes much to humanist hermeneutics, even while pushing beyond what Erasmus had envisaged for the eloquent Christian preacher in such pedagogical works as the *Ratio* (1518). Philip's *Defence* and Mary's circulation of the *Psalter* in coordination with her publication of the *Defence* stressed the continuity of classical and biblical poetic language in the construction of an English poet capable of divine expression. The degree of poetic accomplishment, and the sheer scale of formal innovation in the Sidney Psalter, heralds the end of one phase of an evolutionary process and the beginning of another within English Reformation and Renaissance culture. On the one hand, that such copious ornament, in the tradition of classical eloquentia, was considered to be appropriate to the psalms, and that Mary Sidney considered the psalter a fit monument to the memory of her departed brother, speaks to a general acceptance of classicizing eloquence as the natural complement to scriptural revelation.<sup>89</sup> The fact of this general acceptance demonstrates the accomplishment of Erasmus and other Christian Humanists' project to naturalize *eloquentia* within the culture of Christ. On the other hand, that such an idiosyncratically brilliant and deeply personal work of poetry was considered acceptably exemplary of intra-scriptural translation speaks to the development of new horizons of poetic expression encroaching upon the traditional domains of theology. The Sidney Psalter, in other words, announces new possibilities for poetic expression in and about the hallowed precincts of Scripture.

### **Truly Feigned Inspiration**

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<sup>89</sup> In the prefatory poem, "To the Angel Spirit of the Most Excellent Sir Philip Sidney," Mary refers to her departed brother's "rare works" as being "Immortal monuments of thy fair fame" (*The Sidney Psalter* 8:68,71).

Biblical translation was an essential intra-scriptural point of departure, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for English poets who wished to soar “above the Aonian Mount” of classicizing and secular poetic ambition.<sup>90</sup> The self-authorizing prophetic poetics of Edmund Spenser and John Milton share a remarkable host of features with the assimilative hermeneutics and scriptural poetics of Erasmian rhetorical theology. In terms of their intra-scriptural participatory strategies, Spenser and Milton’s prophetic poetics are also anticipated by the enormously popular and pan-confessional practice of psalm-translation culminating in the Sidney Psalter.<sup>91</sup>

With respect to the founding of an English Protestant office of prophetic poetry, Philip Sidney was almost as innocent of intent as Erasmus. The same cannot be said, however, of Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke. As Margaret Hannay has shown, the Sidneian legacy is largely owing to the psalm-translations and posthumous editorial efforts of Philip’s sister Mary Sidney which effectively cast Philip in a prophetic light. Nevertheless, the combined precedent of Philip Sidney’s *Defence* and the Sidney Psalter opened the way for a prophetic poetics in which the English Protestant mind might find proper employment “singing the praises of the immortal beauty, the immortal goodness of that God who giveth us hands to write and wits to conceive” (*Defence* 113.21-2). Philip Sidney’s posthumous example marks a transitional moment. In the wake of Sidney’s example, via the work of biblical translation and the interpretative strategies of rhetorical theology, theologically ambitious poets like Spenser and

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<sup>90</sup> The famous phrase is from the opening proem of *Paradise Lost*, by John Milton (Bk I. 14).

<sup>91</sup> Hamlin, Brennan, Hannay and Kinnamon write, “the existence of biblical poetry... provided authoritative justification for writing verse at a time when that was seen by many as both idle and morally suspect: ... if David could write poems, then so might others (at least if they struck to the proper subject matter... In fact, the metrical Psalm rivalled the Petrarchan love poem as the popular lyric mode for English poets” (*The Sidney Psalter: The Psalms of Sir Philip and Mary Sidney* “Introduction” xii).

Milton appropriate the eloquent preacher's authority and claim for their own secular or extra-ecclesial works the power to effect a prophetic renewal of Scripture.

There is something new and challenging at work in the conceptions of prophetic poetic utterance that undergird Spenser's figure of Sapience and Milton's figure of Wisdom and Urania. Erasmus's understanding of assimilative participation in the eloquent Logos is particularly conducive to explaining how these poets might have imagined themselves authorized to introduce poetic innovations *within* the general framework of scriptural narrative. Erasmus's understanding of the transformative function of Scripture and the affective faculty for which its message is intended allow for what might be paradoxically called an ordinary power and lay office of prophetic utterance. The power is an ability and the office a calling to actively participate in the communication of the Logos as the providentially enabled consequence of diligent, learned, and devoutly practiced sapiential interpretation.<sup>92</sup>

Previous studies of the prophetic dimensions and claims within the work of early-modern English poets have tended towards a polarization of the issue of prophetic utterance. Thus, John M. Steadman writes, "critics have tended to accept literally the Renaissance poet's claim to divine inspiration and to underestimate the extent to which this is both a conscious literary fiction and a traditional poetic convention" (*Moral Fiction* 4). Prior studies have tended to stress *either* the objectively referential significance of prophetic language as representing "actual"

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<sup>92</sup> This type of reading and the reader who might effect it were, while newly possible, still inevitably rare. As Mark Vessey notes: "For a scholar of the kind Erasmus had made himself, 'reading' and 'hearing' the Word of God faithfully in sixteenth-century Europe presupposed the review of an entire tradition of biblical transcription and commentary" ("Introduction" to *Holy Scripture Speaks: The Production and Reception of Erasmus' Paraphrases on the New Testament*, 4).

religious experience<sup>93</sup> or the literary significance of prophetic language as representing genre-specific formulae, traditional topics, and stylistic conventions.<sup>94</sup>

The distinction between actual religious experience and the conventional representation of religious experience depends in large part upon the underlying assumption that when the poet's prophetic experience—the vision of Spenser's Sapience and the nightly visitation of Milton's Spirit are prime examples—happens in the “real world” it happens outside of the text and is an experience altogether distinct from the interpretative and assimilative activity of reading. This work seeks to make an original contribution to the critical discussion of Spenser and Milton's prophetic works and prophetic claims by demonstrating how, in the wake of Christian humanist theology, “actual,” visionary religious experience may be conceived as coextensive with texts and reading practices. To the extent that the prophetic experience in these early-modern texts is bound up with culturally specific Christian Humanist reading practices, its representation not only coexists with but quite naturally employs conventionally stylized and even traditionally formulaic aspects of then-contemporary, classicizing, Humanist composition practices.<sup>95</sup> Of particular significance in this respect is the fact that, within the rhetorical theology of Erasmus, prophetic experience—even the apprehension of divine presence—happens in the actual world

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<sup>93</sup> In the introduction to his *Moral Fiction in Milton and Spenser*, Steadman provides an able overview of the “tension [within modern criticism] between the Renaissance poet's conscious artistry and his claim to divine inspiration” (6). As Steadman notes, the final section of Mary Ann Radzinowicz's *Towards “Samson Agonistes”: The Growth of Milton's Mind*, also provides a helpful summary of critics' interpretations/identifications of Milton's divine sources of inspiration. William J. Grace, William B. Hunter, Maurice Kelley, William Kerrigan, Joseph Anthony Wittreich Jr., and Elizabeth Biemann are a handful of the more notable critics who incline towards lending Spenser and/or Milton's prophetic claims something more than that signified by the decorum of poetic convention alone.

<sup>94</sup> Thus Steadman: “Milton is skillfully recasting himself in the highly traditional image of the bard as seer. There is, I believe, no conclusive evidence... [that] he literally regarded himself as prophetic and visionary” (*Moral Fiction* 6).

<sup>95</sup> Elizabeth Biemann's *Plato Baptized: Towards the Interpretation of Spenser's Mimetic Fictions*, John Guillory's *Poetic Authority: Spenser, Milton, and Literary History*, and Barbara Kiefer Lewalski's “*Paradise Lost*” and the *Rhetoric of Literary Forms* offer interpretations of the integral importance of both belief and artistry within early-modern authorship.

while remaining *within* the text. Still further, within the Erasmian-influenced humanist Reformation culture of Spenser and Milton, as within the earlier medieval tradition of meditative reading, a fundamental and reciprocal permeability characterizes the relationship between reader and text, poet and poem, inspiration and utterance. Considering the prophetic poetics of early-modern English poets in terms of the logocentric divinity, grammatical hermeneutics, and assimilative participation of Erasmus's theology opens up some important new interpretative possibilities for understanding many of these poets' more bafflingly exalted prophetic claims. Most significantly for the present thesis, by adopting an Erasmian lens, it becomes possible to explain the enigmatically personified divine figures of Spenser's Sapience and Milton's Wisdom and Urania in terms of the grammatical hermeneutics vividly signalled by their "fleshing out" of intra-scriptural grammatical anomalies.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> By grammatical anomalies, I am referring in the first instance to the gender of Spenser's Sapience, as well as the number of parent languages attached to Milton's two pre-existent sisters Wisdom and Urania.

## Chapter 2

# The New Poet's New Poetry: Edmund Spenser's Humanist Reform of the English Poetic Office

### Introducing the New Poet

Edmund Spenser's carefully crafted oeuvre demonstrated to his contemporaries that a sixteenth-century English poet, writing in the vernacular, could achieve both a level of learned eloquence and a level of instructive authority comparable to that of the classical *auctores*. A number of the self-authorizing and self-fashioning strategies within Spenser's poetry<sup>97</sup> bear considerable, if as yet little studied, resemblance to concepts and mechanisms integral to the grammatical hermeneutics and prophetic or Logos-participating preaching of Erasmian rhetorical theology.<sup>98</sup> There are decidedly significant resemblances between Erasmus and Spenser's conceptions of the cultural authority of *bonae litterae* and individuals' interpretative authority in relation to both sacred and profane texts.

Spenser received his grammar school education through the Merchant Taylors' School which was founded according to the same Christian Humanist principles as John Colet's St. Paul's. This grammar school education represented the pedagogical ascendancy of Christian

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<sup>97</sup> Spenser's self-authorizing and self-fashioning strategies have been the subject of many fine studies, to which the arguments that follow are deeply indebted. Of particular interest for the arguments are those of Elizabeth Biemann, Patrick Cheney, Heather Dubrow, Jane Grogan, John Guillory, Richard Helgerson, Carol Kaske, Richard A. McCabe, Harold Weatherby, and Joseph Anthony Wittreich.

<sup>98</sup> Iterating what has already been noted in the general introduction—in this thesis I concentrate exclusively upon the Christian Humanist rhetorical theology of Erasmus. This is not to suggest that Erasmus was alone among Christian Humanists exerting significant influence upon English culture in general or upon Spenser and Milton in particular. Rather, following John N. Wall, I take Erasmus as “the most articulate spokesman” for that influential community (“Godly and Fruitful Lessons” 49).

Humanist values and perspectives over those of (a previously hegemonic) Scholasticism.<sup>99</sup>

Christian Humanist concepts and perspectives pervaded Elizabethan culture.<sup>100</sup> Grammar-school children absorbed elements of the moral philosophical outlook conveyed by Erasmus's *Adages* together with elements of eloquence conveyed through his Latin composition manual *De Copia*.<sup>101</sup> Divinity-school students absorbed elements of the grammarian's theological method conveyed by both Erasmus's *Ratio* prefacing and *Annotationes* accompanying his Greek and Latin New Testament. Church goers of all stripes absorbed elements of the exegetical and homiletic principles conveyed by Erasmus's Englished *Paraphrases* from which excerpts were frequently read in church-services. In Oxford and Cambridge book inventories between 1558 and 1603, Erasmus is the single most highly represented author.<sup>102</sup> In Spenser's England, Erasmian Christian Humanist concepts and perspectives were cultural common-places ready-to-hand for those who were both inclined and dexterous enough to use them.

Like Erasmus, Spenser represents the auctorial tradition of *bonae litterae* not only as a secular repository of moral instruction but as an obscure dispensation enfolded within Christian providential history. This shared conception of *bonae litterae* as a dispensation of divine providence helps to account for the curiously permeable relationship between classical and

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<sup>99</sup> Scholasticism, though in decline, continued to exert enormous authority within the universities and the grammar schools.

<sup>100</sup> In the *Spenser Encyclopedia* O.B. Hardison Jr. writes that "[f]or Spenser, the most important aspect of Erasmian influence was probably in the field of education, specifically, the curriculum and pedagogical methods of Merchant Taylors' School" ("Humanism" 380). That said, much of Hardison Jr.'s article is taken up with noting the humanist styling of, and pervasive inclusion of humanist elements throughout Spenser's works. Much like tracing out the contours of Calvinism, it is impossible to see precisely where the Christian Humanist and/or Erasmian influence begins and ends within Elizabethan culture due to the thorough-going nature of its integration.

<sup>101</sup> See Donald Lemen Clark's *John Milton at St. Paul's School: A Study of Ancient Rhetoric in English Renaissance Education*; Maurice Kelley's "Grammar School Latin and John Milton;" Kenneth Charlton's *Education in Renaissance England*.

<sup>102</sup> See Margo Todd's *Christian Humanism and the Puritan Social Order*, (p. 67) cited above, p. 9.

Christian culture and specifically between erotic and biblicizing elements in Spenser's poetry.<sup>103</sup> In Erasmus's rhetorical theology it was the grammarian's method that accorded and legitimized individuals' interpretative authority in relation to sacred and profane texts alike. The theological importance of the grammarian's secular learning and literary critical method sheds considerable light upon Spenser's characterization of secular poetic authority and divine inspiration as sharing the same domain and even appearing to be, in some way, co-extensive. Finally, the Erasmian Christian Humanist focus upon, and faith in, the actual language of the biblical text (rather than the concepts or doctrines hidden within or beyond it) suggests a hitherto overlooked yet compelling rationale for the arrogation of prophetic poetic authority in Spenser's works. At its most theologically ambitious—as in the culminating vision of heavenly Sapience in *The Fowre Hymnes*<sup>104</sup>—Spenser's poetry fleshes out in visionary images the type of grammatically precise reading that was both proper to Erasmus's revolutionary theological method and popularized by his tremendously influential New Testament.

### **Donning Tradition**

Like his illustrious yet short-lived contemporary and patron Philip Sidney, Spenser represented himself as seeking to cultivate both discerning judgement and exemplary virtue in his

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<sup>103</sup> My arguments concerning the relationship of erotic and biblicizing elements in Spenser's poetry share much in common with those of Elizabeth Heale concerning Spenser's 'Reformed Poetry of Love' in her essay "Spenser and Sixteenth-Century Poetics" pp. 596-600. Heale does not, however, pursue possible parallels with Erasmian humanism. My work specifically builds upon that of Heale by considering the manner in which the enfolding of the secular love lyric within the sacred love lyric/hymn parallels the enfolding of secular (metaphorical) inspiration within sacred or biblical (literal) inspiration, as well as the manner in which the latter forms of inspiration involve one and the same anabolic (corporeal/incarnational) process of textual assimilation—a process of becoming text strikingly exemplified in the writing of Erasmus where it is promoted as integral to the true practice of theology.

<sup>104</sup> Spenser's Sapience is discussed at length in my third and final section on Spenser.

readership.<sup>105</sup> Also like Sidney, Spenser conceived of poetry as possessing natural sovereignty over other domains of learning and the poet as preeminent among teachers.<sup>106</sup> The idea of poetry's pedagogical and cultural pre-eminence in antiquity was entirely commonplace. Indeed, Richard Puttenham's third and fourth chapters of *The Arte of English Poesie* were entitled "How poets were the first priests, the first prophets, the first Legislators and polititians in the world;" and "How the Poets were the first Philosophers, the first Astronomers and Historiographers and Oratours and Musitiens of the world" (3, 5). For Puttenham as for Sidney, however, the poet's cultural pre-eminence was located and restricted to a distant and mythical antiquity unavailable to the trifling poet prodigal writing morally questionable verse in the *volgare*. Poetry's abiding linguistic and moral authority was divided between the ancient *auctores* and the modern humanist schoolmaster or grammarian interpreter. In his bid to restore the cultural pre-eminence of poetry, Spenser sought to arrogate the authority of both of these parties. As Andrew Hadfield writes of Spenser's career-launching work, the *Shepherd's Calender* was "designed to resemble a humanist edition of a work of Latin or Greek literature" (124-5). In other words, Spenser was imitating and vying with not only the classical *auctores* as a poet-maker, but also the modern humanist schoolmasters and textual editors as a poet-interpreter.

As Richard Helgerson has noted, in conceiving a poetic career far in excess of the normative Elizabethan prodigal's flirtation with letters, the question facing Spenser was "not merely what to write but what to be" ("New Poet" 895). In a culture economically and politically dominated by the royal court—with its intricate networks of allegiance and patronage—the

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<sup>105</sup> In referring to the cultivation of "discerning judgment" I have in mind both Åke Bergvalle's discussion of Sidney's concepts of "wit" and "judgment" in *The Enabling of Judgment* and Jane Grogan's discussion of Spenser's concept of "narrative intelligence" and "exemplarity" in *Exemplary Spenser* (pp. 52, 53 and 59-68).

<sup>106</sup> The theme of the preeminent nobility of poetry and the tragic lack of due reverence shown to it (as discussed later in this section) is developed at length in Spenser's "Teares of the Muses."

question of “what to be” was at once a question of how one was to appear and appeal to one’s potential patrons, and with what authority one might speak. Not only the poetry that was written but the self that wrote it required (re)fashioning. As Helgerson writes: “The first [step] was publicly to abandon all social identity except that conferred by his elected vocation. He ceased to be Master Edmund Spenser of Merchant Taylors’ School and Pembroke College, Cambridge, and became Immerito, Colin Clout, the New Poet” (“New Poet” 896). In the anonymous publication of *The Shepheardes Calender* Spenser effected his authorial reinvention as the “New Poet” through a strategically self-effacing identification of author and poetic office.<sup>107</sup> The *Calender* opens with a prefatory envoy entitled “To His Booke” which Spenser signs *Immerito* (the unworthy one), thereby drawing attention to the question of identity, authorship, and textual authority. It is then in the author’s absence *in propria persona*—made doubly conspicuous through the disingenuous modesty of its envoy—that the *Calender*’s assortment of more and less proximal authorial personae proceed to demonstrate their author’s comprehensive knowledge of, and vital initiatic participation within, the pastoral poetic tradition.

Spenser’s donning of the mask of Immerito in the prefatory envoy “To His Booke,” is not only an act of clearing the textual slate of the self; *Immerito* is also pre-face to a further palimpsest of Spenserian personae throughout the *Calender*. In terms of their proximity to Spenser’s authorial self, the central among these personae is Colin Clout. As the running commentary to the *Calender* (provided by Spenser’s equally anonymous commentator E.K.) points out, the invention of Colin Clout is one of re-discovery. The popular and irreverent character of “Colyn Cloute” is the prior invention of the English poet John Skelton (1463-1529)

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<sup>107</sup> The seminal discussion of this process is found in Richard Helgerson’s “The New Poet Presents Himself: Spenser and the Idea of a Literary Career,” and in chapter 2 of his *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton and the Literary System*.

and “Colin” is also the persona adopted by the French poet Clément Marot (1496-1544). By donning a composite mask integrating Skelton and Marot’s personae, Spenser signals the assimilation of both their poetry and laureate ambition.<sup>108</sup> Important though Skelton and Marot are for Spenser’s invention of Colin Clout, there are still other faces under-writing the latter persona. According to E.K. it is under the name of Colin that the *Calender*’s anonymous “Poete secretly shadoweth himself, as sometime did Virgil under the name of Tityrus” (January gloss 1). E.K.’s statement connects Colin and Tityrus as auctorial personae, thereby drawing attention to the practice of masking ventriloquism itself, which was a common auctorial habit and signifier. Playfully complicating this Colin-to-Spenser as Tityrus-to-Virgil connection, Spenser’s Colin reveals himself to be the inspired disciple of “[t]he God of shepherds Tityrus... Who taught me homely, as I can, to make,” and E.K.’s commentary to the latter passage further assures the reader “[t]hat by Tityrus is meant Chaucer” (June 81-2; gloss 81). Thus, as Richard A. McCabe notes, Spenser “gestures not just towards Virgil but towards Chaucer, a conflation of classical and native traditions intended to produce a vernacular ‘classic’ identical to neither” (464). The New Poet’s playful masking makes conspicuous use of a humanist scholar’s polyglot learning while demonstrating an auctorial poet’s imitative mastery of the traditions from which he is drawing.

Spenser’s employment of the multivalent persona of Colin Clout allows him to engage in the type of textual participation by which an author gains access to his predecessors’ *auctoritas*

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<sup>108</sup> The particular moral authority which Spenser arrogated through the adoption of the irreverent persona of Colin Clout is considered in section 1.2, “Figuring Virtue.” As Richard A. McCabe points out, John Skelton “was commonly designated ‘poet laureate’” (463). McCabe is echoing J. Griffiths’ “What’s in a Name? The Transmission of ‘John Skelton, Laureate’ in Manuscript and Print.” As Robert Starr Kinsman notes in the *Spenser Encyclopedia*, Spenser drew from Skelton the popular authority of the latter’s Colyn Cloute, renowned for his satirical critique of ecclesiastical abuses. (660-1) For an interesting discussion of Spenser’s assimilation of Clément Marot, see Annabel Patterson’s “Reopening the Green Cabinet: Clément Marot and Edmund Spenser.”

even as he subjects that process to playful parody. As Andrew Hadfield notes in relation to Spenser's imitation and allusive inclusion of prior authors, in addition to "demonstrating a formidable knowledge of ... European, and classical books... [t]he *Calender* itself covers what was considered to be virtually the whole tradition of English literature as it was then known" (*Life* 124).<sup>109</sup> In the work with which Spenser inaugurates his poetic career the composite auctorial lineage of his central poetic persona, together with his eclogues' comprehensive range of mimetic rehearsal, identifies poetic merit not with the name of poet but with the auctorial tradition itself as something to be envisaged and ventriloquized.<sup>110</sup>

As McCabe rightly insists, "a persona such as "Colin Clout' ... [is] not just 'another self' but the self as 'other'" (464). In employing the persona of Colin Clout, Spenser identifies himself with the poetic "other" of the auctorial tradition. In a process signaled and set in motion by his adoption of the anonymous title "*Immerito*," Spenser empties himself at the outset of the *Calender* in order to become authoritative poetic utterance. In the *Calender*, Spenser demonstrates his comprehensive assimilation of and organic continuity with the auctorial tradition. The assimilative, participatory nature of this process (together with its clear signalling

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<sup>109</sup> In *The Schoolmaster*, Roger Ascham provides an accessible definition of imitation which illustrates the expectations of the educated readership for which Spenser's *Calender* was strategically fashioned: "imitation is to follow for learning of tongues and sciences the best authors... This *imitatio* [involves] *dissimilis materiei similis tractatio* and also *similis materiei dissimilis tractatio* ["Similar treatment of dissimilar matter and also dissimilar treatment of similar matter."] (117). In his article on the "Antique World" in the *Spenser Encyclopedia*, Thomas Green notes that, "There is indeed very little in *The Faerie Queene* which is not assimilative of something, whether it is ancient or whether it can be located somewhere else in Spenser's enormous cultural heritage. The basic process of the poem is parodic, if the implication of ridicule is removed from that term, for almost everything in it constitutes a revision or displacement of something else, much of which ultimately has classical roots" (117).

<sup>110</sup> Hadfield notes that the "sophisticated balance of poetic text, notes, commentary, letters, with the critical apparatus reading like part of an exchange between equals, indicates that the poems have developed out of an intellectual milieu that looked back to the humanist ideal of the 'republic of letters', one the text itself has deliberately constructed" (*Life* 120). This idea—that the *Calender* deliberately constructs a "republic of letters"—speaks to the persistent humanist tendency, so pervasive that it is easily overlooked, to conceive the self in terms of textual participation.

of the good humanist scholar's multi-lingual and comprehensive learning) recalls Erasmus's counsel to the aspiring preacher. In the *Ratio*, Erasmus writes:

[M]ake your heart itself into a library of Christ... [such that] like from the provident householder, you can bring forth "new things and old" as they should be needed. For these things which come forth from your own heart, as it were, practically alive, penetrate far more vividly into the souls of your listeners than those things which are gathered from a hodgepodge of other authors. (341)

In Erasmus's figure, the assimilation of the books of Christ—not only by the intellect but also by the heart, which is to say through the affective will—lends them new life. Having been truly assimilated and not merely "gathered [as unassimilated, fragmentary, excerpts] from a hodgepodge of other authors," they issue forth in new forms imbued with an affective power of their own capable of effectively penetrating and transforming the souls of listeners.<sup>111</sup> At the same time, however, to engage in this participatory assimilation of texts is not only to become a library containing all of the books of Christ but also to be thereby assimilated into the book of Christ—that is, into the scriptural figure and persona of the provident householder. Through its participatory assimilation of the pastoral tradition from the classical to the early-modern period, the *Calender* becomes a library of *auctores*. Thus, in speaking through the composite persona of Colin, Spenser acquires countenance<sup>112</sup> by assuming the voice of a popular and auctorial recitation.<sup>113</sup> At the same time, Spenser becomes a figure within the auctorial tradition he is

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<sup>111</sup> Erasmus is here encouraging the aspiring preacher to return to and read (and digest) the original texts themselves, rather than resorting to borrowing from any of the proliferating handbooks and encyclopedic collections of (undigested and, without context, undigestible) biblical and patristic excerpts.

<sup>112</sup> As David L. Miller notes, Spenser uses the term "countenaunce" with reference to "public estimation or repute" ("Spenser's Vocation, Spenser's Career" 214).

<sup>113</sup> Modern critics rightly question the extent to which Spenser fully assimilated his *auctores*. Green writes: "Like most [Elizabethan] readers, he [Spenser] apparently tasted many more books than he digested" (113). What is at issue here, however, is Spenser's conspicuous display of learning as one who has digested his antecedents.

reproducing: like the preacher becoming the provident householder of Scripture, Spenser becomes the New Poet written into the text and cast of the tradition of *bonae litterae*.

In “Spenser’s Vocation, Spenser’s Career,” David L. Miller describes the cultural context within which Spenser’s *Calender* launched his career by looking ahead to a much later Spenserian work, the “Teares of the Muses”:

Spenser’s poetic canon opens with an address “To His Booke” in which the unknown father of a bastard text sends it out to find sponsorship before venturing into polite circles. From Terpsichore (in “Teares of the Muses”) we learn why this gesture was necessary: the Muses’ children are dispossessed heirs in the kingdom of modern letters, forced to appear as outsiders whose birth secures no special place. (214)<sup>114</sup>

The dispossession of Terpsichore and the other muses signals the unfortunate circumstances of those who speak for “goodly Poësie” when “nor Prince nor Priest doth her mayntayne” who was once “the noursling of Nobilitie” (“Teares” 289-90). Spenser’s authorial persona is here a type of royalist, one who wishes to enable the muses to regain their “royall thrones which lately stood / In th’hearts of men to rule them carefully” (“Teares” 313-14). But he is also the type of royalist who—court jester-like—will insist upon his own learned and inspired authority in recalling his noble readership to their lapsed responsibilities.<sup>115</sup> Re-figuring the pretensions to auctorial poetic authority that were expressed in the *Calender* via Colin Clout, Spenser presents himself, in “Teares of the Muses,” as one so fully imbued with the learning and artistry of the auctorial

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<sup>114</sup> As William Oram observes, “‘The Teares of the Muses’ is as much about the absence of patrons as it is about the absence of poetry in England” (Introduction, “Teares of the Muses” 264). Given the deaths of both Sidney and Leicester—both formerly patrons—in 1586 and 1588 respectively, Spenser must have felt the need for patronage almost as acutely in the early 1590s (“The Teares of the Muses” appears in the volume *Complaints* of 1591) as he had a decade earlier when he first sent off his “booke,” *The Shepheardes Calender* (entered on the Stationer’s register in 1579).

<sup>115</sup> Hadfield’s insistence upon Spenser’s willful sleighting of potential patrons and of his monarch is duly noted: “The poem is framed to suggest that Spenser was attempting to sever himself from the world of patronage politics and in doing so was asserting his independence as a poet” (*Life* 131). For all its pastoral high-jinx, however, the *Calender* was also framed to impress, and it is certainly not inconceivable that Spenser was subject to competing and irreconcilable impulses with respect to snubbing and pleasing potential patrons.

tradition—represented by “[t]he sacred springs of horsefoot *Helicon* / So oft bedewd with our learned layes” (“Teares” 279)—that he has become capable of speaking for the muses themselves.

In composing his *Calender*, the New Poet insists upon his authority as a learned culture-bearer in whom and by whom the culture survives. In his reception of the *Calender*, Sidney agrees with the New Poet’s pretensions, declaring that Spenser’s “Shepherds Calendar hath much poetry in his eclogues, indeed worthy the reading, if I be not deceived” (*Defence* 110). The redundancy implicit within the phrase “much poetry in his eclogues” suggests that Sidney is singling Spenser out as an author whose work is deserving of the name of poetry precisely because of its comprehensive assimilation of the poetic tradition(s).<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, the “Shepherds Calendar” has incorporated this quantity of poetry (this “much poetry”) in such a coherent and integral manner that it comprises “poetical sinews.” The assimilative, corporeal nature of the figure is strengthened by Sidney’s ambivalent use of the personal pronoun “his” in declaring that the “Shepherds Calendar hath much poetry in *his* eclogues.”<sup>117</sup> In Sidney’s view, the work possesses something of the perfectly integrated fullness of organic unity—that of something born rather than pieced together—and this quality in the work leads Sidney to deem its maker one of those who bear out the old proverb, “*orator fit, poeta nascitur*” (*Defence* 109-10).<sup>118</sup> What makes this grammatical quibble interesting is the extent to which it complements

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<sup>116</sup> This is true even if Hadfield is right in surmising that Sidney’s brief comments in the *Defence* suggest that “he has not really understood the poem and why it was written the way it was” (*Life* 129).

<sup>117</sup> To clarify, poem and poet are potentially conflated by the ambivalent grammar of the phrase, the “Shepherds Calendar [i.e., “it”] hath much poetry in “his” eclogues.” Admittedly, in sixteenth century usage, “his” occasionally means “its,” yet in this instance the possession of “poetical sinews” corporealizes the poem and this corporealizing of the *Calender* suggests and facilitates a reading that conflates the work with its anonymous author’s textual self.

<sup>118</sup> “An orator is made, a poet born.” Translation in *Defence* 228 n 38-9. Of course, it is also possible that the phrasing of Sidney’s complement *is* gratuitous. If that is the case, however, the fact remains that Spenser’s principal poetic persona in the *Calender* (Colin) displays his own and his author’s poetic authority by disclaiming yet

the anonymizing envoy “To His Booke.” Sidney’s approving judgement appears to conflate poem and poet thereby suggesting the success with which (and the very manner in which) the *Calender*, and no prior name or courtier’s standing, has supplied its author’s countenance.

### Figuring Virtue

In Spenser’s day, for poetry’s champions and critics alike, the ability to bring about the participatory identification of the reader with fictional characters or perspectives comprised the work of fiction’s seductive power. For Stephen Gosson, it is by this power that poets threaten to “turne reasonable creatures into brute beastes” (10), while to Sidney—adopting language that echoes the Christian Humanists’ praise of persuasive eloquence—it is by this power that the poet may “strike, pierce, [and] possess the sight of the soul” thereby illuminating all instructive examples “before the imaginative and judging powers” (*Defence* 90).<sup>119</sup> Rather than prescriptively distinguishing between virtue and vice in the abstract, the poet’s narrative involves the reader in the act of judging while the poet’s eloquence moves the reader to feel, within the feigned experience of the narrative fiction, the affective affinity or revulsion natural to their encounter.

One of the principal ways Spenser set about legitimating his poetic vocation in the eyes of his readership was by insisting upon poetry’s civic capacity for fostering virtuous action.

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ironically demonstrating his comprehensive knowledge of and imitative participation within the auctorial poetic tradition.

<sup>119</sup> In Erasmus, and the humanist tradition upon which Gosson and Sidney are both drawing, poetic eloquence is the natural and appropriate accompaniment of sacred utterance. Indeed, for Erasmus, the Christic message is inherently eloquent, such that those who have properly assimilated it (in the original Greek language and thus, implicitly and of necessity, with the requisite training in *bonae litterae*) shall naturally utter things that are “practically alive, [and] penetrate far more vividly into the souls of [their] listeners” (*supra*). Within the method of Erasmian rhetorical theology, eloquence and understanding are essentially two sides (one expressive, the other receptive) of the same coin.

With the persona of Colin Clout in the *Shepherds Calender* Spenser was capitalizing on the moral currency of Skelton's prior cognomen Colyn Cloute. Skelton's Colyn was a popular "jester/trickster figure," critic of ecclesiastical abuses, and "scourge of the mighty" (Hadfield, *Life* 278). Through the deployment of Skelton's persona, Spenser positioned his role as poet in virtuous opposition to a range of popularly decried moral dangers.

In *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* Spenser capitalizes upon poetry's ambivalent reputation by adapting the accusatory language regularly leveled against the trifling and immoral production of contemporary poet-prodigals to heap scorn upon the court's misuse of learning.<sup>120</sup> In other words, he attributes to the courtiers the arts of poetry without the concern for truth and virtue that—as any grammar school graduate well knew—is the central and legitimating lesson of good letters: "those wretches... [imbued] with malice and with strife... [employ] deceitfull wit... and fained forgerie ... Masked with faire dissembling curtesie... furnisht with tearmes of art, / Nor art of schoole, but Courtiers schoolery" (675-702). By Colin's report, the agency at court is taken up with counterfeiting—an art of imitation devoid of "single Truth and simple honestie... despys'd of all" (727-8). Rather than providing a defence of poetry, Spenser simply insists upon the "art of schoole" and its traditional poetic prerogative to provide instructive moral critique, while exploiting the terms of anti-poetic sentiment to denounce the degenerate practice of courtly counterfeiting.<sup>121</sup> Contra the muse-haters and the courtly establishment, and even

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<sup>120</sup> For a thorough-going treatment of anti-poetic sentiment in the early-modern period see Peter C. Herman's *Squitter-Wits and Muse-Haters: Spenser, Sidney, Milton, and Renaissance Antipoetic Sentiment*.

<sup>121</sup> Similarly, as John M. Steadman writes, in *The Faerie Queene*, "Spenser transfers the accusations that critics had leveled against the fictive images of poetry. The falsehood lies not in the poet's images of the true virtues of antiquity but in the vicious practices of his contemporaries and their confusion of false semblance with truth" (*Moral Fiction* 113).

whilst slumming it in the low-lying grazing lands of pastoral, the New Poet obstreperously occupies the moral high ground.

Implicit within Spenser's insistence upon the social usefulness of poetry was the humanists' exalting of affective over intellectual understanding (most particularly in relation to faith and morality) as expressed in the Sidneian formulation, "moving is of a higher degree than teaching [by mere prescription]" (*Defence* 94). Spenser didn't have to argue that the grammarian and rhetorician's poetic resources of language and style were the superlative instruments for the fashioning of an active moral-philosophical understanding. By Spenser and Sidney's time, the ideal poet's power to fashion heroic virtue—the power of one such as Xenophon, "to bestow a Cyrus upon the world to make many Cyruses"—had become proverbial (*Defence* 85). Moreover, the campaign to establish the essential role of *bonae litterae* in teaching both language and virtue had already been successfully waged by Erasmus and other Christian Humanists in the name of both their rhetorical theology and their classicizing pedagogy.<sup>122</sup>

Perhaps Spenser's best known claim to the moral authority of the auctorial poet and his grammarian interpreters is to be found in the "Letter to Raleigh" appended to the *Faerie Queene*: "The generall end therefore of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline" (*Faerie Queene* 715). As A. Leigh DeNeef writes, private morality becomes public and political when placed within a "historical" narrative, regardless of whether it be the narrative of "a mythical past or an actual present" or, indeed, a mixture of the two ("Letter" 582-3)<sup>123</sup> Thus, Spenser's aim to fashion a gentleman is also "to make, or help to make,

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<sup>122</sup> The establishing of both St. Paul's and the Merchant Taylors' schools on humanist principles and their cultural importance as the preeminent English grammar schools of Spenser's day is evidence of the Christian Humanists' success in promoting their classicizing pedagogy.

<sup>123</sup> I am here paraphrasing but also simplifying DeNeef's arguments which are largely concerned with the manner in which a historical narrative may be used to weave an intricate web of moral exemplarism that not only displays

a country” (583). The fact that Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* announced itself as moralizing fiction did not imply to its then-contemporary readers, as it might today, either naiveté or simplicity. On the contrary, and most emphatically, it implied a presumption, on the poet’s part, to judge. As John M. Steadman writes, “Spenser’s poem is a mirror... [its] reflections ... types and shadows of... Elizabeth’s court [in the] degenerate present” (112). In the “Letter to Raleigh” Spenser insists upon the common knowledge that good letters provide moral instruction, in order to accuse hypocrisy. While the “fashioning” of the gentlemen and gentlewomen for whom and of whom he writes *ought* to be already accomplished, the “Letter to Raleigh” states baldly that the *Faerie Queene* intends the further schooling of its courtly readership. Through his fashioning of fictional exemplars within a fictional narrative that mirrors the persons and world of his courtly readers, Spenser openly intends the “reformation of [his] pupil[s] to proper conduct” (Deneef 583).

While echoing Sidney’s *Defence of Poesy*, Spenser’s “Letter to Raleigh” makes no attempt to defend poetry. As in *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, the “Letter” simply insists upon the shared cultural heritage of its humanist-educated readership in order to draw attention to the corrective intent and method of *The Faerie Queene*. Spenser is, as Hadfield writes, “someone with the confidence to tell others how things are and what to do” (*Life* 253). The clearest indication of this aggressive intent, and of how high it might aim, may be brought out through the contrast between Spenser’s ostensible lauding of Elizabeth throughout *The Faerie Queene* and his promotion of married sexuality as the ideal form of chastity in Book III. Spenser

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given virtues but displays them in a dizzying assortment of accidental relations much like “grammatical inflections” (“Letter” 583). Deneef is also concerned to clarify the manner in which the historical narrative functions to translate the private virtues, via narrative entanglement, into public service—“The ‘history,’ the narrative or story of the poem, is conceived as a particular public or political application of general private morality” (“Letter” 582).

is at pains in the “Letter to Raleigh” to draw particular attention to the connection between his and Raleigh’s figuring of the queen under the guises of Belphoebe and Cynthia—“Phoebe and Cynthia being both names of [the virgin goddess] Diana” and thus pointed references to Elizabeth’s unmarried status (716). The Reformation ideal of chastity, defined in contradistinction to the perceived hypocrisy of the Roman Catholic doctrine of clerical celibacy, was that of married sexuality. It is true that “in Belphoebe the poet is portraying and even celebrating Elizabeth’s chastity, [just as] in Gloriana [he portrays] her rule” (Steadman 115). But it is also true that in drawing attention to the form of her chastity, as he does in the “Letter to Raleigh,” Spenser as surely draws attention to Elizabeth’s failure to marry. The ramifications of this failure are then suggested by Spenser’s “showing the female knight [Britomart, hero of Bk III and exemplar of the virtue of Chastity] on a quest to find her husband, Artegall, the Knight of Justice, and so secure the future of her dynasty” (Hadfield, *Life* 261). Spenser, it seems, cherished the Reforming intent that everyone (including the queen) be reminded of the lessons they had learned in school.

The “virtuous and gentle discipline” that Spenser sought to instill through *The Faerie Queene* went hand in hand with the fostering of a public discipline of discernment—not only the worldly ability to produce sound judgment in relation to confusing testimony, but the ability to see and condemn the mighty in their mighty failings.<sup>124</sup> The ethico-didactic prerogative of poetry in the grand tradition of the *auctores* was integral to the humanist education of Spenser’s contemporaries as it was to the cultural understanding of an era and a nascent English empire vying with the imperial achievements of the classical world. By insisting, in his “Letter to

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<sup>124</sup> As Jane Grogan writes, “Spenser... leaves that responsibility [of moral interpretation] with the reader, amply furnished with affective and potentially corruptive images and examples of vice” (49).

Raleigh,” upon the ethico-didactic prerogative of poetry that was part of the English humanist heritage he shared with his readership, Spenser made clear that he intended to have his say on matters of public import, as he continued to do (more or less recklessly yet consistently) throughout his career.<sup>125</sup>

### **Intra-Textual Inspiration**

In addition to insisting upon his poetry’s critical and advisory function in fostering both moral judgment and virtuous action at every level of English society, Spenser depicted his works as incorporating both poetic and prophetic inspiration. In the sixteenth century, the nature of poetic inspiration was a tricky question. Indeed, it was not at all clear to what extent, and in what manner, a then-contemporary poet might claim poetic inspiration and what authority might thereby be arrogated.

John Guillory’s study of poetic authority and inspiration in Spenser and Milton develops several arguments that run parallel with my own before diverging radically in looking ahead to modern conceptions of the imagination. The point of divergence in our arguments concerns the actively present or statically memorial nature of divine utterance. Guillory describes the self-authorizing or metaphorically “inspired” auctorial poetic tradition Spenser represents and manipulates as follows:

[T]he human word [as opposed to the divine Word] remains its own authority, built up out of past voices that declare their continuity with the present merely by continuing to speak. These words, or the works constituted by them, become canonical in the very process of acknowledgment, as Spenser acknowledges

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<sup>125</sup> Spenser’s *Complaints* (1591) reveals him to have been both keenly aware of the power of the printed word within the court of popular opinion and entirely willing to wield this power against extremely powerful opponents such as Lord Burghley (Elizabeth’s chief advisor) at court. The fact that the *Complaints* was “removed from circulation because the work was judged to be seditious” reveals that the authorities were similarly aware of the power of both popular opinion and of the artfully wrought printed word to sway it (*Life* 265).

Chaucer, who acknowledges Alanus de Insulis. [This is the] survival, the *vivam* of the text... (Guillory 66).

In this account of the mechanics of tradition, authorial continuity is established through acknowledgement and the successive revivals of mimetic recitation. This process, Guillory declares, is “the only ground of authority on this side of the impassable boundary of the sacred” (66). Because he sees the human word of acknowledgment as the poet’s “only ground of authority,” Guillory refers to the concept of poetic inspiration that survives into the Renaissance as exclusively “metaphorical.” Poetic inspiration communicating the speech and/or authority of past *auctores* is metaphorical because it has no living origin. Guillory’s distinction is eminently sensible—a living origin is required for anything beyond imitative ventriloquism.<sup>126</sup> To the extent that early-modern English-Protestant authors and readers are not imagined to believe in the Platonic doctrine of metempsychosis according to which Ennius claimed Homeric inspiration (via incarnation), so contemporary criticism may imagine that these same early-moderns held poetic inspiration to be a metaphorical convention.<sup>127</sup>

My own argument diverges with that of Guillory to the extent that I do not read Spenser’s works as necessarily endorsing an “impassable boundary of the sacred” synonymous with “the feeling of the vanished god” (44). For Guillory, the continuity of the human word is the only ground of authority “in the continual absence of a speaking God” (45), “[u]ntil or unless a voice on the other side speaks again” (66). Spenser, however, was not compelled to conceive the “absence of a speaking God.” After all, Christian Humanist theologians had imagined (and

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<sup>126</sup> The biblical *locus classicus* for the literal idea of inspiration is God’s breathing of spirit into Adam in Genesis 2:7.

<sup>127</sup> In the *Faerie Queen* Spenser claims the “infusion sweete / Of [Chaucer’s] owne spirit,” thereby imitating Ennius, the iconic father of Latin poetry, who claimed (in a fragment preserved by Lactantius) to have been instructed in dream that he was the Roman incarnation of Homer.

published) a God whom it pleased to take the form, in Scripture, of a copious and ever-renewing living discourse.<sup>128</sup> Spenser and his early-modern English readership could believe in the living presence of their God in Scripture in a way they could not believe in Ennius's incarnation of Homer.

The Christian Humanist perspective concerning the nature of Scripture and of God's living voice within Scripture was neither arcane nor even culturally marginal. The conception of a present and speaking God was promoted in vivid terms within Erasmus's *Paraclesis* prefacing his culturally central 1516 Greek edition and Latin translation of the New Testament: "[T]hese writings bring you the living image of His holy mind and the speaking, healing, dying, rising Christ himself, and thus they render Him so fully present that you would see less if you gazed upon Him with your very eyes" (*Paraclesis* 108). Erasmus dissolves the distinction between God as speaking origin and Scripture as textual artifact. Instead of conceiving the divine utterance of Scripture as the textual remnant of an absent God fallen silent, Erasmus conceives Scripture as incarnation and living presence. If divine Author and divine text are conceived to be mutually participating, then the activity of acknowledgment and the successive revivals of mimetic recitation promoted within the poeticizing genre of Erasmian paraphrase establish a continuity and survival of the divine and living Word. It is thus possible, entirely within the realm of early-modern ideas, to conceive the divine Word investing the human author of interpretative intra-biblical fictions not only with literal inspiration but, thereby, with prophetic authority.

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<sup>128</sup> Erasmus's defence of his choice to translate the Greek term *Logos* (of John 1.1) by the Latin term *sermo* (thus not "In the beginning was the word," but "In the beginning was the discourse/speech/total oration"), and the enormous controversy this provoked, ensured that the humanist conception of God as copious (and even two-sided and conversational) discourse had entered the popular imagination. See Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Erasmus on Language and Method in Theology* p. 25.

Implicit within Spenser's works is the single participatory process of textual assimilation that serves as the foundation, within Humanist pedagogy, for both secular and scriptural imitation. This single participatory process of textual assimilation informs two distinct kinds of poetic inspiration in Spenser's works just as it informs both secular interpretation and biblical exegesis in the works of the Christian Humanist grammarian. Both forms of poetic inspiration encountered in Spenser's work combine interpretation and utterance.<sup>129</sup> The first of these forms of poetic inspiration is an ostensibly metaphorical inspiration consisting in the participatory and productive assimilation of the auctorial poetic tradition. It is ostensibly metaphorical because there is no living source from which the auctorial speech and authority may be communicated. Spenser's Colin Clout refers to Chaucer/Tityrus as the god of shepherds but for Spenser and his audience Chaucer's is clearly a metaphorical godhead. The latter's power to inspire is an intra-textual power that resides not within Chaucer/Tityrus's literal and living divinity but within the human word. This auctorial poetic inspiration names a potential within the living author for the revivifying recital of the auctorial word.

The second of these forms of poetic inspiration is an ostensibly literal inspiration consisting in the participatory, productive assimilation of the biblical text as incarnate Logos. It is ostensibly literal because it was possible for early-modern English Protestants to imagine the source of inspiration as a literal and living divinity. Spenser's narrator within *The Fowre Hymnes* describes Sapience as a divine figure participating in the Christian godhead—a godhead that Spenser and the greater part of his contemporary audience take (or profess to take) literally. The power of Sapience to inspire Spenser's narrator, however, is still intra-textual. The fact of

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<sup>129</sup> In the following discussion I adopt and adapt Guillory's terminology.

Sapience's literal divinity does not mean that the poet's inspiration is extra-textual. On the contrary, in a godhead corresponding to the Christ-Logos there is no distinction between divine Author and divine utterance. In other words, neither Spenser's Sapience nor the vision of Sapience need be conceived as extra-scriptural. The power to inspire resides within the divine Word which, unlike the memorial utterance represented by Guillory, is conceived as the living presence of the divine origin. As with auctorial poetic inspiration, divine inspiration occurs through the participatory assimilation of texts. The power of prophetic inspiration is still a potential (within the living author) for revivifying recital, but in this instance recital involves or is believed to involve participating in the living divinity of the Word.

In view of the distinction between the human and the divine word, Spenser's work appears to comprise two forms of poetic inspiration—metaphorical with respect to the assimilation of the human word, and literal with respect to the assimilation of the divine Word. Within his dialogue-form treatise *The Antibarbarians*, however, Erasmus employs the persona of Batt in proposing that,

Everything in the pagan world that was valiantly done, brilliantly said, ingeniously thought, diligently transmitted, had been prepared by Christ for his society. He it was who supplied the intellect, who added the zest for inquiry, and it was through him alone that they found what they sought. Their age produced this harvest of creative work, not so much for them as for us. (60)

Within the perspective of Erasmian Christian Humanism, the auctorial poetic tradition is considered as a providential dispensation of the living Logos. This enfolding of *bonae litterae* in the copious utterance of providence is consistent with the related Humanist idea that participatory textual assimilation is the basis of both secular and scriptural imitation and interpretation. Without any recourse to the Platonic idea of metempsychosis, early-modern Christian Humanist ideas thus made it possible for Spenser and his contemporary English

readership to imagine metaphorical inspiration (inspiration via the works of pagan auctores) enfolded in literal inspiration (inspiration via the living Logos) as the lesser within the greater vehicle of divine providence.<sup>130</sup>

### **“Of Muses... I Conne No skill”: An Uncouth Lover’s Lament**

Throughout his career Spenser insists that Eros is fit topic for an inspired poet in spite of its poor reputation in the common estimation of his English Reformation readership. For Richard Helgerson, however, it is largely as a result of Spenser’s predilection for amatory verse that the laureate attainment and authority he achieved over the course of his career remained precarious:

Spenser’s idea of a poet was finally an unstable but necessary union of two ideas, embodied in two roles—shepherd and knight, Colin and Calidore—neither of which could be renounced in favor of the other. The first gained him a place in the genus *poetae* as it was understood by his generation. The second defined him as the unique English member of the species of professional national poets. (*Self-Crowned Laureates* 99-100)

In this view, Spenser’s recognition as a poet depended upon the proving ground of pastoral amatory verse in spite of the latter remaining fundamentally irreconcilable with the more noble pursuit of heroic poetry. Unable to abandon the genre of amatory poetry Spenser appears to Helgerson to remain fettered to the normative and self-deprecating role of poet prodigal.<sup>131</sup> Yet his career-long engagement in amatory verse does not suggest Spenser’s back-sliding into the

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<sup>130</sup> Guillory’s distinction between metaphorical and literal inspiration remains essential in distinguishing inspiration via acknowledgement, recitation and imitation from inspiration via metempsychosis (or other process of spirit-based possession or visitation). Metaphorical inspiration requires human industry—both long assimilative study and diligent cultivation of poetic craft. To the extent that this labour comprises participation in a logocentric providence, however, human industry becomes integral to the idea of literal, yet still text-based inspiration. Spenser is constantly enfolding the human word within the divine—rewriting secular narrative into, or rediscovering secular narrative as part of the divine textual horizon. Spenser’s prophetic poetics and its evangelistic aim of integrating *bonae litterae* within the revelatory horizon of Christian providence will be explored at length in the subsequent discussion of Spenser’s *The Fowre Hymnes*.

<sup>131</sup> Patrick Cheney’s thesis in *Spenser’s Famous Flight* suggests that Spenser’s career demonstrates an intentional progression through the poetic genres and thereby tends to resolve the tension that Helgerson’s argument maintains. I return to Cheney in the discussion that follows.

degenerate set role of the poet prodigal so much as his commitment to transform the common, critical estimation of erotic verse.

Both Spenser's close friend and correspondent Gabriel Harvey and Spenser's pseudonymous (and often artfully misleading) commentator E.K. suggest that truly inspired poetry and love poetry are mutually exclusive categories.<sup>132</sup> According to Helgerson, Harvey "follows the accepted pattern [of the Elizabethan poet-prodigal], promising to abandon poetry for the more serious business of law" ("New Poet" 901) and even requests, in their private correspondence, that Spenser abandon amatory verse as well: "do, I repeat, bid farewell to nonsense and trifling songs of this kind" (qtd. in "New Poet" 910 *n* 25). In this same connection, Helgerson writes that according to E.K., "in losing his divine inspiration... the ancient Poet had degenerated into the modern amorous "maker" ("New Poet" 899).<sup>133</sup> Examining passages within the December and October eclogues, Helgerson demonstrates that the *Calender* contains a "forceful critique of the conventional poet-lover, revealing that poetry written under such a guise is solipsistic, self-indulgent, and fruitless—that it leads inevitably to its own renunciation" ("New Poet" 899). The *Calender* does indeed contain a "forceful critique of the conventional poet-lover," but the latter is staged as an ambivalent component within a larger argument concerning the value of erotic poetry. The bracketing of this critique is signaled by the unreliable testimony of its proponents within the *Calender*. Additionally, E.K.'s anti-erotic gloss on the

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<sup>132</sup> The identity of E.K. remains a matter of conjecture. In the introduction to *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, however, Thomas Cain acknowledges that "[t]he suggestion that E.K. is a Spenser persona has at least two bits of evidence in its favor: the translation of Cicero in the Maye gloss on 'Tho with them' is the same as in the first of Spenser's 'Three Proper Letters to Gabriel Harvey' (1580); and the obvious mistake of 'Persephone' for 'Tisiphone' in the 'November' gloss on 'Furies' is repeated in 'Teares of the Muses'" (164). Cain also allows the possibility that "both [Spenser] and Harvey had some role in producing the glosses" (9).

<sup>133</sup> E.K.'s gloss may not make as definitive a temporal leap from inspired antiquity to degenerate modernity as Helgerson implies. The temporal shift depends solely upon the term "afterwarde." See October gloss 21.

“lighter matter of Poesie,” which represents the culturally commonplace (and negative) critical estimation of the poet prodigal, is appended to the October eclogue in which it is precisely the status or “weight” of poetry and its relative sources of enthusiasm that are at issue.

One of the *Calender*’s clearest denunciations of love as an unsuitable source of poetic inspiration is made within an exchange between Cuddie and Pires, two characters in the October eclogue. Pires begins by extolling love’s virtue in relation to Colin’s poetry:

... love does teach him climbe so hie,  
And lyftes him up out of the loathsome myre:  
Such immortall mirrhor, as he doth admire,  
Would rayse ones mynd above the starry skie.<sup>134</sup> (91-94)

To this Cuddie responds: “All otherwise the state of Poet stands, / For lordly love is such a Tyranne fell: / That where he rules, all power he doth expell” (97-99). Helgerson represents Cuddie’s response as “swiftly put[ting] down” Pires’s defence of love. Yet Cuddie’s witness against “lordly love” cannot be trusted, for it is immediately followed by a laughably impotent boast and set within a rambling argument that thoroughly undercuts itself.

Setting epic over and against pastoral, Cuddie characterizes “vaunted verse” (presumably the high poetic genre of epic) as “compass[ing] weightye prise” and comprising “throndring words of threate” (100, 103, 104). He then goes on to declare that the composition of such verse “a vacant head demaundes” driven by drunkenness—for “when with Wine the braine begins to sweate, / The numbers flowe as fast as spring doth ryse” (100, 107-8). In addition to the ironic derision suggested by Cuddie’s “vacant head,” the theory that “Bacchus fruite is frend to Phoebus wise” (106) is inevitably suspect, particularly with respect to an English Protestant readership. A vacant head, absent of both learning and poetic design, is only what is required if

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<sup>134</sup> Spenser’s spelling of Piers’s name continually alternates and I have preserved these alternate spellings.

poetry literally depends upon the visitation of an inspiring spirit. By designating “Bacchus fruite” (wine) as the particular spirit that might inspire him, however, Cuddie takes the metaphorical idea of (Appolonian) inspiration by metempsychosis and makes it both literal and laughably material. As though to confirm the untrustworthiness of Cuddie’s judgment, the latter goes on first to boast: “Thou kenst not Percie howe the ryme should rage. / O if my temples were distaind with wine, / And girt in girlonds of wild Yuie twine” (109-11), before admitting in the very next stanza, “But ah my corage cooles ere it be warme” (115). The admission of poetic impotence, in the absence of wine and wild ivy, essentially condemns Cuddie’s reliance upon “Bacchus” to the very charge he had laid against “lordly love”: “where he rules, all power he doth expell” (99). The “forceful critique of the conventional poet-lover” is thus thoroughly disarmed by the speech within which it is entangled. Spenser’s *Calender* stages a critique of the conventional poet-lover represented by Colin only to place this critique on trial by setting up a Bacchic straw-man alternative and finding the latter lacking.

The poetic persona of Colin Clout begins in the January eclogue by breaking his “pype” (spurred by erotic frustration) and ends in the December eclogue by growing weary and hanging up his pipe. As Helgerson notes, the return of renunciation at the end of the cycle appears to condemn the endeavours of the poet-lover to a limbo of plaintive futility: “Before he loved, Colin had sung the praises of the shepherds’ god, Pan, and of the queen, Eliza. With love’s fading, his verse once again achieves something like disinterested exaltation in the visionary elegy for Dido. But under love’s influence, he can manage only melodious self-pity” (“New Poet” 899). This reading squares with Colin’s dismal view, in the December eclogue, “of all my harvest hope I have / Nought reaped but a weedye crop of care” (121-2). It also squares with

Colin's complaint to Hobbinol, which appears at the close of the November eclogue, of his loss of poetic ambition following the loss of his faithless love Rosalind.

The problem with the concordance between the denunciation of love as unfit matter for anything like the exaltation of "vaunted verse" and Colin's complaints, however, is that Colin's testimony appears to be every bit as misleading as that of Cuddie. Colin's complaint to Hobbinol is disingenuous in the extreme:

Of Muses Hobbinol, I conne no skill  
For they bene daughters of the hyghest Jove,  
And holden scorne of homely shepheards quill: ...  
I play to please my selfe, all be it ill.

Nought weigh I, who my song doth prayse or blame,  
Ne strive to winne renowne, or passe the rest  
With shepheard sittes not, followe flying fame: ...

The God of shepheards Tityrus is dead,  
Who taught me homely, as I can, to make.  
He, whilst he lived, was the soveraigne head  
Of shepheards all, that bene with love ytake:  
Well couth he wayle hys Woes, and lightly slake  
The flames, which love within his heart had bredd, ...

Now dead he is, and lyeth wrapt in lead, ...  
And all hys passing skil with him is fledde,  
The fame whereof doth dayly greater growe. (June 65-91)

This deeply ironic speech of Colin's points up the errors in the boastful speech made by Cuddie.

If Cuddie declares that "vaunted verse" a "vacant head demaundes," Colin (as a transparent and comic Spenserian persona) displays a head full to overflowing with copious and accurate

knowledge of the poetic tradition.<sup>135</sup> Colin's speech proceeds according to a pattern of systematic contradiction. The editors of the *Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser* gloss

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<sup>135</sup> This example bears out Guillory's argument that Spenser conceives the idea of inspiration in the metaphorical sense: the authority of auctorial inspiration is created through acknowledgement/recitation/imitation of auctorial texts which follows upon assimilation and mastery of the material assimilated.

“conne no skill” as “know nothing.” Colin claims to know nothing of the muses before proceeding to name them the daughters of Jove (Zeus) and to acknowledge the scorn in which they hold shepherds thereby suggesting his ready and jesting familiarity with the invocation to the *Theogony*: “And once they [i.e., the muses, daughters of Zeus] taught Hesiod fine singing, as he tended his lambs below holy Helicon” (3). Colin’s claim that the muses holden scorn of homely shepherds quill” is an artful jumbling of the Hesiodic muses’ scorn-filled conferral of poetic inspiration upon “Shepherds that camp in the wild, disgraces, merest bellies” (Hesiod 3). For good measure, Colin also denies having aspired to “Parnasse hill” (June 70), thereby referencing his “ignorance” of an alternative to Hesiod’s tradition of the muses—an alternative tradition found in Ovid and Plutarch among others, in which the muses have their home not on “holy Helicon” but on Mt. Parnassus.

Claiming to “play” for his own ears only, Colin denies striving to “winne renowne, or passe the rest,” insisting that it is not proper (“sittes not”) for a shepherd to pursue “flying fame.” The irony here is that in that first shepherd-poet’s other extant work, the *Works and Days*, is related a story of Hesiod’s participation in a poetry competition at Chalcis in Euboea, “where I may say that I was victorious in poetry and won a tripod with ring handles” (56). Colin is advancing a poetic argument (via ironic example) against the idea that exalted verse—possessing anything like the divine inspiration E.K. attributes to the ancient Poet—might ever be the work of a vacant head. Colin claims ignorance while demonstrating (either his own or Spenser’s) knowledge of the traditions surrounding the muses as daughters of Zeus/Jove and their relation to the renowned and victorious poet-shepherd Hesiod. Then, having first made the claim to give no consideration to the rules of epideictic poetry—“Nought weigh I, who my song doth prayse or

blame”—Colin proceeds to praise Chaucer (under the Virgilian persona of Tityrus).<sup>136</sup> Helgerson claims that under love’s crippling influence Colin “can manage only melodious self-pity,” yet here he is, in his diminished, love-lorn capacity, praising Chaucer not only as a shepherd in line with those other inspired shepherds of surpassing skill (Hesiod and Virgil/Tityrus) but as the very “God of shepherds” whose Orphic skill so great that “some little drops” thereof would impart to Colin the power to “learne these woods, to wayle my woe, / And teache the trees, their trickling teares to shedde” (June 93, 95-96). Indeed, with such skill, Colin—again giving no thought to “who [his] song doth prayse or blame”—imagines his “plaints” would “Flye to my love, where ever that she bee, / And pierce her heart with poynt of worthy wight” (June 97, 98-99). That is, through the effective affective force proper to epideictic poetry Rosalind would be moved to condemn her own mistreatment of Colin.<sup>137</sup>

The final and perhaps most significant detail that argues against the reader’s unqualified acceptance of Cuddie and Colin’s rejection of love as an adequately exalted source of poetic material and inspiration<sup>138</sup> is the fact that Tityrus is described as “soveraigne head / Of shepherds all, that bene with love ytake” (June 83-84). In other words, Colin has learned his poetic skill from the English God of inspired poet-shepherds whose sovereignty pertains

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<sup>136</sup> Spenser here makes indirect and ironic reference to the close association of poetry with epideictic rhetoric (the rhetoric of praise and blame). As Alastair Minnis points out, in Averroes’s influential “Middle Commentary on the Poetics” (translated by Hermann the German in 1256), the “very first comment on poetry... is the firm declaration, ‘Aristotle says: Every poem, and all poetic utterance, is either praise or blame’” (282).

<sup>137</sup> Even while referring to wished-for literal inspiration by “some little drops” of Chaucer, the god of shepherds’ skill, Spenser demonstrates the assimilative (laboriously text-based) nature of Colin’s and/or Spenser’s (metaphorically) inspired verse.

<sup>138</sup> These eclogues make constant sport with the notion of inspiration. Pires’ statement that “love does teach him climbe so hie,” like Cuddie’s use of Bacchus, suggests literal inspiration by an active divinity (whom Cuddie then denounces as a “Tyranne fell.” Spenser’s references, via Colin, to the origins and original writings of the pastoral tradition as well as the inclusion of Chaucer’s works within this tradition (Chaucer being named god of love-lorn Shepherds) make clear that if “love” teaches Colin (or Spenser himself) to climbe, this exalted and exalting teaching (or metaphorical inspiration) comes via the author’s assimilation of the textual tradition.

specifically to the domain of the lover's complaint. However much he protests his ignorance, it is precisely within the divine domain and exalted lineage of Hesiod, Virgil, and Chaucer (styled love-poets) that Colin professes and proves himself to be "pypping lowe in shade of lowly grove" (June 71).

Helgerson characterizes Spenser at this stage in his career as "burdened with his poetic gift, unwilling to waste it, not knowing how to use it" ("New Poet" 901). The judgment is likely sound considering Spenser's middling social and economic status, the poor contemporary estimation of poets and poetry, and the relative scarcity of patrons. What the above analysis suggests, however, is that Spenser knew *enough* to use his poetic gift to mount an artfully contrary argument for the persistence from antiquity of a tradition of inspired and properly inspiring poetry which extended through Chaucer (in whom it was in no way diminished, but amplified) to himself. Spenser also knew to locate his argument in the lowly valleys beneath Helicon and Parnassus in such a way as to stress the traditionally divine and generically inaugural character of pastoral while insisting upon the nobility, within this pastoral tradition, of amatory verse.

By repeating the critique and tracing the commonly imagined contour of poetry's degenerate contemporary form within the *Calender* itself, Spenser creates ironic distance between the critique and his own poetry. In staging both a renunciation of poetry and a mock depreciation of amatory verse within the pastoral genre that signaled the beginning of a Virgilian career, Spenser announces his intention to dramatically exceed the limiting contours of contemporary poetry. Spenser situates the contemporary critique of poetry (and poet-prodigals), which the *Calender* parodies and exploits, *beneath* his manipulation of the "low" style and subject matter of inspired pastoral in the tradition of Hesiod, Virgil and Chaucer. Through

Chaucer's divinization as the god of love-poet shepherds, Spenser further exalts amatory verse, insisting that the specifically amatory tradition of pastoral is invested with the power of auctorial inspiration. Colin's inspiration is that of the *Calender* as a whole: it is of a piece with the humanists' transformative process of assimilative participation and participatory renewal. Through the ironic protestations of ignorance within his cornucopian song of origins in the October eclogue, Colin bears witness to Spenser's participation in and renewal of the auctorial and amatory poetic tradition.

### **Love and Stately Service**

Spenser's use of enfolding or nesting structures throughout his works allows lower, common, secular, and worldly objects (and even genres) to be assimilated within and/or justified by higher, regal, sacred, and divine objects. At the same time, his Reformation ideal of chaste marriage allows Spenser to use Eros in order to overturn hierarchies of objects, genres and poetic conventions as he playfully arranges them within the transformative web of his epideictic song.

In *Spenser's Famous Flight*, Patrick Cheney traces the arc of Spenser's career as follows: "After publishing a pastoral in 1579, three books of an epic in 1590, a volume of love lyrics in 1595, and three more books of an epic in 1596, the New Poet reinvents the Virgilian Wheel a last time by inserting the hymn as the final spoke" (195). As Helgerson notes, it was this Virgilian "model that offered [Spenser] his best hope of escape from the constricting Elizabethan pattern of a poetic career [as amateur prodigal]," particularly given that "for the gentleman, the profession of letters, as a *gagne-pain*, did not yet exist" ("New Poet" 900-903). The Virgilian Wheel, consisting of the progression from pastoral (Virgil's *Eclogues*) to didactic (the *Georgics*)

to epic (the *Aeneid*),<sup>139</sup> was habitually collapsed by Renaissance authors and critics into the basic progression from pastoral to epic and was a career pattern strongly associated with laureate ambition amongst sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English poets.<sup>140</sup>

In Spenser's case, the model underwent substantial revision amounting to a type of Christian, and more specifically Augustinian, conversion of the Virgilian career. Cheney identifies two classes of poetic model that exerted significant influence upon Renaissance poets and which Spenser uniquely combined in producing a coherent synthesis of classical and Christian elements that Cheney terms Spenser's "Orphic idea of a literary career" (*Famous Flight* 6). On one side of this synthesis are the Virgilian, Ovidian and Augustinian generically exclusive "careeric" models:

If the Renaissance Virgilian model displays the poet's turn from pastoral to epic to complete a courtly career successfully, the Ovidian model presents the poet's writing of love poetry as a hapless interruption to that career. By contrast, the Augustinian model emphasizes the poet's need to end such a career by turning from youthful, courtly, erotic poetry to aged, contemplative, divine poetry... [These] models constitute competing choices for the contour of the Renaissance poet's career, they also ensure the valuation of four genres central to the Renaissance hierarchy of genres: pastoral, epic, love lyric, and divine poem or hymn. (*Famous Flight* 5-6)

In all three models, Virgilian, Ovidian, and Augustinian, the writing of love-poetry is accorded an episodic place within an evolutionary narrative that represents it in negative terms. On the other side of Spenser's careeric synthesis are the generically inclusive "hierarchical" models originating in treatises by humanist literary critics such as Julius Caesar Scaliger and George

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<sup>139</sup> While insistently drawing attention to the Virgilian model informing his work, Spenser deviates from it by moving directly from pastoral to epic and leaving out the stage of Georgic or didactic poetry unless, as Richard Neuse has argued in "Milton and Spenser: The Virgilian Triad Revisited," both the *Epithalamium* and the first three books of *The Faerie Queene* constitute a type of Georgic transition.

<sup>140</sup> With regards to Spenser's adoption and adaptation of the Virgilian model, see Helgerson's *Self Crowned Laureates*, pp. 21-100.

Puttenham and providing “an inclusive, encyclopaedically arranged generic map for wide formal experimentation” (*Famous Flight* 6). The humanist critics might share the dismissive regard of their *auctores* for amatory verse, but they were nevertheless able to turn the latter (via the rules of epideictic rhetoric) to good effect in teaching virtue through the illumination of blameworthy action and its motivations.

Cheney’s conception of Spenser’s Orphic career model is derived primarily from the October eclogue of *The Shepheardes Calender* (*Famous Flight* 27). The October eclogue, as we have already seen, presents a dialogue between Piers and Cuddie concerning the historical and contemporary estimation and practice of poetry. In the course of their discussion, Cuddie’s plaintive representations reflect the amateur prodigal’s conception of poetry as a trifling occupation fueled by wine (“Bacchus’ Fruit”) and ultimately committed to indolence: “But ah, my Courage cools ere it be warm, / For-thy content us in this humble Shade: / Where no such troublous Tides han us assaid” (October 115-117). In his intermittent and self-indulgent pursuit of poetry, Cuddie appears both restrained by and complacent in the poor contemporary estimation of “the state of poet.” Piers, for his part, proposes a far more ambitious and “troublous” (in the sense of a dolorous or pains-taking) poetic program.

Providing an alternative to Helgerson’s suggestion that, at the time of the *Calender*’s composition, Spenser was “burdened with his poetic gift, unwilling to waste it, not knowing how to use it,” Cheney reads “Piers’s career program as a projected solution ... [to] an actual career problem faced by the New Poet in the late 1570s” (“New Poet” 901; *Famous Flight* 30). In Cheney’s reading, Piers vocalizes what is essentially a prophetic moment of careeric self-fashioning on Spenser’s part. Cheney provides the following rough outline of the poetic program

that Piers suggests to Cuddie and the relation of this program to Spenser's actual poetic production:

Piers follows Virgil in beginning with the pastoral, but he evidently ousts the georgic (in keeping with Renaissance practice...), moves the epic into the second position, adds love poetry, and concludes with the hymn. Remarkably, Piers's program looks like the actual publication record of the four main works that end up ordering Spenser's career. The 'lowly dust' of pastoral corresponds to the 1579 *Calendar*; the 'awful crowne' of epic, to the 1590-6 *Faerie Queene*; the 'love and lustihead' of lyric to the 1595 volume bridging the two instalments of the epic, *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*; and the 'heaven[ly]' flight of hymn, to the 1596 *Fowre Hymnes*. (*Famous Flight* 30-31)

Cheney's identification of the general parallels between Piers's career program and the chronology of Spenser's major publications suggests the intentional—or, at the very least, self-conscious—nature of Spenser's deviations from established careeric patterns. In their appropriative rearrangement Spenser appears to treat these genre-structuring career models much like any other element of an *auctore*'s work subject to Renaissance practices of imitation.

In a radical departure from the Virgilian career model—equally departing from the Augustinian and Ovidian models—Spenser advances from pastoral to epic only to interrupt the latter stately service (after publishing the first three books of *The Faerie Queene*) with the publication in 1595 of *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*. As Cheney notes, Piers draws attention to the renewal or energizing force of the love lyric to uplift the poet in his ultimately heavenward generic ascent. Piers (and Spenser, through Piers) insists upon a clear return to amatory verse after the “stubborne stroke of [the] stronger stounds” of epic. One may question, however, to what extent and in what respect Spenser's epic itself may be distinguished from amatory verse.

As Andrew Hadfield notes,

*The Faerie Queene* is dedicated to a virgin queen, but the thrust of its narrative is towards marriage and reproduction as the desirable goals of life.... The opening line of *The Faerie Queene* is a stark, even coarse, reminder of sexual desires and

needs... (255) The first instalment of the poem ends with... Britomart staring at Scudamore and Amoret, the lovers she has helped to unite, as they combine to create a hermaphroditic form (*Life* 262)

Spenser's epic, the "stubborne stroke of stronger stounds" notwithstanding, is very much concerned with love and its (most often failed) approach through limited virtues. Furthermore, in Spenser's *Shepherd's Calender* the genre of pastoral is epitomized by Colin's description of Chaucer: as Chaucer is the god, so pastoral is the poetry "Of shepheards all, *that bene with love ytake*" (84; my emphasis). As Elizabeth Biemann notes, "Spenser presents himself consistently as the poet of love – even when his topoi are more apparently aesthetic, social and political, or cosmological" (152). Piers significantly claims that Eros may transport the poet heavenward. What Piers is not given to understand (or communicate), however, is that when Spenser turns from the higher genre of epic to the lower genre of love lyric he will also be turning from the topic of love imperfectly attained—by a cast of knights representing partial virtues—to the kindred yet more elevated topic of mutual love fulfilled.

When Spenser interrupted the epic *Faerie Queene* with the publication of the amatory lyric sequences *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*, he was ostensibly turning from "bloody Mars" to "love and lustihead" and following the program suggested by Piers to Cuddie within the October eclogue of the *Shepherd's Calendar*. This might well have seemed a significant step down, for a readership versed in the Renaissance hierarchy of genres: from the stately service of epic to morally ambivalent amatory malingering. Indeed, Spenser seems to toy dismissively with this very assumption of generic rank in Sonnet 80 of the *Amoretti* cycle when he begs rest from his epic endeavour, "After so long a race as I have run / Through Faery land" (648). Spenser proceeds to ask that, until he be again "refreshed," he be "give[n] leave ... in pleasant mew, / to sport my muse and sing my loves sweet praise: / the contemplation of whose heavenly hew, / my

spirit to an higher pitch will rayse” (648-9). The “mew,” as Cheney points out, was the cage in which trained hawks were kept while moulting. Thus, the love lyric as mew is that cage in which “[t]emporarily grounded, the hawk can develop wings essential to its high soaring mission” (*Famous Flight* 152). Cheney rightly argues that Spenser is here representing the love lyric as a space in which he can refresh his energies and develop wings for further poetic flight. And yet, while Spenser has made it clear that he will be returning to the “strong endeavour” (656) of epic, he has not, in fact, likened that endeavour to poetic *flight*.

The way in which Spenser’s verse is threaded into Cheney’s own phrasing concerning the poet’s mission obscures a curious ambivalence in Spenser’s sonnet. Cheney writes that “[b]y perceiving his beloved’s ‘heavenly hew’ in the love lyric, [Spenser] can ‘rayse’ his ‘spirit’ to the ‘higher pitch’ of epic” (*Famous Flight* 152). The love lyric renews Spenser’s energies for the future “strong endeavour and attention dew” to epic, but in fact Spenser does not seem to represent either the “higher pitch” or the poet’s winged flight as belonging to epic. The love lyric as mew prepares the poet for flight, yet the first half of Sonnet 80 describes the poet’s work on the *Faerie Queene* as the long race he has “run” (648). The metaphor Spenser employs to characterize himself as epic maker is that of a steed, and a steed runs on the ground.

The significant contrast of avian and equine metaphors in Sonnet 80 operates a surprising inversion of the traditional hierarchy of love lyric and epic genres. The contrast between earth-bound epic and soaring amatory lyric is unexpected, curious, and begs explanation. But this first hierarchical inversion is followed by another considerably more jarring. In the same sonnet’s closing couplet, Spenser actually draws attention to the preceding lines’ potential to slight both his stately service and his sovereign. With marked disingenuousness, Spenser qualifies his reference to the “heavenly hew” of the “love” for whom he sings—“But let her prayes yet be

low and meane, / fit for the handmayd of the Faery Queene” (649). Somewhat incautiously signalling the threat that his sovereign’s jealousy could pose, Spenser requests (of his muse?) that the glory of his own Elizabeth’s “prayses” be lowered, indeed that they be “low and meane.” The reader is left to surmise that such “low and meane” estimation is “fit” for the “handmayd of the Faery Queen,” not as her own fair appraisal but because such poor estimation is pleasing to the Queen herself. The upshot here is that “low and meane” seem rather fitly said of a sovereign who might be jealous of her handmayd’s praise.<sup>141</sup> By this reading, the love lyric lifts the poet’s “spirit to an higher pitch” from which he then feels compelled to lower his song out of consideration for the petty jealousy of his patronizing “Faery Queene” (649).

Sonnet 85 repeats the idea that envy poses a threat to the poet’s love but it introduces a further development. Beginning with a meditation upon the ignorance of “[t]he world that cannot deeme of worthy things” the poet proceeds into a revelation of the true estimation of his love: “Deepe in the closet of my parts entyre, / her worth is written with a golden quill: / that me with heavenly fury doth inspire, / and my glad mouth with her sweet prayses fill” (651-2). The final couplet of Sonnet 85 then appears to respond to the poet’s earlier and potentially insincere request (in Sonnet 80) that his love’s praise “yet be low and meane,” by positing a future time “when as fame in her shrill trump shal thunder, / let the world chose to envy or to wonder” (652). The fame the poet speaks of is that ensured for his beloved by his own poetic praise anticipated as the “thunder” of fame’s “shrill trump.” Indeed, this praise of his beloved rather than the labours of the *Faery Queen*, would appear to correspond to the “higher pitch” to which love raises the poet’s spirit in the October eclogue. This is not the “higher pitch” that heralds the

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<sup>141</sup> The reality of this threat is well attested in the remarkable fall from grace of Sir Walter Raleigh.

poet's return to the land-hugging toilsome race of epic, but the higher pitch that heralds the poet's soaring flight in *Epithalamion* when all threats are passed and the day of Spenser and Elizabeth Boyle's marriage is upon them.

When Spenser challenges the contemporary diminishing of amatory verse he also challenges Petrarchan conventions. As Alexander Dunlop notes in his introduction to the *Amoretti* cycle: "[t]he fundamental Petrarchan tension is ultimately between a God-centered and a self-centered universe. The only resolution is renunciation of one of those centers" ("Amoretti" 586). Seeming to conform to this basic Petrarchan pattern, the opening sonnet of the *Epithalamion* foregrounds the poet-narrator's self-centered desires with Spenser asking of the muses ("Ye learned sisters"):

Helpe me mine owne loves prayes to resound  
Ne let the same of any be envide,  
So Orpheus did for his owne bride,  
So I unto my selfe alone will sing,  
The woods shall to me answer and my Eccho ring. (14-18)

Spenser here employs the model of Orpheus to describe the manner in which he wishes his "owne loves prayes to resound." Through its repetition of first person pronouns the sonnet indicates its self-centred focus. There is, however, a certain calculated degree of irony in Spenser's adoption of Orpheus as his model. On the one hand, Spenser's interruption of epic is a "powerful Orphic resolution to the Protestant poet's problem" represented by "the problematic role of the love lyric in a laureate career" (Cheney, *Famous Flight* 188). Spenser is, after all, using "Orpheus' song for Eurydice as precedent for his own song for Elizabeth" (Cheney, *Famous Flight* 188). On the other hand, in "Virgil's Gnat," Spenser portrays Orpheus as carrying the blame for Eurydice's continued Stygian imprisonment: "But cruell Orpheus... / Seeking to

kisse her, brok'st the Gods decree, / And thereby mad'st her ever damn'd to be" (470-472).

Spenser imitates to overgo, and this applies even to the mythic Orpheus.

Spenser is more careful than both his Orphic and Petrarchan models. By singing "unto my selfe alone," he removes himself from the company of his Eurydice and thereby removes the threat that precipitous love poses to their union in view of God's decree. Having sung his love in perfected imitation of Orpheus so as to safely convey both himself and his beloved to the gates that will release them into new life together, Spenser is poised to overgo Petrarch as well:

Open the temple gates unto my love,  
Open them wide that she may enter in, ...  
... this Saynt with honour dew, ...  
Bring her up to th'high altar that she may  
The sacred cermonies there partake,  
The which do endlesse matrimony make[.] (204-217)

When Spenser sings and celebrates his desire, he takes care that this song participates in the greater music which altogether plays "[t]he praises of the Lord." Spenser's *Epithalamion* thus celebrates an ideal of divinely sanctioned marriage that resolves the Petrarchan tensions between worldly and spiritual good, between self-centred and God-centred experience, and between pagan and Christian poetry.

Spenser's *Epithalamion* dismantles the traditional opposition between erotic love for something merely mortal<sup>142</sup> and faithful devotion to God. Indeed, Spenser insists upon his earthly marriage and also his *Epithalamion* as themselves constituting a celebration of God:

And let the roring Organs loudly play  
The praises of the Lord in lively notes,  
The whiles with hollow throates  
The choristers the joyous Antheme sing,  
That al the woods may answere and their eccho ring. (218-22)

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<sup>142</sup> In the final sonnet of the Canzoniere cycle Petrarch laments "those past times / I spent in loving something which was mortal" (see below).

The integration and enfolding of Spenser's marriage within the sacred ceremonies of the Church is paralleled by the integration and enfolding of the sonnet cycle within the liturgical calendar<sup>143</sup> and (via corrective imitation) of Orpheus in Christian song. These Spenserian gestures of enfoldment can hardly be called Erasmian strategies. They are, however, consistent with the pronounced inclination of Erasmian Humanism to conserve all that is good and beautiful under the auspices of providence and in doing so to provide a Christological justification for the celebration of their harvest.<sup>144</sup>

The harvest represented in Spenser's *Epithalamion* performs a double office of personal celebration and public instruction. The turn from *The Faerie Queene* to *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion* is not only a turn away from epic to lyric. It is also a turn from one Elizabeth (Crown Regent) to another (Spenser's betrothed), and from the ground-hugging race of indentured servitude to free soaring and culturally transformative personal celebration. As *The Faerie Queene* insists upon reminding Queen Elizabeth of her failure to attain the Reformation ideal of married chastity, so Spenser's celebration of his own achievement of the same serves as further instructive rebuke. In *Epithalamion*, as Hadfield notes, Spenser goes so far as to depict the queen, in the figure of Cynthia, "looking into his bedroom on his wedding night... staring in

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<sup>143</sup> Alexander Dunlop, Alastair Fowler and Kent Hieatt have traced out numerological connections between the *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion* sonnet cycles and the liturgical calendar for 1594, the year of Spenser's marriage to Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle. The essential anchoring points are Sonnet 22 corresponding to Ash Wednesday (13 February 1594), Sonnet 62 corresponding to New Years day (25 March 1594), and Sonnet 68 corresponding to Easter (31 March 1594). Anne Lake Prescott further notes that "the 89 sonnets of the *Amoretti* sequence "are equal in number to the 89 readings provided by the Prayer Book for the Sundays and holy days of the ecclesiastical year" (87).

<sup>144</sup> This is the inclination exemplified most clearly by Erasmus's work *The Antibarbarians*. Erasmus's conception of the dispensation of Christ's providence includes not only great works, but the faculties by which they were accomplished and the desire that motivated the pursuit of that accomplishment: "Everything... valiantly done, brilliantly said, ingeniously thought, diligently transmitted... prepared by Christ... who supplied the intellect, [and] zest for inquiry..." (60).

jealousy at her subjects” (*Life* 306). Hadfield’s reading of Spenser’s approach to sexuality in *The Faerie Queene*—“that Holiness... far from being the apex of Christian virtue, is a first stage only, something that has to be... *fleshed out*” (*Life* 260; my emphasis)<sup>145</sup>—accords well with that of Elizabeth Biemann:

Spenser’s poetry of personal love, like the love theory he develops in the hymns, demonstrates his conviction that sexual appetite in the early experience of the developing soul must not be hastily repudiated. That which begins therein, ‘below,’ may ultimately prove through healthy growth the currency of salvation for the whole. (152)

Eros properly attained transports the poet heavenward. At the same time, the love lyric—with its lighter notes figuring Spenser’s personal achievement of the “Reformation ideal of marriage”—serves as yet another instructive exemplar for queen and country (Hadfield, *Life* 261).<sup>146</sup>

Elizabeth may be Cynthia—the imperial moon of Faery land—watching over and jealously guarding her subjects, but Spenser is the orient star guiding them all towards cultural integration and erotic fulfillment.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> I have taken liberty with Hadfield’s phrase, but only so as to tailor it to the larger argument he is making.

<sup>146</sup> Hadfield characterizes the lesson given in the following terms: “marriage in relation to Holiness (as) ... answer to the question Aristotle poses of how one should live one’s life” (*Life* 259). Hadfield is referring to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* pp. 4-6.

<sup>147</sup> For Cynthia as imperial moon I am again drawing upon Hadfield’s discussion in *Edmund Spenser: A Life* (306).

## Chapter 3

### Spenser's *The Fowre Hymnes*

#### Classicizing Exegetical Poetry

*The Fowre Hymnes* (1596) is one of Spenser's last published and most ambitious works. In view of the (pseudo-Aristotelian) received wisdom that "all poetic utterance, is either praise or blame" of more and less noble objects, it was possible in Spenser's day to conceive the nobility of a poetic work according to its contemplative proximity to God as the ultimate object of praise. On such terms, *The Fowre Hymnes*, with the vision of heavenly Sapience at its zenith, represents the crowning achievement of Spenser's career. The *Shepherd's Calender* had introduced Spenser as the "New Poet" and one meriting his place in auctorial company. *The Fowre Hymnes*, in its turn, sought to establish Spenser as English poet-divine and one meriting comparison with those poets, as Sidney writes, "chief, both in antiquity and excellency, [who] did imitate the inconceivable excellencies of God." In composing *The Fowre Hymnes*, Spenser was not only ensuring that Christianity was "adorned and supported by the finest studies" (*Antibarbarians* 60), he was fulfilling the mythical office idealized by Erasmus and other Christian Humanists, the office of a poet-theologian like those "[i]n ancient times [when] poets and theologians were held to be the same people..." (*Antibarbarians* 74).

With *The Fowre Hymnes* Spenser appears to heed the exhortation in Sidney's *Defence*, calling for English poets to direct their literary gifts towards the pursuit of divine praise. Whereas Sidney had restricted his divine making to biblical translation, however, Spenser embraces the "inconceivable excellencies of God" and the "mysteries of the faith" as falling within his poet's purview. In *The Fowre Hymnes* Spenser is quite literally "singing the praises of the immortal

beauty, the immortal goodness of that God who giveth us hands to write, and wits to conceive” while turning his eyes to the providential supply of the classical Eros tradition for the “new budding occasions” of his divine song (*Defence* 113).

Both the practice of converting pagan learning and eloquence to Christian purpose and the legitimation of this practice mounted back at least as far as Augustine and Jerome. *The Fowre Hymnes*’ uninhibitedly programmatic pursuit of this practice, however, is suggestive of Erasmus’s totalizing pronouncement (via Batt) in *The Antibarbarians* that “[e]verything in the pagan world that was valiantly done, brilliantly said, ingeniously thought, diligently transmitted, had been prepared by Christ for his society” (60; my emphasis). In conceiving the tradition of *bonae litterae* as a dispensation of providence, Erasmus and other Christian humanists lent a general Christian validity to pagan culture, the specifics of which simply awaited able interpreters.

In addition to conceptually christening pagan literary culture, Erasmus had opened the gates of theology to the poet’s tribe with an exegetical method that accorded definitive authority to the philological and rhetorical learning of the grammarian. In a private letter to Antoon Van Bergen, Erasmus declares it “utter madness... even to put a finger on that part of theology which is specially concerned with the mysteries of the faith unless one is furnished with the equipment of Greek as well since... no one ignorant of that language could grasp even the primary, or, as our theologians call it, literal, meaning”<sup>148</sup> (*Letters* 142-297 25). To begin to understand the mysteries of the New Testament, in Erasmus’s view, exegetes required considerably more than a working knowledge of and proficiency in *koine* or common Greek. The grammarian’s

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<sup>148</sup> The letter is n.149, “To Antoon Van Bergen” (1501).

interpretative method, which Erasmus both practiced and propounded, involved approaching the Bible as one would any “literary” text. To properly approach the mysteries of the faith, one needed abundant experience of the poetic language and rhetorical strategies that the biblical authors bring to bear on their elevated subject, and for that one needed to be steeped in the ancient poets.<sup>149</sup>

In exhorting his readers to humanist study, Erasmus proposes that *everything* of value in antiquity should be considered a providential dispensation of Christ. Similarly, in exhorting English poets to Christian employment, Sidney proposes that *all created things* provide occasion for divine praise: “we could turn our eyes to nothing, but we should ever have new budding occasions” (*Defence* 113). *The Fowre Hymnes* remains conceptually consistent with the tenor and scope of Erasmus and Sidney’s exhortations in its Christian appropriation of classical and pagan material. Spenser, however, does not appear to share either Erasmus or Sidney’s view of poetry’s limited role in relation to Scripture.<sup>150</sup>

When Erasmus opened the gates of theology to the poet, he welcomed the latter only as an interpreter. Erasmus’s exegetical method treated the Bible as literature but *bonae* and *sacrae litterae* remained clearly distinguished within the act of interpretation, and proper interpretation remained the final goal.<sup>151</sup> For Spenser, the capacity for able scriptural interpretation fostered by

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<sup>149</sup> It might be assumed that beyond the exegete’s necessary knowledge of *Koine* or common Greek (the Greek represented by the New Testament itself), knowledge of classical Greek would be of little consequence. For Erasmus, however, the language of the New Testament is in tension with that of the classical world from which it draws ideas and idioms and from which even its accidental departures may be significant.

<sup>150</sup> Erasmus’s forays into what might be termed divine poetry are almost all limited to the genre of scriptural paraphrase. The one great exception to this rule is Erasmus’s *Moriae encomium* (*The Praise of Folly*). The relation of Erasmus’s ventriloquism of Dame Folly to his use of a fictional narrating voice in biblical paraphrase is explored in Mark Vessey’s “The Tongue and the Book: Erasmus’ *Paraphrases on the New Testament* and the Arts of Scripture.”

<sup>151</sup> As an unusual exception to the clear distinction Erasmus maintained between *bonae* and *sacrae litterae*, Mark Vessey has described Erasmus’s curious use of a Virgilian intertext in his paraphrase of the Lucan gospel. See Vessey’s “Interpretation in Erasmus’s *Annotations on Luke*.”

a formation in *bonae litterae* and the classical languages is not only propaedeutic to the higher employment of theology. For Spenser, contrary to Erasmus, this same classically cultivated capacity for scriptural interpretation is propaedeutic to the inspired creative work of a theologically profitable poetry.

*The Fowre Hymnes* presents itself as both a work of Christian Humanist erudition and divinely inspired poetry. In its first pair of hymns to love and beauty, *The Fowre Hymnes* provides a compendious distillation of the mythologizing poetry of love and beauty through the persona of a benighted pagan narrator. In its second pair of hymns to heavenly love and heavenly beauty, *The Fowre Hymnes* provides a meditation upon Christian archetypes of love and beauty through the persona of a devout Christian contemplative. The entire work is prefaced by a dedication announcing the author's intention that the second pair of heavenly (and Christian) hymns act as a retraction of the first pair of worldly (and pagan) hymns. In the artificial rationale of the dedication, the heavenly hymns are later compositions benefitting from the spiritual maturity and wisdom of the poet's advancing years while the worldly hymns suffer from the blameworthy imperfections of the poet's earlier youthful ignorance.

The artifice of retraction within the dedication of *The Fowre Hymnes* provides a formal mechanism for binding the work's two pairs of hymns together as though they were the mirroring productions of one and the same narrator in two phases of life.<sup>152</sup> The narrative perspective represented within the second pair of heavenly hymns naturally corrects that of the first. Within this process of correction, however, the heavenly hymns also weave a host of

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<sup>152</sup> The retraction is artificial by design. No reader is likely to be convinced, or to imagine he or she is meant to be convinced, that Spenser's youth was shrouded in pagan ignorance. To the extent that any identity may be preserved between the poet-narrator of the worldly hymns and that of the heavenly hymns, it must be as a sort of Humanist's poet-everyman—an everyman whose history represents the evolutionary development of the species (that of poet) as a whole.

significant pagan motifs from the earthly hymns into the scriptural narratives they represent. Indeed, *The Fowre Hymnes* programmatically develops pagan motifs in ways that suggest hitherto “inconceivable excellencies” and “mysteries of the [Christian] faith” (*Defence* 86; *Letters* 142-297 25). This use of pagan motifs in singing the praises of the Christian godhead was challenging but not incomprehensible. The classicizing imagery and eloquence of *The Fowre Hymnes*’ vision of the Christian godhead was anticipated by the Erasmian conception of the divine *Logos* as the providentially supplied copious discourse of God. With *The Fowre Hymnes* Spenser was effecting a radical assimilation and adaptation of both Christian Humanist concepts and theological method. Erasmus had treated the Bible as literature for the purposes of exegesis. Spenser took the humanist idea of interpretative continuity between *bonae* and *sacrae litterae* as a pretext for the paired and parallel structure of his pagan and Christian hymns. In *The Fowre Hymnes* Spenser treated the Bible as literature and proceeded to make classicizing exegesis into poetry.

### **Heralding “Retraction”**

*The Fowre Hymnes* opens with a dedication, to “the Ladie Margaret Countesse of Cumberland, and the Ladie Marie [Anne] Countesse of Warwicke,” that announces the corrective intention of the work as a whole. In the dedication, Spenser confesses to having produced a pair of blameworthy erotic hymns to love and to beauty in the “greener times of [his] youth” (*infra*). He further notes that these hymns may have found favour with such young and carelessly impressionable readers as “do rather sucke out poyson to their strong passion, then hony to their honest delight.” Regret that “many copies thereof were formerly scattered abroad,” together with the reproof of one of his dedicatees, has spurred him to produce a corresponding pair of

heavenly hymns “to amend, and by way of retractation to reforme” his earlier creations. Through their joint publication, the second pair of praiseworthy hymns to heavenly love and heavenly beauty shall effect the instructive “retractation” and “reforme” of their too worldly counterparts. As Mary I. Oates writes of this dedication, “Spenser sounds as though he has written two religious hymns to atone for two secular hymns so sensual in nature that they actually corrupted the young” (“Retractions” 145).

There is general consensus among literary critics today that Spenser’s retractative dedication constitutes a gesture of self-authorizing rhetorical artifice and that it is functionally integral to *The Fowre Hymnes* as a single unified poetic structure.<sup>153</sup> I am in agreement with Anne E. Tanski when she argues that the oppositions between “youth and maturity as well as between passion and wisdom” that the retractative dedication projects upon the binary structure of *The Fowre Hymnes* are artful contrivances. The first two hymns are less likely to have been written in Spenser’s “youth and passion” and more likely to have been “written to represent youth and passion” as well as, I would add, Neoplatonizing Petrarchan poetic culture (*Mount Up Aloft* 8, 5).

Readers of *The Fowre Hymnes* could look back upon a longstanding and widely employed auctorial convention of retraction or apology within both secular and ecclesial tradition. As Anita Obermeier notes,

In both late antiquity and the Middle-Ages, the old-age topos becomes a conventional structural element for many Christian writers who want to polarize their intra-auctorial careers as a movement from youth—the preferred but still misspent time for secular love poetry—to old age—the time for the true (“verae”) things in life... (Obermeier 34)

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<sup>153</sup>On the conventional opposition of youth/maturity, passion/wisdom in the post-Augustinian tradition of authorial retraction, see also Anita Obermeier’s *The History and Anatomy of Auctorial Self-Criticism in the European Middle Ages*.

Horace (65-8 BCE) was one of the very first to apply the rhetorical, retractative artifice of the ‘wisdom of old age versus foolishness of youth’ trope to the canon of his works. After composing his *Ars amatoria* (*Art of Love*), Ovid composed a palinode as retractative companion piece entitled *Remedia amoris* (*Cures for Love*). In the final poems of the *Canzoniere*, Petrarch transitions into repentant apology for his former love of Laura and the vanity of this love’s attendant song. As conclusion to *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer begs his reader to accept his “retracciouns” while claiming that any displeasing faults within this or other earlier works have not been the product of “wyl” or “konnyng” but rather of simple ignorance (“unkonnyng”) (*Complete Poetry and Prose* 393). Perhaps the most significant precursor of all, for this most singularly theological of Spenser’s poetic works, was Augustine’s *Retractationes* (427 CE), a lengthy work of intra-auctorial self-criticism and bibliography composed by the author in his early seventies.<sup>154</sup>

Spenser’s retractative dedication aligns him with an illustrious lineage of secular and ecclesial auctores all of whom employed literary retractions as a means of auctorial self-promotion. It is significant that Horace’s renunciation of the poetic products of youth is already a gesture of rhetorical artifice rather than true repentance. Indeed, subsequent authors appear to have taken pains to prevent their retractions from being understood too literally.<sup>155</sup> The opening of Ovid’s retractative *Cures for Love* includes an address to Cupid: “Sweet boy, I’ve not betrayed you or my talent / And no new muse unweaves work done before” (151). This apology to Cupid guides the reader’s interpretation by reaffirming the value of Ovid’s earlier verse. In the penultimate lyric poem of the *Canzoniere* cycle, Petrarch addresses the “King of all Heaven”: “I

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<sup>154</sup> The two books of the *Retractations* were completed in 427 CE.

<sup>155</sup> See Obermeier’s discussion of Horace’s couching retractative statements in the conditional tense, pp. 33, 34 and n.39, 40.

go my way regretting those past times / I spent in loving something which was mortal / instead of soaring high, since I had wings / that might have taken me to higher levels” (365 p.77.ll.6,1-4).

Petrarch’s apology then issues into a final poem-prayer (song 366) addressed to the Virgin Mary, which serves as palinode to the rest of the collection. The magnitude of the imbalance is significant: more than three hundred and sixty lyric poems sing and soar after mortal love while a single poem soars after higher levels in the praise of the holy Virgin. The inclusion of the retractative palinode hardly places the rest of the collection under erasure. On the contrary, it invites Petrarch’s readers to revisit and review, and perhaps even savour, the poet’s fault. Similarly, Chaucer’s “retraccioun” is a complement to rather than a cancellation of texts. Chaucer lists his blameworthy titles for the reader even as he accuses his youthful ignorance and repents for their production. Chaucer does not say he wishes he had never written those things that the reader finds displeasing but says only that he “wolde [ful fayn](#) have seyde [them] bettre if [he] hadde had [konnyng](#)” (393).

Spenser needn’t have borrowed the common-place old age vs. youth trope directly from Horace or any of the other subsequent above-mentioned *auctores*. That said, the dedication’s elaborate style is visibly derivative. Robert Ellrodt suggests that Spenser’s “argument and imagery” in the retractative dedication to *The Fowre Hymnes* are so very common in Spenser’s period as to be considered “hackneyed” (14). Ellrodt notes the significance of the phrasing found in Benivieni’s near-contemporary *Ode of Love*—“molte copie uarii luoghi disseminata”—which is translated directly into Spenser’s dedication as “many copies thereof were formerly scattered abroad”<sup>156</sup> (Ellrodt 14). The verbatim translation of Benivieni’s retractative excuse (with its

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<sup>156</sup> Ellrodt also notes that “Castiglione’s excuse for publication [of *The Courtier*] was not unlike Spenser’s and Benivieni’s” and he further adduces a number of late sixteenth-century English parallels” (*Neoplatonism* 14).

implicit reference to Petrarch's "Scattered Rimes") alerts the reader to the very tradition of poetic retraction, reminding them not only of other retractative works but of the auctorial tradition to which these, with *The Fowre Hymnes* now among them, belong.

Spenser's specific use of the latinate term "retractation" (rather than either the more common "retraction" or the already archaic Chaucerian "retraccioun") may have been intended, like his conspicuously literal translation of the phrase from Benivieni, as a visual cue alerting the reader to the presence of Augustinian *topoi* within *The Fowre Hymnes*.<sup>157</sup> That *The Fowre Hymnes* appears, in the retractative aspect of its dedication, to herald itself as a distinctly Augustinian project may have suggested to some readers an earnest repentance on the author's part regarding his earlier poetic production. Yet as Henry Chadwick notes, "almost half of [Augustine's *Retractations*] consists in telling critics that he has nothing to withdraw" (xiii). Thus, for the Christian humanist reader familiar with the original *Retractations*, Spenser's Augustinianizing is more likely to have suggested the rhetorically eloquent assertion of the author's own canonicity. As S.P. Tatlock writes, the *Retractationes* "was meant to be a review and re-vision of all [Augustine's] earlier works... His main object is to restate, revise or withdraw passages which he now feels to be objectionable; but he also reviews his own progress as a theologian" ("Chaucer's Retractions" 522). This review of his spiritual progress is explicitly held up by Augustine as representing a model for imitation: "Let those, therefore, who are going to read this book not imitate me when I err, but rather when I progress toward the better. For, perhaps, one who reads my works in the order in which they were written will find out how I

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<sup>157</sup> In Erasmus's edition of Augustine (1529), the *Retractations* is placed at the very beginning. According to the OED the primary meaning of this term, current in Spenser's day as today, is "[a] reconsideration or re-examination of something previously discussed. Chiefly in the title of or with reference to a book by St. Augustine containing further treatment and corrections of matters dealt with in his earlier writings."

progressed while writing” (*Retractions* 5). Through the artifice of Augustinian retraction—visually implied by the orthographic echo of Augustine’s *Retractationes*—Spenser’s dedication suggests that, in its re-vision of objectionable erotic/pagan/Petrarchan poetry and in its demonstration of the poet narrator’s theological progress, *The Fowre Hymnes* may be taken as an exemplary object of imitation. Like Augustine’s work, *The Fowre Hymnes* is to be followed not where the author/narrator errs, but where (through the labour of interpretation) he “progress[es] toward the better” (*Retractions* 5).

The single most important Augustinian *topos* within *The Fowre Hymnes*, is that of the Christian interpretation of pagan texts. As Brian Stock writes, Augustine was “the point of reference to which later writers invariably returned in their search for the roots of problems concerning reading and interpretation” (1-2). In composing a poetic work of syncretic exegesis Spenser had almost no choice but to begin from Augustine. Spenser’s *The Fowre Hymnes* announces itself as an Augustinian project and proceeds in typically humanist fashion to exploit its Augustinian orientation in order to achieve the ambitious ends of a theological poetry.<sup>158</sup> In signalling *The Fowre Hymnes*’ Augustinianizing narrative framework, the dedication simultaneously assigns the readers their corresponding interpretative posture—the work will demonstrate the spiritual progression of a life and, in the process, present patterns of (interpretative) experience worthy of imitation.

With its dual poetic and patristic parentage, Spenser’s dedicatory retraction serves as a perfectly appropriate bridging mechanism for the inter-orientation of pagan and Christian material in *The Fowre Hymnes*. In positing the progression of a life from pagan idolatry to

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<sup>158</sup> Spenser had significant precedent in adopting and exploiting Augustine in defense of poetry. In the *Secretum* (*De secreto conflictu mearum*) Petrarch employs a version of Augustine in order to work out a justification of his poetic vocation in light of his Christian faith. See Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle, *Petrarch’s Genius* 15.

Christian fidelity set out in correctively mirroring hymns, the dedication anticipates the interpretative conversion of “pagan spoils” to their “right use” in Christian service.<sup>159</sup> Finally, in depicting the work as an Augustinian biographical progress-narrative concerned with the scripturally informed right interpretation of texts, the dedication also implies that *The Fowre Hymnes* will build towards that most Augustinian of objectives, “the achievement of eschatological (re)union with God [when] reading and interpretation... superseded by a higher mode of wisdom (‘sapientia’)... transform into an intuitive apprehension of God” (Ettenhuber 16).<sup>160</sup>

As the retractative dedication suggests, *The Fowre Hymnes* will be a work of retrospective, confessional fiction covering the progression from youth to old age and from pagan ignorance to Christian enlightenment. In its description of the poet-narrator’s vision of Sapience, however, *The Fowre Hymnes* ultimately disappoints (or exceeds) Augustinian expectation regarding the final intuitive apprehension of God. If *The Fowre Hymnes* had remained faithful to the Augustinian model, its epiphanic culmination in visionary union with God would have remained beyond the reach of human language.<sup>161</sup> The narrative framework Spenser employs in *The Fowre Hymnes* is recognizably Augustinian. The final vision of God and

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<sup>159</sup> The conversion of “pagan spoils” to Christian purpose was an important rhetorical strategy traditionally associated with Augustine. For the Christian’s responsibility to take up the “spoils of the Egyptians,” see Origen’s “A Letter from Origen to Gregory.”

<sup>160</sup> Ettenhuber’s concise formulation (read without interruption in her original text) of Augustine’s fundamental interpretative goal and the means by which it is achieved perfectly mirror the progressive interpretative and ultimately visionary narrative in Spenser’s *The Fowre Hymnes*.

<sup>161</sup> This idea is perhaps most fully developed in Stanley Fish’s seminal work *Self Consuming Artifacts* in which Stanley Fish looks at the long Augustinian tradition whereby the contemplative work becomes a “vehicle of its own abandonment”(3). In his *Canzoniere*, Petrarch illustrates this evolutionary principle of transcendence not with an ascetic shift into pregnant silence (that of an abandonment of literary vehicles in meditation) but through the shift of object in his final poem from Laura to the heavenly Virgin. As I argue below, there is considerable resonance between Petrarch’s poem 366 of the *Canzoniere* and Spenser’s vision of Sapience in the final hymn in honour of heavenly beauty within *The Fowre Hymnes*.

language that animates this narrative, however, appears considerably closer to that of Erasmus than that of Augustine. The figure of Sapience, as *The Fowre Hymnes*' crowning vision of the heavenly beauty of the Christian godhead, invites copious and eloquent praise. Spenser's artful retraction of neo-platonizing amatory poetry eschews the contemplative Augustinian silence that lies beyond words' power to signify. Rather than following Augustine, Spenser follows Erasmus and other like-minded humanists in celebrating the copious revelation of a Christian godhead that delights in language as the providential vehicle by which it is known and exalted.

### **Corrective Illumination**

The generically typical nature of the Neoplatonist features employed in *The Fowre Hymnes*' first pair of worldly hymns does not mean that Spenser or *The Fowre Hymnes* should be considered Neoplatonist. On the contrary, Spenser's first hymn in praise of Cupid illustrates the harmful folly of its narrator, of his pagan culture, and of a hyperbolized Petrarchan genre of blameworthy, idolatrous love.<sup>162</sup> Through its mirroring structure of Neoplatonizing pagan and Christian sequences, *The Fowre Hymnes* represents pagan narratives concerning the nature of love and beauty as imperfectly, ambivalently, and sometimes perversely prefiguring Christian revelation.<sup>163</sup> On the one hand, this mirroring process privileges the second pair of Christian

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<sup>162</sup> The narrator of Spenser's first hymn seems to exemplify the words of Hugh of St. Victor, "just so the foolish natural man who does not perceive the things of God sees outwardly in these visible creatures the appearances but does not inwardly understand the reason" (Charles Singleton *Dante's Commedia: Elements of Structure* 25). Spenser's copious use of a particularly Petrarchan Neoplatonism implies that retractative correction in *The Fowre Hymnes* concerns not only the errant view of Spenser's (ostensibly autobiographical) narrator but the broader Petrarchan culture of contemporary poetry as well.

<sup>163</sup> According to Ellrodt, "courtly and Petrarchan notions... command [Spenser's]... interpretation of Neoplatonism" (124). Of the conventional form of Spenser's Petrarchism, Ellrodt writes: "the dramatic 'frame' of the first two Hymnes—the poet courting an 'obdurate lady and suing for grace [see H.L., 1-14, 141-154; 293-307; H.B. 273-87]—is 'Petrarchan' in the worst sense: it repeats frigidly the Petrarchan commonplaces on the 'enmarbled' heart of a 'rebellious Dame' or the lover's 'long pynning grief', but affords none of Petrarch's subtle notations of a lover's moods" (122).

(heavenly) hymns as corrective antidote. On the other hand, with their quasi-typological function *The Fowre Hymnes* attributes providential (albeit ambivalent) significance to the first pair of pagan hymns. Spenser's representations of Neoplatonism in *The Fowre Hymnes* are thus consistent with the Erasmian position on the learning and eloquence of the pagan classical culture: "Their age produced this harvest of creative work, not so much for them as for us" (60). *The Fowre Hymnes* assimilates the pagan material, wresting it from its former wicked employment and converting it, via progressive interpretative correction, into knowledge and praise of Christ and the Christian godhead.<sup>164</sup>

Following its retractative dedication, *The Fowre Hymnes* begins with the pagan "Hymn in Honour of Love" which opens as a lover's complaint blending praise of the god of Love with an insistence upon the narrator's own suffering in the manner of Ovid's *Amores*.<sup>165</sup> This hymn's conventional opening further echoes the Petrarchan Neoplatonic tradition and perhaps most particularly, as Jefferson Fletcher has abundantly shown, Girolamo Benivieni's highly popular *Ode of Love*.<sup>166</sup> Echoes of Benivieni in the opening stanzas of Spenser's first hymn signal the contemporary poetic tradition within which he is working while also linking that tradition and Benivieni's work in particular with the erroneous and (anachronistically) pagan outlook parodically represented in the earthly hymns.

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<sup>164</sup> I am here echoing Augustine: "these treasures... from the mines of providence... which were wickedly and harmfully used in the service of demons must be removed by Christians... and applied to their true function, that of teaching the gospel" (Christian Teaching 64). By gaining knowledge "via negation," I am simply referring to the practice (in Calvinist terms) of "understand[ing] accurately what Christ was" by determining what he was not (CCC 145). Calvin's reading of Colossians on this topic (dispelling false doctrine) is discussed below.

<sup>165</sup> For the analogous text in Ovid, see *Amores*, second elegy, Book I. According to M.L. Stapleton, "Ovidian eroticism asserts itself in *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion* and *Fowre Hymnes*... [and] the Ovidian work most analogous to these Spenserian texts is one that scholars have infrequently mentioned in this context, the *Amores*" (*Spenser's Ovidian Poetics* 182).

<sup>166</sup> Fletcher's essay, "Ode of Love" and Spenser's *The Fowre Hymnes* (1911), remains instructive, in spite of its being an ancient example of the no longer central work of source hunting,

The description of Love in “An Hymn in Honor of Love” is one of praise, but, for its Christian readers, it is the ironic praise of blameworthy and even demonic features. This first hymn describes Cupid’s reign as a “rule of tyranny” (Bjorvand 18):

Love, that long since hast to thy mighty power  
Perforce subdued my poor captived heart  
And, raging now therein with restless stour,  
Dost tyrannise in every weaker part (HL 1:1-4)

The initial picture of Cupid as a mighty, raging and tyrannical conqueror is one to which Spenser’s pagan narrator consistently returns. Love is described as a “Great god of might ... Victor of gods, subduer of mankind” (HL 7:43, 45). The glory of his might is deemed inexpressible (HL 7:49). He is called “Tyrant love,” [who] dost laugh and scorn ...[and] dost triumph in [the] decay” of those whose suffering he has caused with “his sharp empoisoned darts” (HL 20:134,137; 18:121). His “victorious conquests” (HL 2:11) and “wondrous triumphs”(HL 3:18) consist in the abasement of all those who, “with wide wounds imbrued” (HL 2:13), suffer his influence.

The description, in the “Hymn in Honour of Love,” of Cupid’s “rule of tyranny” (as god of Love) is in marked contrast to the later description, in the “Hymn of Heavenly Love,” of Christ’s “rule of grace” (also as God of Love). In the first stanza of the earthly hymn, the conventionally Petrarchan and pagan narrator relates his experience and anticipation of Love’s infliction of suffering. In the first stanza of the heavenly hymn, the Christian and anti-Petrarchan narrator relates his hope of exaltation. In the heavenly hymn, the theme of love’s infliction of suffering appears to be absent but, in fact, it has been displaced. *Exaltation* in the heavenly hymn stands in the place of *suffering abasement* in the earthly hymn. This asymmetry with respect to Love’s agency carries, concealed within it, the salvific symmetry of a divine accounting—a

reconciling of all things in Christ, much as Paul describes in his letter to the Colossians.<sup>167</sup>

Necessarily implicit in the Christian narrator's hope of exaltation is his God's incarnated experience of suffering and death: Christ sacrifices himself for love of humanity. Thus, in both hymns a profound link between love and the experience of suffering is maintained. In the pagan hymn the experience of love is characterized by the suffering of the fallen narrator absent the promise of redemption. In the "Hymn of Heavenly Love," the experience of love is characterized by the hope of the narrator in light of the redemptive suffering and sacrifice of Christ.

In the "Hymn of Heavenly Love," Christ's sacrifice for humankind constitutes an experience of love as suffering:

O huge and most unspeakable impression  
Of love's deep wound, that pierced the piteous heart  
Of that dear Lord with so entire affection  
And, sharply launching every inner part,  
Dolours of death into his soul did dart,  
Doing him die that never it deserved,  
To free his foes that from his hest had swerved. (HHL 23:155-161)

Spenser's description of Christ's loving sacrifice corresponds, both thematically and through verbal echoes, to the pagan narrator's initial description of the suffering inflicted upon him by the mighty personification of his own idolatrous Love, Cupid. In the opening stanzas of the earthly hymn, the narrator had related the "wide wounds" his tyrannical lord has inflicted upon the victims of his many victorious conquests (HL 2:13). In terrified awe, he had asked "[w]ho can express the glory of thy might?" (HL 7:49). Where the earthly hymn related the suffering of love's subjects, in the "Hymn to Heavenly Love" it is the Lord of love himself who receives the "deep wound" and whose heart is pierced. Where the pagan narrator's heart was penetrated by

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<sup>167</sup> Paul writes, God has chosen to "reconcile all things unto him self, and to set at peace through the blood of his crosse both the things in earth, and the things in heaven" (Col. 1.20 GNV).

Cupid's "sharp empoisoned darts" (HL 18:121), and subdued by force, Christ has freely chosen and subjected himself to the soul darting "dolours of death." There is nothing doctrinally challenging about the Christ narrative as Spenser tells it in *The Fowre Hymnes*. The challenge is, instead, one related to genre and the Humanist classicizing cultivation of Christian eloquence. In the mirroring symmetry of the two pairs of hymns, Spenser uses the pagan hymn-form to structure his poetic paraphrase of the biblical Christ narrative.

In the worldly "Hymn in Honour of Love," the pagan narrator's suffering under Cupid's "rule of tyranny" is described in the opening stanzas. In the "Hymn of Heavenly Love," Christ's suffering for the sake of his own rule of mercy is described in the centrally located twenty-third stanza. This spatial displacement mirrors the cosmic displacement of suffering within Christian providential history from the individual, as peripheral and alienated creature, to the God of Love, as central and mediating Creator. In the "Hymn in Honour of Love," the narrator's experience of love as suffering within the pagan and Petrarchan paradigm epitomises the darkness of the fallen world. In the "Hymn of Heavenly Love," Christ's sacrifice—Christ's own experience of love as suffering—dispels the darkness and raises the narrator up out of the fallen world. Taken together, these two accounts of love as suffering describe what Brian Stock calls the "biblical drama of alienation and return" (*After Augustine* 3). Spenser's pairs of hymns effectively dramatize a historical progress of the Western poetic tradition. This is a progress narrative that is only fully comprehensible in the context of the Augustinian idea of a providentially supplied, salvific history—an idea of progressive revelation that was amplified within Christian Humanist culture.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Much of my argument here is running in close parallel to arguments advanced by Carol Kaske in her *Spenser and Biblical Poetics*. The essential terms of our arguments, however, are not easily reconciled. Kaske emphasizes the Christian Humanist "adiaphorist" character of Spenser's contradictions—for instance, contradictory images within

The twenty-third stanza of the heavenly hymn displaces and transforms the earlier pagan experience of love and suffering with which the worldly hymn began. This same stanza also repeats and inverts elements from its numerically correspondent counterpart in which the benighted pagan narrator queries the nature and identity of Love:

But if thou be indeed (as men thee call)  
The world's great parent, the most kind preserver  
Of living wights, the sovereign lord of all,  
How falls it, then, that with thy furious fervour  
Thou dost afflict as well the not-deserver  
As him that doth thy lovely hests despise,  
And on thy subjects most dost tyrannise? (HL 23: 155-161)

Spenser generates significant irony by having the pagan narrator question his own understanding and characterization of love in terms reminiscent of Christ. The three descriptive phrases, “world's great parent,” “most kind preserver,” and “sovereign lord of all” are all recognizably attributable to Christ. The inclusion of these particular epithets in close succession, within the pagan narrator's queries, casts the shadow of a clearly delineated Christian counter-reading. The worldly and heavenly twenty-third stanzas function as a kind of typological call and response with the pagan narrator's language ironically anticipating its Christian revision.

Spenser's ironic, querying description of Cupid encourages his readers to review their knowledge of the pagan Eros tradition in relation to their biblical knowledge. The cluster of attributes represented in Cupid's epithets resembles the cluster of attributes represented in the description of Christ in the opening passages of Paul's letter to the Colossians. Stressing Christ's universal sovereignty as Creator (echoed by Cupid's attribute of “world's great parent” and

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the *Faerie Queene* that appear to promote religious toleration between English Protestant and Romanist Christians.(97) I emphasize the providentially supplied character of Spenser's pagan images in *The Fowre Hymnes* as these promote a supercessory Christian *copia*. Kaske mentions the seventeenth century concept of “progressive revelation” in her discussion of biblical analogues to Spenser's use of contradictions. (129)

“sovereign lord of all”), Paul writes: “For by him were all things created which are in heaven, and which are in earth, things visible and invisible... all things were created by him, and for him” (Col. 1.16 GNV). Concerning Christ’s redemption of humanity by becoming co-participant in the fall of humankind (echoed by Cupid’s attribute “most kind preserver”), Paul addresses thanks to God the Father: “Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness... into the kingdom of his dear Son, / In whom we have redemption” (1 Col. 13, 14). Indeed, Spenser’s twenty-third stanza of the “Hymn in Honour of Love” suggests not only Cupid’s typological resemblance to Christ but also the ways in which the pagan tradition “falls,” distorting and perverting the image of divine Love. Having, as the “world’s great parent,” created all things, Christ undergoes his “most kind” incarnation (his becoming *of a kind* with humanity) and the “afflict[ion]” of his sacrifice upon the cross as the archetypal “not-deserver,” in order to buy eternal life for humanity, thereby showing himself to be the “preserver / Of all living wights.” This God of Love comes not with “furious fervour” but with mercy. He does not “afflict” but heals. He does not “tyrannise “ over his subjects but undergoes suffering and death in order to save those who do not deserve salvation.<sup>169</sup>

The process of interpretative revision *The Fowre Hymnes* enacts through its comparative and contrastive mirroring of Cupid and Christ recalls the passage in Paul’s letter to the Colossians declaring the reason or purpose of his ministry: “God wolde make knowen what is the riches of this glorious mysterie among the Gentiles, which riches is Christ in you, the hope of glorie” (Col. 1.25-27 GNV). Through the intricate play of consonance and dissonance between

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<sup>169</sup> An additional point of interest within Paul’s descriptions of Christ in Colossians—and one that makes Colossians particularly relevant to *The Fowre Hymnes*—is the manner in which they combine features of the Johannine Logos and the Hebrew Wisdom (Wis. 7.24; 8.1). While not immediately relevant to the present discussion this is a point to which I will return in my later discussion of the relation between Spenser’s Christ and Sapience.

the descriptions of worldly and heavenly Love—with Cupid appearing as both type and demonic inversion of Christ—Spenser demonstrates that the traditions surrounding Cupid may be read as an obscure and ambivalent foreshadowing of Christ. For the reader who takes seriously both the Pauline notion that “God *wolde* make knowen... the riches of this glorious mysterie among the Gentiles” and the Augustinian notion that the “treasures... of providence... *must* be... applied to... preaching the gospel,” Cupid’s distorted prefiguration of Christ *requires* corrective interpretation. (*Christian Teaching* 64; my emphases)<sup>170</sup>

Spenser’s readership was familiar with both the pagan myths surrounding Eros and Venus (as the gods of erotic love and beauty) and the Christian stories concerning Christ (as the God of charitable love). Considered in light of the truths of their English Protestant faith, Spenser’s readership would not only have recognized errors in the pagan hymns to love and beauty, but would have read the pagan hymns largely *as* error. Spenser’s twenty-third stanza in honour of earthly love depicts the folly of his pagan narrator’s faith but it also leavens this folly with concentrations of unmistakably Christian language, an ironic construction that both emphasizes the error in the pagan narrator’s faith and draws attention to the elements of veiled truth therein. In other words, Spenser implies that the one God of love is indeed “[t]he world’s great Parent, the most kind preserver / Of living wights, [and] the soveraine Lord of all” and that the pagan narrator has some clouded knowledge of Him, even while he is utterly mistaken in attributing to Him the fervour of his own fallen state.(HL 2.156-7) As with Augustine’s depiction of the treasures of the Egyptians, Spenser’s account condemns the idolatrous confusion of

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<sup>170</sup> Carol Kaske notes that “*correctio* functions as a structuring principle between two units which are formally distinct” not only in *The Fowre Hymnes* but throughout Spenser’s works. (124) Noting that in Spenser’s milder or non-iconoclastic corrective contradictions, “both poles of the contradiction have some validity as a kind of double truth,” Kaske concludes that “[f]or Spenser, self-correction is not just a rhetorical device but a habit of mind” (125-6).

“superstitious fantasies... used wickedly and harmfully” while insisting upon the pagans’ clouded portion of providential truth.

*The Fowre Hymnes*’ concern with representing and correcting the pagan tradition’s false doctrine of love mirrors the contemporary Protestant concern with doctrinal reform in the Church. In elucidating the opening passages of 1 Colossians in his *Commentary on Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, Calvin links the praise of Christ with the restoration of “pure doctrine”:

Again [Paul] returns to thanksgiving, that he may take this opportunity of enumerating the blessings which had been conferred upon them through Christ, and thus he enters upon a full delineation of Christ. For this was the only remedy for fortifying the Colossians against all the snares, by which the false Apostles endeavored to entrap them—to understand accurately what Christ was. For how comes it that we are carried about with so many strange doctrines, (Hebrews 13:9) but because the excellence of Christ is not perceived by us? ... This, therefore, is the only means of retaining, as well as restoring pure doctrine—to place Christ before the view such as he is with all his blessings, that his excellence may be truly perceived.<sup>171</sup> (145)

As in Calvin’s passage above, the pagan narrator of the earthly “Hymn in Honour of Love” is “carried about” (or led astray) by strange doctrines “because the excellence of Christ is not perceived by [him].” Calvin’s passage repeats and intensifies the idea found in Augustine that it is the Christian *duty* of the able interpreter to represent and praise Christ “with all his blessings” in such way “that his excellence may be truly perceived.” It is a duty the interpreter owes to his fellow Christians to fortify them against the “snares” of “false Apostles”—the duty of a defender of the faith. Again, there is nothing doctrinally new and challenging about Spenser’s Christ-narrative or about the particular corrections and negations of pagan doctrine that that narrative

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<sup>171</sup> As Andrew Hadfield writes in “Spenser and Religion—Yet Again,” “Calvin’s writing and thought were omnipresent for the educated in Elizabethan England... Spenser grew up in Calvinist times, lived in a city in which Calvinist writings were easily available, and was closely connected to a group of Calvinist educators and divines” (24).

entails. What is new here is that the correction of false doctrine is being used as a pretext for the copious elaboration and affective amplification of biblical narrative in poetic paraphrase.

When the pagan narrator asks why love tyrannizes his own subjects, the English Protestant reader is bound to recognize that the pagan narrator's query entirely mistakes the true nature of love. Moreover, if the reader fails to do so initially, the mirroring stanzas of the "Hymn of Heavenly Love" will further urge this recognition. In terms of the Greek Scripture, the quintessential expression of the nature of love is found at 1 Corinthians 13:

Love suffreth long: it is bountiful: love envieth not: love doth not boast itself: it is not puffed up: It disdaineth not: it seeketh not her owne things: it is not provoked to anger: it thinketh not evil: It reioyceth not in iniquitie, but reioyceth in the trueth: It Suffreth all things: it beleveth all things: it hopeth all things: it endureth all things. (1 Cor 13.4-7 GNV)

When considered in relation to this scriptural definition, Spenser's Cupid represents not love but the darkness of the fallen world that has, as it were, made love over in its own image.

Helplessly mistaking the true nature of love, as Bjorvand and Schell write, the pagan narrator's "praise of Cupid [seems] so grossly inappropriate at times as to verge on blasphemy" (YSP 688). Indeed, the pagan narrator's emphasis upon Cupid's tyranny is strongly reminiscent of conventional Christian representations of both the adversary and the fallen state of humanity. Still within the commentary upon 1 Colossians, Calvin writes:

In the first place, we ourselves are called darkness, and afterwards the whole world, and Satan, the Prince of darkness, under whose tyranny we are held captive, until we are set free by Christ's hand. From this you may gather that the whole world, with all its pretended wisdom and righteousness, is regarded as nothing but darkness in the sight of God, because, apart from the kingdom of Christ, there is no light. (CCC 147)

Calvin's description of the dark "tyranny [under which] we are held captive" is analogous to the pagan narrator's opening complaint relating the torment of his "captived heart" in which love

“[d]ost tyrannise” (HL 1.4) The motif of the light of Christ and the darkness that precedes it is similarly developed and embedded throughout Spenser’s *Hymnes*. In the account of Cupid’s Creation of the world, for instance, he is twice described as “wanting light” (HL 10.70, 11.71). This is in marked contrast with a corresponding heavenly stanza in which the “glorie of [God’s] light” is constantly enjoyed by the angels—“For he his beames doth still to them extend / That darknesse there appeareth never none” (HHL 10.69; 11.72,73).<sup>172</sup> The verbal echoes of terms and phrases—“wide wounds” inflicted by Cupid / “deep wound” inflicted upon Christ; “sharp empoisoned darts” launched by Cupid / “dolours of death [that] dart” against Christ; Cupid’s want of light / the angels’ enjoyment of endless light—direct the reader’s attention to the contrasts and antitheses between the earthly and heavenly accounts of love.

It could be argued that the love of the earthly hymn is quite simply Eros conceived entirely as sexual lust. Following such a reading, the pagan narrator’s love might be considered, in Calvin’s words, “nothing but darkness in the sight of God” and therefore irredeemable. That this is not altogether the case, however, is suggested by the earthly (or natural) hymn’s reference to heavenly love as distinguished from “loathly sinfull lust” (HL 26.179) and its association of this higher aspiring love with “heavens hight” (HL 27.189). As Carol Kaske writes, “Spenser leads the puzzled reader to smooth down the contradiction into a fine distinction” (*Biblical Poetics* 84).<sup>173</sup> The narrator of Spenser’s first two earthly hymns is moved by the Spirit but his

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<sup>172</sup> Of the opposition of light and dark imagery in these stanzas Bjorvand notes that the “contrast is underscored by the selection of rhymewords. ‘Bright-light-high-spright’ abound in the Hymne of Heavenly Love, while ‘light’ in stanza 10 of the Hymne of Love occurs only to stress the absence of light in Cupid’s world” (18).

<sup>173</sup> Kaske’s observation is made in relation to Spenser’s contradictory depiction of the use of rosary beads in *The Faerie Queene*. Kaske sees Spenser’s process of smoothing contradictions into fine distinctions as an aspect of his own positive adiaphoristic thinking (86,87) and his inclination “to train the reader in the discrimination of adiaphora” (87). Kaske importantly rejects the idea (which she finds in King, Gilman, and Greenblatt) that either Spenser’s poetry or his mindset are programmatically iconoclastic.(89)

worship is necessarily misguided, idolatrous, and, from a Pauline and Augustinian perspective, spiritually unprofitable. Nevertheless, the earthly pagan hymn to love clearly suggests the presence of a heavenly dimension within Eros free of sinful taint. Although it lacks the essential guiding knowledge of Christ, there seems to be considerably more light in Spenser's darkened world than Calvin's commentary upon Colossians might allow.

Spenser's hymns contain much of the same material found in homiletic works like Calvin's reading of Colossians but "draw the mind" (Sidney, *Defence* 96) after a different fashion. The tales that Spenser tells in *The Fowre Hymnes* carry out a corrective revision of pagan philosophy through the lens of an English Protestant reading of Scripture. Unlike the treatise of either philosopher or theologian, however, Spenser in his hymns "beginneth not with obscure definitions, which must blur the margent with interpretations, and load the memory with doubtfulness; but he cometh to you with words set in delightful proportion" (Sidney, *Defence* 95). Spenser thereby invites his reader into an active and pleasurable exercise of the understanding that exceeds the audition of doctrinal paraphrase and homile.

In his ironizing construction of the earthly poet-lover's erring interpretation of love, Spenser "epitomise[s] the essential predicament of fallen man" (Bjorvand, "Spenser's Defence" 23). The fallen narrator's mistaken perspectives are a poetically productive artifice investing the earthly hymns' images and concepts with a chiasmic quality. The pagan narrator's descriptions of Cupid cast corrective shadows, anticipating their own transformative refutation. Or, to invoke Sidney's characterization of the poet's seduction into learning, they hang at the opening of the fair vineyard of *The Fowre Hymnes*' instruction, advertising their "delightful proportion" like "a cluster of grapes, that full of that taste, you [the reader] may long to pass further" (*Defence* 95). "Pass[ing] further," from the taste of the worldly pagan hymns to that of the heavenly, leads not

to an outright iconoclastic rejection but rather to the ruminative process of comparative interpretation.<sup>174</sup> The first art of *The Fowre Hymnes* is “not gnosis but praxis” (*Defence* 94): the art of moving its readers with the desire to apply what they know and, enabled by the work’s design, to uncover (as Calvin writes regarding the restoration of pure doctrine), the “full delineation” of the “excellence of Christ... with all his blessings” (CCC 145). The active interpretation of both pagan and scriptural texts arranged according to the poet’s art leads the reader “to understand accurately what Christ was” while embellishing this knowledge with the storied pagan ornament of that which Christ was not. (CCC 145).

### **Conversion of Spoils**

As Robert Ellrodt suggests, the unity of *The Fowre Hymnes* read as two pairs (one earthly and one heavenly) of mirroring hymns to love and beauty is that “of a diptych with parallel but contrasted themes on each leaf” (117). The mirroring analogy between worldly and heavenly forms in *The Fowre Hymnes* is not only corrective but reciprocally interpretative. As Kaske writes, “Spenser regarded this work not as a vehicle of doctrine but as a site of internal contestation, an unresolved debate” (124). Contrary to the conceptual narrowing of doctrinal reform but perfectly in keeping with the Erasmian cultivation of an adiaphoric Christian *eloquentia*, *The Fowre Hymnes*’ assimilative and productive contestation of the pagan eros

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<sup>174</sup> I am in agreement with Kaske’s general position that Spenser tends rather towards adiaphoric, corrective construction—so that “reevaluated images... are not “broken” but reinstated”—rather than iconoclasm.(90). That said, in my view, the mild saving of the phenomena (90) that Kaske observes in the *Faerie Queene* is also operating in the corrective program of *The Fowre Hymnes*. Following Hadfield and Biemann, I disagree with Kaske’s claim that “propositional reversal in the *Fowre Hymnes*—the correction of sexual by Christian love—is indeed self-canceling [i.e., “so violent as to cancel out both image and meaning”]” (90).

tradition expands both the popular conception of Christian godhead and the language proper to its celebratory description.

In the mirroring structure of *The Fowre Hymnes*, the second pair of heavenly hymns comprises an anagogical complement to the first. As *anagoge*—the Christian “[m]ystical or spiritual interpretation” (OED)—the second pair of heavenly hymns provides the dominant master-narrative and “asserts providential history” (Kane 303).<sup>175</sup> Once correctively illuminated, the erring narrative of the worldly hymns is seen to reflect, and its detailing is seen to embellish, the truths of its Christian counterpart. Mary I. Oates reads *The Fowre Hymnes* “like a sonnet sequence, [in that it] pretends to record the artistic creations (in this case, hymns of praise) of a ‘hero’ at different stages of a quest” (Retractions 165). It is a quest, I would add, that both illustrates and plays to the ambivalent perspective of an acutely literate Renaissance Christian readership looking back with both reverence and condescension upon the pagan poets and culture of antiquity.

The pairs of earthly and heavenly hymns, besides representing the archetypal story of incarnational alienation and return, also form an antithetical two-part history of amatory poetry. Each hymn is presented through the eyes of a poet-lover who acts as first-person narrator and whose respective earthly or heavenly perspective represents a distinct vision, not only of love and beauty but of the cosmos in which these function.<sup>176</sup> This alternation between pagan and

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<sup>175</sup> As Sean Kane writes in the *Spenser Encyclopedia*, “Augustine’s philosophical response to the self-defeating contests which the unregenerate will sets for itself is to adduce the principle of hierarchy. By separating the Creator from creation, by relating visible to invisible things as surface to interior, he breaks open the arena of classical materialism. Distinct from a fatalistic view of history based on the cycles of nature, he asserts providential history” (“Latin Father” 303).

<sup>176</sup> I am in agreement with Kaske when she notes that the “*Fowre Hymnes* inscribe contradictory discourses” but we have emphasize different elements in examining these discourses. While I agree that “the ‘Hymne of Love’ inscribes erotic hedonism and idolatry” I am less inclined to see “the ‘Hymne of Heavenlie Love’ inscrib[ing] a narrow and otherworldly Christianity” (123). As I argue below, the otherworldly Christianity of Spenser’s vision

Christian perspectives further mirrors the conventionally Petrarchan alternation between an idolatrous, self-centered experience of love and beauty and a properly Christian God-centered experience of love and beauty. Through the correction effected by the heavenly hymns, Spenser's *The Fowre Hymnes* demonstrates a Humanist and Augustinian right use of the eloquent spoils of pagan poetry—"discern[ing] 'the invisible attributes of God, ... through what has been made... deriv[ing] eternal and spiritual value from corporeal and temporal things" (*Christian Teaching* 10). In other words, the corrective mirroring structure of *The Fowre Hymnes* serves to convert both the earthly hymns' pagan, mythological material and their idolatrous, self-centred Petrarchan perspective into figures of Christian interpretative instruction and divine praise. Where Spenser most radically challenges the Petrarchan tradition, and exceeds Augustine in his conversion of pagan spoils, is in his treatment of Eros. *The Fowre Hymnes* does not merely correct the pagan Eros tradition by suggesting, as Elizabeth Biemann writes, "that eros is an imperfect figuring forth of agape" (156),<sup>177</sup> nor does it merely follow the concluding movement of Petrarch's *Canzoniere* in renouncing the love of mortal woman for the love of God. Instead, *The Fowre Hymnes* lays Christian claim to the motifs of the pagan Eros tradition. This process culminates in the "Hymn to Heavenly Beauty" with the revelatory vision of Sapience—a figure that both eloquently declares the beautiful majesty of the Christian godhead and effectively retracts Christian poetry's required recantation of Eros.<sup>178</sup>

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(especially in the "Hymn to Heavenly Beauty") not only runs counter to doctrinal narrowing but need not be read as definitively anti-erotic.

<sup>177</sup> Biemann here echoes the conclusions of Jacques Blondel for whom, Biemann writes, "the differences separating earthly and heavenly pairs should be understood under the guidance of Paul (I Corinthians 13:12)" (156). See Blondel, "Allegorie, eros et religions dans *The Fowre Hymnes*."

<sup>178</sup> Though in general agreement, my argument here runs counter to Kaske when she claims that in *The Fowre Hymnes*, "[n]either sexual love nor human beauty is reinstated" and that Spenser's "correction of profane by sacred love is iconoclastic" (124, 125).

Spenser signals the considerable and productive importance of the assimilation of pagan “spoils” to his Christian narrative by anchoring a prominent example of it to the first line of the first stanza of the “Hymn of Heavenly Love.” The line, ostensibly addressed to Christ, reads, “Love, lift me up upon thy golden wings” (HHL 1.1).<sup>179</sup> Spenser is here transferring the attribute of golden wings, already mentioned in connection with Eros, from Cupid to Christ. In the earlier “Hymn in Honour of Love,” the pagan narrator distinguishes between mere lust and the higher Neoplatonic conception of love to which he aspires. In the process he both describes Cupid in terms suggestive of New Testament descriptions of Christ and associates the pagan god’s golden wings with the heavens:

... love is Lord of truth and loialtie,  
Lifting himselfe out of the lowly dust  
On golden plumes up to the purest skie (HL 26:176-8)

The pagan narrator’s heavenly aspirations are, of course, corrupted by his unconscious idolatry. Even while paying tribute to love as “lord of truth and loyalty,” he fastens upon the exalted self-mirroring image of his own affection, “the wished scope / Of my desire”(HL 43.296-7). Instead of an exalted freedom in “the purest skie” (HL 26.178), the pagan narrator’s ascent upon Love’s “golden wings” inspires in him an “infinite desyre” (HL 29.202). There is no rest with this love and the lover is “never satisfyde with it” but is beset by “evils which poor lovers grieve” (HL 29, 37).<sup>180</sup> Happiness becomes impossible—indeed, even “when he hath found favour to his will, / He nathemore can so contented rest ... / [but suffers] torment ... hellish paine... [his] life a

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<sup>179</sup> As noted in the *Longman Annotated Edition*, “Golden wings are an attribute of the Orphic Protogonos [or first born] ... who was identified with Eros/Cupid” (354). More specifically, they appear in the *Orphic Hymns* “Hymn to Protogonos” where “Protogonos... born of the egg... delight[s] in his golden wings” (8), and in Aristophanes’ *Birds* where Eros is described “shining with golden wings” (693).

<sup>180</sup> Reference with line numbers: HL 29:199; 37.258

wretches hell... all his ioyes defaced” (HL 36-39).<sup>181</sup> The distinction which the pagan narrator makes and attempts to maintain between earthly lust and heavenly love ultimately eludes him. Instead of being raised out of the lowly dust of worldly suffering, the pagan poet-lover’s ill-fated erotic flight pitches him down, into a familiar, if intensified, darkness.

In a related image, the pagan narrator of the “Hymn in Honour of Love” asks Cupid “to overspred / Me with the shadow of thy gentle wing” (HL 3.19-20). While Cupid is indeed traditionally conceived as the “Winged One” the latter passage bears an unmistakeable resemblance to Psalm 36:7, which describes the winged mercy of God: “the children of men trust under the shadowe of thy wings” (GNV). The Neoplatonic ascent imagined by the pagan/Petrarchan narrator did not entail the lover’s liberation from either desire or suffering but only the latter’s increase. For Spenser’s English Protestant readership, both true heavenly ascent and the sheltering wings of mercy properly belong to their own Judeo-Christian God—and most expressly to Christ as the message, embodiment, and effector of that mercy. Spenser’s analogy between the wings of Christ and Cupid works in two ways. First, it validates Cupid’s attributes of heavenly ascent and mercy as prefiguring (and thus, ultimately, derived from) the attributes of Christ. Second, as heavenward flight and winged mercy are primarily attributed to Christ, so the visually associated attribute of golden plumage naturally transfers to Christ as well. This transfer of Cupid’s emblematic golden wings provides a felicitous analogy to Augustine’s statement in the *Confessions* regarding his own assimilation of pagan learning, “I set my mind upon the *gold* which Thou hath desired Thy people to take away from Egypt, since it was Thine, wherever it was” (180; my emphasis).<sup>182</sup> Spenser’s transfer of qualities, however, goes beyond the discovery

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<sup>181</sup> Reference with line numbers: HL 36,245-6; 37.252-3; 38.265; 39.272

<sup>182</sup> Early Fathers, among whom Origen, Jerome and Augustine, read the despoiling of the Egyptians at Exodus 3:22 as symbolically authorizing the Christian integration of pagan learning.

of vestiges of the Christian godhead promoted by Augustine. Augustine's practice depends, ostensibly, upon the construed resemblance between a given pagan element and a corresponding Christian element attested in Scripture.<sup>183</sup> Enabled by the Christian Humanist view of pagan works as actively participating in the progressive revelations of providence, The "Hymn to Heavenly Love" incorporates the golden plumes of Eros not as a vestigial echo but as a providential supplement in the description of Christ.

There is more to Spenser's appropriation of Cupid's wings for Christian flight than the Christian Humanist plundering of pagan gold for the stores of Christian eloquence. The golden plumes of Cupid are specifically related to his identification with the Orphic *Protogonos* or "first born" god identified with Eros (*supra*), and thus to Cupid's being "eldest of the heavenly Peares" (HL 8.56). The correspondences between the births of Cupid and Christ have been the subject of considerable speculation.<sup>184</sup> The comparison is complicated by Spenser's confusing employment of two distinct and competing accounts of Cupid's birth:

Or who alive can perfectly declare  
The wondrous cradle of thine infancie,  
When thy great mother, Venus, first thee bare,  
Begot of Plentie and of Penurie,  
Though elder then thine own nativitie;  
And yet a chyld, renewing still thy yeares,  
And yet the eldest of the heavenly Peares? (HL 8.50-56)

In this passage Cupid is described first as being born of Venus and then as begotten of Plenty and of Penury. Spenser employs Cupid's contradictory birth-narratives as partial types whose

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<sup>183</sup> "Ostensibly" because in the early-modern period the scriptural grounds for traditional Christian articles of belief were being questioned. Some among Spenser's readership, for instance, might challenge Augustine's discoveries of vestiges of the Trinity, holding Trinitarian doctrine to be an accretion foreign to Scripture.

<sup>184</sup> For discussions of Benivieni and Natalis of Comes as potential sources for Spenser's combination of the Platonic myth that Cupid was born of Plenty and Penury and the tradition that Cupid is son to Venus, see already J.S. Harrison (1903), Renwick (1925), Bennett (1931), Lotspeich (1932) as noted in *Variorum* 1.511.

conflation (in a single unresolved figure) prefigures the mystery of the birth of Christ. As Bjorvand notes, “Cupid is said to be older than his own nativity... like Christ, who before his birth was coeternal with God the Father... both Cupid and Christ are born in time, Cupid through Venus and Christ through the Virgin, and while Cupid is ‘begot of Plentie and of Penurie’... Christ also expresses the paradox of the richness and poverty of Love” (“Spenser’s Defence” 19).<sup>185</sup> Bjorvand thus allows that the two accounts are contradictory within the pagan narrative but that they are not necessarily contradictory when they are interpreted as the obscure reflection of the birth of Christ.

Bjorvand lists the striking similarities between Cupid’s and Christ’s births but is unsure what to make of them. Distrusting the close association his reading suggests, he writes:

It is true that the description of Cupid as “elder then [his] own natiuitie” and “the eldest of the heauenly Peares” ... may seem to link him with Christ, but... the denomination ‘eldest’ has no meaning in relation to the eternal Son. This becomes clear in the Hymne of Heauenly Beautie where Sapience is described as ‘peereless maiesty’” (“Spenser’s Defence” 19).

Bjorvand concludes that the apparent contradiction between Christ’s elder status and the peerelessness of Sapience undermines the analogy and points to Cupid’s being “an earthly parody rather than a type of Christ” (19). While I am in agreement with Bjorvand that Cupid is, generally, an earthly parody rather than a type, I disagree with the contention that the title “eldest of the heauenly Peares” is meaningless in relation to Spenser’s description of the eternal Son.

Spenser could have found patristic warrant for his figure combining the Son’s eternity with his elder generation in Origen’s concept of the eternal generation of the Son.<sup>186</sup> If Spenser

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<sup>185</sup> Bjorvand is citing John Mulryan “Spenser as Mythologist: A Study of the Nativities of Cupid and Christ in *The Fowre Hymnes*.”

<sup>186</sup> The question of whether the Son’s eternity precludes his generation was the subject of much controversy among the early fathers of the Church. See Harry Wolfson, ch.XIV “The Mystery of the Generation,” in *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, p. 287ff.

was following Origen (or another of the early fathers) in imagining an eternally generated Son, this does not necessarily mean he conceived the same conditions of generation for his figure of Sapience. Bjorvand finds that Sapience's description as "*peereless* maiesty" renders meaningless the notion of Christ's being, like Cupid, "eldest of the heauenly *Peares*" (my emphases). It may be possible however, "to smooth down the [apparent] contradiction into a fine distinction" (*Biblical Poetics* 84) if the reader imagines an un-generated Sapience occupying a threshold position between the apophatic transcendence of the Father and the kataphatic manifestation of the "heauenly Peares." Both the Hebrew Wisdom and the Neoplatonist One provide recognizable precedents for such a threshold-figure in which all of Creation is gathered (like thoughts in the mind), in the un-generated pre-existence of a transcendent unity.<sup>187</sup> Returning once again to Colossians, we read of the Son that he is the "image of the invisible God, the first borne of everie creature" (Col. 1.15 GNV). Here in Paul, then, Spenser had precedent for Christ's conception as "eldest [and most honoured] of the heavenly Peares" (HHL 5.31-35). In other words, it is altogether possible, using accessible examples from Scripture and the philosophical speculation of the early Church Fathers, to trace out a meaningful analogy between Cupid's "feigned" and contradictory births and the mystery of Christ's conception(s).

Spenser does not simply equate Cupid with Christ. Instead, he suggestively presents potentially meaningful analogies. The essential, for this reading, is combinatory possibility. The transfer of Cupid's golden plumes to Christ demonstrates that the earthly pagan hymns—and pagan works more generally—may contain detail and insights supplementary to the sacred narratives of Scripture. Within the work of Erasmus, and in particular the *Antibarbarians*, the

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<sup>187</sup> This possibility, which corresponds to the two-stage Logos theory within ante-Nicene patristic philosophy, is explored in detail in the following section in relation to Spenser's "embosoming" of Sapience in the transcendent Father.

pagans of antiquity are credited with achievement of the natural knowledge of God in accordance with the decree of divine providence. Consistent with the received notion of this providential decree, Spenser's Christian graft of Cupid's feathers and his resolution of the contradictory accounts of Cupid's birth in the mystery of Christ's generation demonstrate the poetic capital that may be made of the consonance between pagan and Christian culture.

The instructive totality of *The Fowre Hymnes* is greater than the sum of its heavenly parts taken in isolation. The aesthetic integrity of the earthly hymns, even in their "full wrong divinity" (Sidney, *Defence* 86), suggests the following Augustinian sentiment and sentence from Genesis: "I hold that all things together are better than superior things by themselves... For our God has made 'all things very good'" (*Confessions* 125; Gen. 1: 31). This is, ultimately, the spirit of Spenser's "retractation": it sets the stage, not only for the refutation of pagan error, but for the instructive discovery of divine aspects hidden within the obscure, poetic angles of pagan doctrine. Once discovered, of course, these are to be converted to their right use in "singing the praises of the immortal beauty, the immortal goodness of that God who giveth [poets] hands to write, and wits to conceive" (Sidney, *Defence* 113). When the reader is led—presumably by the spirit as well as by the guiding architectonic of the work itself—to discover the natural knowledge of God within the first pair of idolatrous hymns, then all four of Spenser's hymns participate in singing Christian praise.

Spenser's complicated arrangement of source materials in *The Fowre Hymnes* corresponds to the Christian Humanist idea that obscure prophetic truths have been, as it were, written into the textual fabric of pagan culture. In the "Hymn to Heavenly Beauty," the analogy between God and poet-maker is given ambivalent figurative expression in a passage concerned precisely with the vision of the Christian godhead. Illustrating the providential reciprocity

between Christian and pagan narratives, Spenser assimilates the Neoplatonist conception of the Good, as the divine source of beauty,<sup>188</sup> to both the goodness of Creation attested in Genesis (Gen. 1: 31), and the medieval Christian figure of Creation as a second book authored by God:

The meanes, therefore, which unto us is lent  
Him to behold, is on his workes to looke,  
Which he hath made in beauty excellent,  
And in the same, as in a brasen booke,  
To reade enregistred in every nooke  
His goodnesse, which his beautie doth declare:  
For all that's good is beautifull and faire. (HHB 19.127-133)

The dynamic energy of the lover's desire for the beauty of the beloved animates this passage.

The goal represented is to "behold" the Creator. The means of this beholding have been graciously provided: His "workes" reveal him in the aspect of divine beauty which is simultaneously the mediated revelation of "His goodnesse." This revelatory beholding, however, requires diligent searching similar to the kind of close interpretative reading that inquires into every shadowy "nooke," obscure fragment, and interior angle of a written work.

The idea that the living image of God was to be discovered through reading was central to the Christian Humanist conception of Scripture. Of the Greek Scripture, Erasmus had written, "these writings... render Him so fully present that you would see less if you gazed upon Him with your very eyes" (*Paraclesis* 108). Spenser takes the wholly commonplace Christian Humanist idea of participatory and visionary exegesis and combines it with the Pauline idea that the "the invisible things of him, that is, his eternal power and Godhead, are sene by the creation

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<sup>188</sup> As Dominic J. O'Meara writes concerning Plotinus's description of the relation between the Good and Beauty: "We can speak of the One or the Good as beautiful or as beauty in the sense that it is its presence, its light or 'colour', that generates the beauty of things" (*Plotinus: An Introduction to the Enneads* 98). For a very helpful discussion of the Plotinian One "from which all other principles and things emanate" and "which lies tacitly behind the appearances of the Many" (93, 102) in relation to Spenser's works, see Elizabeth Biemann's chapter on the Plotinian Paradigm in *Plato Baptized* (pp.88-104).

of the worlde, being considered in his works” (Rom. 1.20 GNV). These two commonplace ideas combine, in the figure of the brazen book and its interpretation or exegesis, as a relatively unexceptional elaboration of the idea that nature comprises a second Scripture.<sup>189</sup> What makes this passage particularly remarkable, however, is its grammatical ambivalence. Erasmus’s translations, annotations, and paraphrases demonstrated the power of a grammarian’s method (attentive to the significance of grammatical minutiae) to undermine the dogmatic rigidity of traditional scriptural interpretation. Appropriating the resources of language and scholarship associated with Christian Humanist theology, Spenser’s passage demonstrates the power of a grammarian’s method (actively exploiting points of grammar and grammatical ambivalence) to “discover” pagan ideas and images within traditional biblical narratives.

Spenser follows tradition in using the device of simile rather than metaphor to describe the relation between Creation (as the sum of God’s works) and book: one does not look upon the book of God’s works but rather upon “his workes... *as in* a brasen booke” (my emphasis). Within the parenthetical element that intervenes between “workes” and “booke,” however, Spenser’s ambivalent syntax makes use of metaphor (and not simile) to suggest the identity between the sum of God’s works, and beauty: “his workes... / ... he hath made in beauty excellent, / ... And in the same... / [we are] to reade... / His goodnesse.”

In Spenser’s passage, “workes” can refer either to a plurality of distinct works or to the totality of works taken together. The “workes” of Creation are described as having been “made *in* beauty excellent” (my emphasis). On the one hand, this phrase can refer to the beauty inherent in each of God’s works. Thus, like the famed creations of Hephaestos, each and every work

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<sup>189</sup> John Reichert offers an instructive discussion of the origins and development of the idea of Nature as a second holy Book in *Milton’s Wisdom* pp.21-28.

possesses a beauty which is the recognizable signature of its Creator. On the other hand, following a syntactically marginal reading, the phrase can refer to the totality of God's works implicit or gathered within the higher synthetic unity of beauty. In accordance with Platonic and Neoplatonist doctrine, the Good (which is the beautiful source of all beauty), comprises the unity of the forms by which all things in Creation are generated.<sup>190</sup>

The image of a personified heavenly beauty emerges from this passage through a series of subtle interpretative steps. First, readers may interpret "workes" in this passage as referring to the totality of God's Creation participating in the still un-differentiated unity of a Neoplatonizing "beautie." Second, Spenser's exhortation to read God's goodness "*in the same*" may be interpreted as an exhortation to read God's goodness not in beautiful "workes" but in the ontologically prior figure of a transcendent, all encompassing, and generative "beautie." Third, the possibility of reading Spenser's "beautie" not only as an abstract philosophical concept but as a divine personification is suggested by the speaking part accorded to beauty in "declar[ing]" the goodness of God. Anticipating the vision of Sapience in Spenser's final "Hymn to Heavenly Beauty," the syntax of Spenser's passage makes possible a reading of "beauty" as the personification of the divine yet virtual totality of God's works—the totality *in* whom (as the beautiful mind of God) all works are fashioned.

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<sup>190</sup> The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* offers a particularly straightforward account of the relations involved that is also particularly pertinent to Spenser's composite passage: "Following Plato in *Symposium*, Plotinus traces a hierarchy of beautiful objects above the physical, culminating in the Forms themselves. And their source, the Good, is also the source of their beauty" (I 6. 7). The beauty of the Good consists in the virtual unity of all the Forms. As it is the ultimate cause of the complexity of intelligible reality, it is the cause of the delight we experience in form. (see V 5. 12). <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plotinus/>

## Song of Sapience

The vision of Sapience in the “Hymn of Heavenly Beauty” may be read as an ambitious exegetical conceit exploiting Christian Humanist grammatical hermeneutics and exalting the poet as biblical interpreter. Spenser’s representation of Sapience involves the reintroduction and explication (or unfolding) of the feminine Hebrew Wisdom within the Greek Scripture’s preexistent Christ-Logos narrative.<sup>191</sup> It also assimilates supporting detail for this interpretative unfolding from the pagan traditions surrounding the heavenly Venus as Beauty.

The authority of Scripture and its primacy over subsequent interpretation was a given for English Protestants of Spenser’s generation.<sup>192</sup> The Humanist return *ad fontes* together with the Protestant insistence upon the derivation of doctrinal authority by Scripture alone re-opened questions formerly decided by conciliar or other authoritative voices of tradition.<sup>193</sup> Where biblical material was noticeably obscure, the primacy of Scripture served, on principle, to maintain exegetical openness. Erasmus had imagined and published a God who intended “to remain obscure not only to the apostles but to us” (*Paraphrase on Matthew* 4). In view of the enigmatic design of such scriptural passages, Erasmus counseled an adiaphoric flexibility in the contemplation of matters not fundamental to the faith” (Remer 97).<sup>194</sup> Erasmus did not, however, consider that scriptural obscurity rendered faithful exposition impossible. On the contrary, he

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<sup>191</sup> The most striking example of the assimilation or enfolding of the Hebrew Wisdom within the Christ-Logos occurs in the Johannine prologue.

<sup>192</sup> Admittedly, the Protestant insistence upon the authority of Scripture alone was more an ideal than a practical reality.

<sup>193</sup> In articles VI and XX of *The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* (1563), it reads, “Holie Scripture conteineth all thinges necessarie to Salvation” (71) and further that the church should not compel that anything beside it “bee beleved for necessitie of salvation” (79). In E.C.S. Gibson, *The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* (2nd edn. rev., London, 1898).

<sup>194</sup> Obvious examples of scriptural texts that appear obscure by design include the Song of Songs, Psalms, Proverbs, the Johannine prologue and Revelation.

imagined a special class of bishops whose purity, philological competence, and participatory meditation of Scripture made them capable of the Spirit-inspired exegesis appropriate to scriptural mysteries. Remarkably, Erasmus characterized these spiritual bishops as prophetically invested poet-musicians: “all who profess the name of Christ must strive to ... become lyre players... (20)... [and] any person who undertakes pastoral duties should make it his prime concern to be selected by David... [after the manner of Idythun, and] should sing prophetically, expounding faithfully the mystical sense of Scripture” (23 vol.65)<sup>195</sup> Consistent with this Erasmian ideal of a Davidic, singing episcopate, *The Fowre Hymnes* comprise Spenser’s prophetic song. Moreover, the vision of Sapience in the “Hymn to Heavenly Beauty,” shows Spenser expounding faithfully the mystical sense enfolded within the artful obscurity of the Johannine prologue and other Wisdom-assimilating texts of the Greek Scripture.

In the “Hymn of Heavenly Beauty” Spenser appears to draw his visionary figure of Sapience out of the grammatical irreconcilability of the feminine Hebrew Wisdom with her apostolic and patristic identification as the masculine Christ. In fashioning Sapience within the accommodation of an inter-Testamental grammatical ambivalence, Spenser was following illustrious Christian Humanist example. Erasmus and other grammarian-theologians had insisted upon the importance of the poetic and rhetorical nature and functioning of biblical language “as a medium in the human encounter with God” (Baker-Smith lxxii vol. 63). In keeping with this language oriented focus, Erasmus had cited points of grammar as justifiable grounds for

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<sup>195</sup> As Dominic Baker-Smith notes, in Erasmus’s *Exposition of Psalm 38* “the figure of Idythun (Jeduthun), whom David chose to make music to the Lord, is taken both as the Platonic sage who has leaped out of the shadows of the cave to perceive with eyes of faith the forms of all that is truly good, and also as the model for the successors of the apostles” (lviii vol.63).

challenging even the most revered of exegetical traditions.<sup>196</sup> Considered as the poetic application of a Christian Humanist grammatical hermeneutic, Spenser's *Sapience* comprises an unfolding (*explicatio*) of the Hebrew Wisdom of Proverbs within the Logos narrative of the Johannine prologue. This unfolding of the feminine Wisdom implies a recognition of the previous infolding (*complicatio*) of Wisdom within the figures of the Johannine Logos and the Pauline Christ.<sup>197</sup> It also implies Spenser's willingness to adopt a prophetic persona analogous to that of the Erasmian spiritual bishop and *theodidaktos* whose heart has been prepared through the diligent assimilation of sacred letters, whose "eye of faith... perceive[s] nothing but the things of heaven" and whom the Spirit has graced with the gift of prophetic utterance. (*Ratio* 76)

Exceeding Erasmus in the prophetic imitation of Paul, Spenser would "speake the wisdom of God in a mysterie, even the hid wisdom, which God had determined before the world, unto our glorie" (1 Cor. 2.7 GNV).<sup>198</sup>

Recounting the vision of *Sapience* in the final "Hymn of Heavenly Beauty" involves adopting the prophetic voice of one taught by God. Still further, Spenser's divinely instructed narrator performs his prophetic office by reading/writing against the grain of accepted exegetical tradition. As Kaske notes, Spenser is not always reverent in his employment of biblical imitation:

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<sup>196</sup> In his Latin translation of the New Testament Erasmus chose—on valid and often-to-be-defended grammatical grounds—to translate the Greek term *Logos* within the Johannine prologue by the Latin term *sermo*, instead of by the Latin term *verbum*. The difference was startling: rather than reading, "In the beginning was the word," Erasmus's translation read something like "In the beginning was the discourse or speech or total oration." See Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle's *Erasmus on Language and Method in Theology* p. 25.

<sup>197</sup> For a discussion of *explicatio* and *complicatio*, most famously elaborated in *On Learned Ignorance* by the fifteenth century Neoplatonizing theologian Nicholas of Cusa (Nicholaus Cusanus), see Edgar Wind, *Mysteries of the Pagan Renaissance* pp. 76, 204-7. For a discussion of the assimilation of the Hebrew Wisdom to Christ in both the New Testament and the thinking of the early Church Fathers, see Harry Wolfson, "The Holy Spirit as the Preexistent Christ" in *Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, p.155-165.

<sup>198</sup> In terms of Erasmus's less exalted adoption of a prophetic and/or apostolic narrating persona, Mark Vessey notes that, in order "to make the apostolic teaching dramatically present and 'applaudible' to an otherwise unreceptive audience, Erasmus would 'play the fool for Christ' as Paul had done. That meant acting the Apostle, speaking as if with his voice, so that nothing and nobody – no (other) book or expositor – should seem to come between the reader and the Word of God" ("The Tongue and the Book" 34).

“[b]y contradicting the Bible or exposing its own self-contradictions—and thus in a sense deconstructing it—Spenser imitates the Bible ironically, dialectically, or even eristically” (“Spenser and the Bible” 498). In the “Hymn of Heavenly Beauty,” Spenser reads his Wisdom/Sapience figure back into New Testament narratives concerning the Christ-Logos, much as the Christian exegetical tradition had systematically read Christ into the representations of Wisdom within the Hebrew Scripture.<sup>199</sup>

### Reciting Wisdom’s Lines

In its structure of mirroring pairs of hymns, Spenser’s *The Fowre Hymnes* stages a simple analogy: as Venus/Beauty is to Cupid/Love, so Sapience/Beauty is to Christ/Love. The theological difficulties this analogy presents are two-fold. First, from the early Fathers, through the medieval doctors, to the Protestant theologians of Spenser’s day, Christian interpreters traditionally assimilated the Hebrew Wisdom to Christ. Second, while the identification of Christ and Love might be reflexive for Spenser’s contemporary English Protestant audience, the identification of the Hebrew Wisdom (*Sapientia* in the Latin) with Beauty is not nearly so obvious. To represent the Hebrew Wisdom as an entity or agent distinct from Christ is already a considerable challenge to Christian exegetical tradition. Spenser, however, goes considerably further. Not only does he represent his Wisdom figure, Sapience, as a Queen Regent in Heaven, but (as the following section, “Eros Above,” will show) he represents her as the Son’s beloved—as the eternal and peerless Beauty who impels Christ’s Love.

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<sup>199</sup> Kaske suggests that Spenser strategically sets out to unsettle the reader and cause him or her to suspend judgment: “[t]he resulting indeterminacy is meant to lead the reader towards suspension of judgment—a position called adiaphorism... allow[ing] a certain latitude regarding practices not explicitly and uniformly condemned by Scripture which could serve a good cause” (“Spenser and the Bible” 498).

The exalted and manifold representation of Wisdom in the Hebrew Scripture manifested the artful handling of a prophetic poetry.<sup>200</sup> Not only was the Hebrew Wisdom described in highly poetic passages, but this description was rendered still more obscure by the assimilation of her traits into the Pauline figure of the preexistent Christ and the Johannine preexistent Logos within the Greek Scripture. On the one hand, as Charles Osgood has shown, the primary sources for Spenser's characterization of Sapience are the descriptions of Wisdom within the books of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>201</sup> On the other hand, the terms "Sapience" and "Wisdom," were used interchangeably within the Christian discourse of Spenser's day to denote the intelligence of God as a divine attribute—an attribute that was shared by and integral to (at least according to Augustine) God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (220).<sup>202</sup>

Spenser's modeling of Sapience upon the Hebrew Wisdom complicates the biblical Creation narrative in relation to Christian Logos philosophy. Wisdom 9, Proverbs 8, and Ecclesiastes 24 are three recognizable sources for the description of the Christ-Logos in the Johannine prologue:<sup>203</sup>

Wisdom 9.9:

And thy wisdome with thee, which knoweth thy workes, which also was when thou madest the worlde, and which knewe what was acceptable in thy sight, and right in thy commandements...(GNV)

Proverbs 8.27-30:

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<sup>200</sup> Kaske cites "Proverbs 1-9... the Apocryphal Wisdom 6-9, Ecclesiasticus 1, 4, 6, 14-15, 24, and 51, and Baruch 3:28-32" as the primary scriptural source texts for Spenser's Sapience ("Spenser and the Bible" 488). See also Job, Psalms, and the Song of Solomon.

<sup>201</sup> See Osgood, "Spenser's Sapience."

<sup>202</sup> For Augustine's discussion of the triune Godhead's mutually shared, singular wisdom see bk.7 of *On the Trinity*. The interchangeability of Sapience and Wisdom in Spenser's day is noted by Grace Warren Landrum in "Spenser's Use of the Bible and His Alleged Puritanism," p.528.

<sup>203</sup> See notes to John 1.1-18, NRSV 3rd ed. with Apocrypha, OUP.

When he prepared the heavens, I was there, when he set the compass upon the  
 depe. When he established the cloudes above, when he confirmed the fountaines  
 of the depe, When he gave his decree to the sea, that the waters shulde not passe  
 his commandement: when he appointed the fundacions of the earth, Then was I  
 with him as a nourisher, and I was daily his delite reioycing alwaie before him...  
 (GNV)

Ecclesiastes 24.5-12:

I am come out of the mouth of the moste High, [first borne before all creatures. I  
 caused the light that faileth not, to arise in the heaven,] and covered the earth as a  
 cloude. My dwelling is above in the height, and my throne is in the pillar of  
 cloude... I possessed the waves of the sea, and all the earth, and all people, and  
 nacion... In all these things I soght rest, & a dwelling in some inheritance. So the  
 creator of all things gave me a commandement, and he that made me, appointed  
 me a tabernacle... He created me from the beginning, & before the worlde...  
 (GNV)

The Johannine prologue adopts the Greek term *Logos* from Philo, in whose writings it describes  
 a three-stage hellenized version of the Hebrew Wisdom.<sup>204</sup> The Johannine prologue adapts  
 Philo's Wisdom/Logos to refer to a more or less three stage Christ. In the first stage ("In the  
 beginning"), the Logos is preexistent godhead, in the second stage, the Logos is instrument  
 and/or author of Creation, and in the third stage the Logos is incarnated man.<sup>205</sup> As a result of the  
 (Philonic) Johannine Logos' assimilation of elements from the Old Testament descriptions of  
 Wisdom, the correspondences that Spenser cultivates between Sapience and the biblical Wisdom  
 naturally entail the resemblance of Sapience and the Johannine Logos.

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<sup>204</sup> According to Harry Wolfson, in Philo, the preëxistent wisdom of the Book of Proverbs [and the Wisdom of Solomon]... is called not only wisdom but also Logos. That Logos of Philo... is conceived to have three stages of existence, two before the creation of the world and one after its creation. First, it existed from eternity as a thought of God. Second, prior to the creation of the world, it was created by God as a real incorporeal being and was used by God as an instrument, or rather a plan, in the creation of the world. Third, with the creation of the World, God implanted the Logos within it and, as an immanent Logos, it acts as the instrument of divine providence in every part of it. [Cf. Philo, I, pp. 226-240; 253-261; 287-289] (*Philosophy of the Church Fathers* 177).

<sup>205</sup> It might be argued that the Johannine prologue refers not to the Logos as anointed Christ but as Jesus. Spenser's "Hymn of Heavenly Love," however, closely associates the crowning (implicitly the anointing) with the begetting of the Son, placing them in the same stanza with no intervening action. (HHL 5.30-35). I shall return to this passage below.

The Geneva Bible of 1560 translates John's *Logos* as "Worde":

In the beginning was the Worde, and the Worde was with God and that Worde was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by it, & without it was made nothing that was made. In it was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in the darkenes, & the darkenes comprehended it not. ... That was the true light, which lighteth everie man that cometh into the worlde. He was in the worlde, and the worlde was made by him: & the worlde knew him not. He came unto his owne, and his owne received him not. But as many as received him, to them he gave power to be the sonnes of God even to them that beleve in his Name... And the Worde was made flesh, and dwelt among us... And of his fulnes have all we received and grace for grace... No man hathe sene God at any time: the onely begotten Sonne, which is in the bosome of the Father, he hathe declared him. (John 1.1-18 GNV)

While the gender of Wisdom in Hebrew Scripture is un-ambivalently feminine, in the Johannine prologue's derivative description of the "Worde" there is a steady repetition of the masculine third person pronoun: "*He* was in the worlde... made by *him*: & the worlde knew *him* not. *He* came unto *his* owne, and *his* owne received *him* not. But as many as received *him*, to them *he* gave power... to them that beleve in *his* Name" (my emphasis). To the extent that New-Testament authors, and their later Christian interpreters, identified the Hebrew Wisdom with the Christ-Logos, this gender contradiction remains both in spite of and as a sign of her assimilation.

Sixteenth-century exegetes were sensitive to the disruptive and/or liberating significance that unreconciled points of grammar might have on scriptural interpretation. In the second edition of his influential *Novum Testamentum* (1519) Erasmus had chosen to translate the Johannine prologue's *Logos*—a masculine noun—by the Latin masculine singular but collective noun *Sermo* (speech). This translation challenged the text of the Vulgate in which Jerome had chosen to use the neuter singular noun *Verbum* (word). The controversy occasioned by Erasmus's presumption to correct both exegetical tradition and the Vulgate brought the question of the religious significance of grammatical distinctions in biblical translation under the scrutiny

of the educated public.<sup>206</sup> For Erasmus's critics, his theological method threatened to provide "scriptural ground for [the] radical reformation of Christological and trinitarian theology" (Coogan 113).<sup>207</sup> Erasmus, stressing his orthodoxy, denied any such motive. As Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle writes, "Sermo is not in his judgement a doctrinal issue, but a grammatical one... [in] the province of translators" (*Language and Method* 12). Though compelled to defend himself (at length and repeatedly) against his critics, Erasmus was not compelled to renounce his translation.<sup>208</sup>

As an interpretative variation upon Wisdom, Spenser's Sapience constitutes an insistence upon the significance of Wisdom's gender within the Hebrew Bible that recalls the grammatical gender confusion underlying the Erasmian controversy. The figure of Sapience challenges the Christian exegetical tradition's occulting of Wisdom by reading Christ into the Old Testament Wisdom narratives. By challenging these conflations of Christ and Wisdom, Spenser's Sapience also challenges traditional interpretations of the Johannine prologue. As Erasmus had done in translating *Logos* by *Sermo*, Spenser uses the polysemous potential within scriptural language to overturn traditional, dogmatic understandings of biblical narrative. Unlike Erasmus, however, Spenser's biblical reading occurs, not within the scholarly theological domain, but within the more nearly autonomous domain of English letters. The Dutch theologian Maarten van Dorp had accused Erasmus of advancing the interests and authority of poets at the expense of proper

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<sup>206</sup> Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Erasmus on Language and Method in Theology*, pp. 3-31.

<sup>207</sup> Robert Coogan's *Erasmus, Lee and the Correction of the Vulgate* provides an instructive overview of how Erasmus's critics conceived of his method and the threat to religious orthodoxy they imagined it posed.

<sup>208</sup> In defense of *Sermo*, Erasmus was able to muster abundant patristic testimony thereby shoring up the already significant authority of his Humanist learning and confirming the validity of his textual method. The controversy surrounding Erasmus's *Sermo* highlighted the significance that points of grammar could have with respect to biblical interpretation and the power this gave Humanist theologians to challenge exegetical tradition. It also focused popular attention upon the grammatical intricacies of the Johannine prologue.

theologians.<sup>209</sup> With *The Fowre Hymnes*, Dorp's fears have been realized: Spenser's poetic application of Erasmus's theological method has served to undermine traditional theological authority while authorizing an exegesis advanced through the mediating power of the Muses.

### **Eros Above**

Spenser's Sapience, like the Hebrew Wisdom, is the intimate companion and counselor of the Creator as well as the further maintainer of His Creation. When Sapience first appears in the "Hymne of Heavenly Beauty" she is described as "the Soveraine dearling of the Deity" (HHB 27.184), crowned "in signe of highest sovereignty" (HHB 28.191), sitting in the "bosome" (HHB 27.183) of God, from which seat "she rules the house of God on hy, / And menageth the ever-moving sky, / And... lower creatures all" (HHB 28.193-195) such that "Both heaven and earth obey unto her will" (HHB 29.197). These descriptions of Sapience provided Spenser's contemporary readership with easily recognizable echoes of Wisdom's description in the Hebrew Scripture. Thus, in Proverbs, Wisdom declares, "The Lord hathe possessed me in the beginning of his waie" (Prov. 8.22 GNV). Of her intimate companionship with God, both before and throughout the process of Creation, she continues, "Then was I with him as a nourisher, and I was daily his delite rejoycing alwaie before him" (Prov. 8.30 GNV). In the Wisdom of Solomon it is written that "the Lord of all things loveth her" (Wis. 8.3 GNV). In terms of her management or governance of both earth and heaven Wisdom is described as "the worker of all things" (Wis. 7.21 GNV), "having all power" (Wis. 7.23 GNV), and being the very "breth of the power of

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<sup>209</sup> Dorp's exchange with Erasmus is related at greater length in Part 1, section 1 ("Participatory Poetics and the Grammar of Christ...: The Erasmian Legacy.")

God” (Wis. 7.25 GNV) who “can do all things, and remaining in her self, renueth all (Wis. 7.27 GNV). These parallels establish the Hebrew Wisdom of the Old Testament as the primary foundation for Spenser’s figure of Sapience.<sup>210</sup>

When Spenser writes of Sapience, “For of her fulnesses which the world doth fill, / They all partake, and do in state remain” (HHB 29.199,200), he cleaves particularly close to the phrasing of a pair of lines in the Wisdom of Solomon describing the “Spirit of the Lord” who “filleth all the worlde” and “mainteineth all things” (Wis. 1.7 GNV). This echo of the description of the “Spirit of the Lord” adds to Spenser’s prior accumulation of parallels between Sapience and the biblical Wisdom. Having identified Spenser’s Sapience with the Hebrew Wisdom, Spenser’s echo of the line from the Wisdom of Solomon now suggests the further identification of Sapience with the “Spirit of the Lord.”

In terms of both the Greek Scripture and Christian exegetical tradition’s assimilative reading of the Hebrew Scripture, by echoing the line “the Spirit of the Lord filleth all the worlde” (Wis. 1.7 GNV), Spenser’s description of Sapience’s “fulnesses which the world doth fill” could be taken to suggest Wisdom’s identification with the Christian Holy Spirit. This identification would enable a reconciling of Spenser’s Sapience (as a divine attribute shared by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) with Trinitarian formulations—a reconciliation often attempted by critics intent upon establishing Spenser’s English Protestant orthodoxy. Throughout *The Fowre Hymnes*, however, and in stark contrast to his manifest interest in identifying, clarifying, and arranging

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<sup>210</sup> The correspondences between the biblical Wisdom and Sapience are most fully developed by Charles Osgood, while the Variorum edition of the *Works of Edmund Spenser* remains the best overview of the general body of biblical and other allusions involved in Spenser’s portrayal of Sapience. Both the *Longman Annotated Selected Shorter Poems* and the Yale Edition of the *Shorter Poems* also provide copious and instructive notes with respect to Sapience and her sources.

Neoplatonist and erotic echoes of biblical narrative, Spenser is little concerned with discovering vestiges of the Trinity or creating echoes of Trinitarian doctrine.<sup>211</sup>

Spenser's two lines "For of her fulnesses which the world doth fill, / They all partake, and do in state remain" comprise a close translation of two lines from the Wisdom of Solomon: "For the Spirit of the Lord filleth all the worlde: and the same that mainteineth all things, hath knowledge of the voyce" (Wis. 1.7 GNV). The echoing citation of the second line, however, is incomplete. In the passage from the Wisdom of Solomon, the Spirit of the Lord who "filleth all the worlde" and "mainteineth all things" is also described as having "knowledge of the voyce." To have knowledge of someone is a figurative phrase, both hidden and implied by Spenser's citation, connoting the intimate union that naturally pertains to the encounter of love and beauty.<sup>212</sup> Instead of echoing the second line in full and describing Sapience as having knowledge of the "voyce" (and thus, of the Christ-Logos as word or utterance), Spenser inverts the relation of agency and proceeds to refer to the Maker (Christ/Logos) as "observ[ing] ... her high behest."

The erotic nature of the "great Maker['s]... observation of [Sapience's] high behest" is not immediately apparent. "[O]bservation" is hardly interchangeable with the sexually freighted phrase to "have knowledge" of someone. The eroticism of this communication, however,

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<sup>211</sup> "Spirit of the Lord," appears in the third of a succession of titled verses variously addressing: "the holy Spirit of discipline," "the Spirit of wisdom" and "the Spirit of the Lord" (1.5,6,7). Spenser's close imitation of this verse has suggested to J.B. Fletcher an identification of Sapience with the Trinitarian Holy Spirit. Osgood and others, however, have noted Spenser's clear distinction between the Holy Spirit and the heavenly beauty that shall be revealed as Sapience: "Vouchsafe then, o thou most almightie Spright, / ... Some litle beams to mortall eyes below, / Of that immortall beautie, there with thee" (HHB 2.8,12,13). The Trinitarian Holy Spirit is, in fact, so little the subject of the "Hymn of Heavenly Beauty" that the principle significance of such references would seem to be precisely the prevention of the Holy Spirit's identification with Sapience.

<sup>212</sup> The OED defines "knowledge" as: "Sexual intercourse; (occas. more generally) sexual intimacy" and provides an example of this usage from the 1540 Acts of Parliament under Henry VIII: "Such mariages beyng consummate with bodily knowlage."

emerges via multiple promptings. In Spenser's passage describing the collaboration of Sapience and Christ (the "great Maker") in Creation, all creatures are said to partake of "her fulness" and "in state remain" "[a]s their great Maker did at first ordain,<sup>213</sup> / Through observation of her high behest, / By which they first were made and still increased" (HHB 200-203). Given that the context is explicitly that of cooperative generation, the "Maker['s] ... observation of her high behest" may be read as a playfully circumlocutory analogy to Proverbs' "The Lord hath possessed me in the beginning of the waie" (8.22). Furthermore, the "fulness" of Sapience suggests both the voluptuous form that kindles and directs love's motion and the pregnant form of generative power.

Taking Spenser's phrase (*his* observation of *her* behest) together with the secreted final clause from the Hebrew Scripture (*her* knowledge of *his* voice), the implication is that Sapience and Christ, Wisdom and Maker, "se face to face... and knowe even as they are knowen," in the mystical knowledge that Paul describes as the final goal of love. (1 Cor. 13 GNV). In other words, the conflation of the Hebrew Scripture's Spirit of the Lord and Wisdom and the enfolding of their descriptions within his description of Sapience provide part of a rationale for the conception of erotic union between Christ and Sapience—hers is a fullness that commands increase.

Critics tend to shy away from tracing erotic motifs through the "Hymn of Heavenly Beauty," yet its eroticism is both overt and sanctioned by scriptural precedent.<sup>214</sup> A remarkable

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<sup>213</sup> That Spenser's "great Maker" is Christ, and not the Father, is suggested by his "observation of her high behest," where "high behest" is suggestive of a commanding (or, at the very least, instructive) authority—something that would make little sense in relation to the Father.

<sup>214</sup> The possession of God's wisdom is not only eroticised throughout Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon but the same figures may be read into Paul's characterization of final knowledge at the end of his discussion of love in 1 Cor. 13: "then shal we se face to face. Now I knowe in parte: but then shal I knowe even as I am knowen" (GNV).

example of this eroticism (and, subsequently, of its critical avoidance) is provided when Spenser's rapt narrator declares:

Of that fair love of mighty heaven's king:  
Enough is me to admire so heavenly thing  
And, being thus with her huge love possessed,  
In the only wonder of herself to rest.

But whoso may, thrice-happy man him hold  
Of all on earth, whom God so much doth grace,  
And lets his own beloved to behold ...

Plenty of riches forth on him will pour, ...  
The external portion of her precious dower,  
Which mighty God hath given to her free,  
And to all those which thereof worthy be. (HHB 34-36)<sup>215</sup>

In response to the above passage, Osgood has tentatively conceded that "there is perhaps a faint reflection of the figure of the lover desiring to marry Wisdom" ("Spenser's Sapience" 171).

Osgood confines himself to suggesting "perhaps a faint reflection" even while pointing to possible parallels with Wisdom 8.2 where the biblical narrator explicitly states: "I have loved her, and sought her from my youth: I desired to marrye her, suche love had I unto her beautie." As it happens, the very next verse from this same scriptural passage links the narrator's desire to "marrye" Wisdom with the exemplification of this union, once again in Wisdom's "knowledge of" or union with the "voyce" of God: "In that she is conversant with God, it commendeth her nobilitie: yea, the Lord of all things loveth her" (Wis. 8.3 GNV). The union/converse between Sapience and the Christ-Maker issues precisely in the creative utterance by which all things "first

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For the Christian interpreter, however, references within the Hebrew Scripture to the loving union of Wisdom and the "Lord"—such as, "The Lord hath possessed me in the beginning of his waie" (Prov. 8.22 GNV) and "the Lord of all things loveth her" (Wis. 8.3 GNV)—need not directly implicate the Son. In other words, for the Christian interpreter these passages need not imply the simultaneous presence and distinction of Wisdom and the Son. For Wisdom to have knowledge of the "voyce," however, implicates the Son while also according Wisdom a distinct presence and agency.

<sup>215</sup> HHB 34.235-238; 35.239-241; 36.247,250-252.

were made.”<sup>216</sup> Its issuing forth also entails the further increase of creation when—as by a sub-clause of Sapience’s first “high behest”—the “voyce” communicates to the “lower creatures” (HHB 28.195): “bring ye forthe frute and multiplie” (Gen. 9.7 GNV).

Spenser’s representations of Sapience demonstrate the rich insights and eloquent ornament that accrue to Scripture when contemplative reading, enabled by the interpretative strategies of the Christian humanist grammarian, issues forth in the poetry of divine praise. When Spenser’s readers read all that is “enregistred in every nooke” of *The Fowre Hymnes* they discover the manner in which the *The Fowre Hymnes* reads all that is “enregistred in every nooke” of the scriptural texts it assimilates. In this way, *The Fowre Hymnes* doubles as both hymn of praise and exegetical instruction by example. Erasmus imagined prophetic teaching emanating from a type of psalmic-musician “whose lyre has been granted to him by David and whose sonorous instrument has been skillfully tuned by the spirit of Christ” (14 vol 65). Through *The Fowre Hymnes* Spenser reproduces both idealized and practical elements of Erasmus’s conception of prophetic teaching. In “bringing forth from the treasure of Scripture what is *new* and what is old,” and in “leap[ing] over all human desires” in his overwhelming love of the things of heaven, the narrating persona of Spenser’s hymns resembles Erasmus’s idealized psalmic-musician. (13, 21 vol 65; my emphasis) In exploiting the poetic resources and grammatical ambivalence of the Hebrew and Greek scriptural intertext to reveal Sapience as the *sensus mysticus* of her scriptural source texts, Spenser’s poetic method resembles that of the Erasmian rhetorical theologian. In other words, *The Fowre Hymnes* comprises an exemplary

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<sup>216</sup> The OED defines “conversant” as “[a] person who ‘converses’ or is intimate with another; a familiar acquaintance” and provides an example of this usage from G. Puttenham’s *Arte of English Poesie*.

Christian Humanist argument for the theological authority and purview of a contemporary Davidic poet.

### “[F]air is loved”

Perhaps Spenser’s greatest challenge to exegetical tradition, with regards to Sapience and the interpretative appropriation of Wisdom, comes in his account of the begetting of the Son within the “Hymn of Heavenly Love.” This account comprises a subtly managed challenge of Spenser’s readers’ habits of biblical interpretation. Heavenly Love’s begetting involves an eclectic interweaving of Platonic and Orphic elements that unsettle and render strange the established and familiar conventions of the biblical narrative:

Before this world’s great frame, in which all things  
Are now contained, found any being place;  
Ere flitting Time could wag his eyas wings  
About that mighty bound which doth embrace  
The rolling spheres and parts their hours by space,  
That high eternal power, which now doth move  
In all these things, moved in itself by love.

It loved itself because itself was fair  
(For fair is loved); and of itself begot,  
Like to itself, his eldest son and heir,  
Eternal, pure, and void of sinful blot,  
The firstling of his joy, in whom no jot  
Of love’s dislike, or pride, was to be found,  
Whom he therefore with equal honour crowned. (HHL4:22-5:35)

This account of the begetting of the Son is one of the most interesting and perplexing aspects of Spenser’s Christian metaphysics in *The Fowre Hymnes*. Spenser’s description of a beautiful, creative godhead has been related to the Platonic metaphysics of *Timaeus* (one of the few Platonic texts commonly known in the Middle Ages), to the *Symposium* (translated and

popularized by Ficino among others), and to the related and popular Neoplatonist metaphysics of Dionysius's *Divine Names*.<sup>217</sup>

In the following survey of mythological echoes my intention is not to pin down Spenser's sources but to highlight the pagan mythological texture that Spenser is applying to his begetting scene within the ostensibly biblical narrative of his "Hymn to Heavenly Beauty." The creation of one "like to itself," the absence "[o]f love's dislike, or pride" in the begotten Son, and the Creator's consequent desire to impart "equal honour" to the Son, echoes the divine cause of creation in the *Timaeus*: "He was good, and in him that is good no envy ariseth ever concerning anything; and being devoid of envy He desired that all should be, so far as possible, like unto Himself" (Tim. 29e). The depiction of an initial desirous movement of creation when the "high eternal power... moved in itself by love... [and] loved itself because itself was fair" echoes Pseudo-Dionysius's description of the essential role of beauty in creation: "Beauty unites all things and is the source of all things. It is the great creating cause which bestirs the world and holds all things in existence by the longing inside them" (*Divine Names* 77). Reference to the begotten as "his eldest son" (thus, first born), recalls the earlier line, "Love, lift me up upon thy golden wings," in its echo of the Orphic invocation of the "two-natured [Eros] Protogonos / ... delighting in his golden wings" (*Orphic Hymns* 8). The fact that the "high eternal power... moved in itself by love... and of itself begot ... his eldest son" may echo the ambivalence arising from alternate accounts of Eros' relation to, and emergence from, Chaos. In Aristophanes' *Birds*, Eros is represented as "shining with golden wings ... [and] mingling with winged Chaos in a secluded recess" (693-703). In Hesiod, Eros is described as one of three first gods born of Chaos.

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<sup>217</sup> As noted in the *Variorum*, see J.S. Harrison who cites *Symposium* 206, 211-12 and *Timaeus* 29, (pp.68-70), and Joseph B. Collins who cites Ps.-Dionysius's *Divine Names* 4.10, pp.211-12.

Spenser could well have borrowed these same echoes from any number of derivative texts but their pagan mythological character is unmistakable.

Spenser's account of Heavenly Love's generation contains enough obvious scriptural echoes (Love is a begotten son who is without sin and consequently crowned) to ensure that Spenser's readers identify Heavenly Love and the Christian Son. The importance of the Johannine prologue as one of the New Testament's central accounts of the Son's pre-existent origin and of his role in Creation either as instrument or as Creator ensures its relevance to Spenser's account of both the Son's begetting and (in the "Hymn to Heavenly Beauty") of his part in Creation. The biblical story of the Son's begetting and the Greek scriptural texts in which it is recounted were entirely familiar to Spenser's educated, English Protestant audience. Indeed, Spenser's then-contemporary English readers knew the biblical story he is telling well enough to discern the variations he introduces in its telling. This means that Spenser's readers would have been acutely conscious of the way in which his pagan accretions obscure, depart from, or challenge the familiar but missing scriptural material. By keeping his overt biblical echoes to a minimum and filling in the details of his narrative with material drawn from pagan sources, Spenser fashions a language capable of playfully undermining traditional interpretations of the biblical texts he is poetically paraphrasing.

Even as it introduces a dizzying abundance of pagan elements, Spenser's account of heavenly Love's begetting as "sonne" makes no use of the Johannine "Worde" (Logos). Similarly, the phrasing of "Before this world's great frame... found any being place" resists identification (perhaps even preemptively) with the opening of the Johannine prologue, "In the beginning was the Worde." Nevertheless, Spenser's account of the begetting of Christ and that of the prologue (as it appears in the popular Geneva Bible translation) do share a number of key

terms and points of reference in addition to their foundational Wisdom source-texts. When one reads in Spenser, “It loved itself because itself was fair... and of itself begot / Like to itself, his eldest sonne and heire,” the phrase “Like to itself” might be taken not only as an echo of *Timaeus* but as a circuitous approximation of “and the Worde was with God and that Worde was God” (Jn. 1.1 GNV). More directly, the familiar technical term “begot” in relation to the divine “sonne and heire” constitutes an unremarkable yet unmistakeable echo of John’s proclaiming “the glorie of the onely begotten Sonne” (Jn. 1.14 GNV).<sup>218</sup>

The most significant parallel between the two beginnings and begettings of Spenser and John, hinges upon a point of grammar. The Johannine prologue comprises eighteen verses recounting the history of the Logos/Worde from the pre-existent beginning, through the creation of the world, to the incarnation and worldly mission of Jesus Christ. The Geneva translators carefully exclude any gendering of the “Worde” until midway through the prologue. Anticipated by his distinguishing from John—“He was not that light, but was sent to beare witnes of the light” (Jn. 1.8 GNV)—the masculine incarnation of the Worde enters the narrative in the tenth verse beginning, “He was in the worlde” (Jn. 1.10 GNV). The transition from Creating divinity to incarnated creature is emphatically signalled by the shift from “Worde” to the third person masculine pronoun. Spenser’s fifth stanza, beginning “It lov’d it selfe” and possessing the familiar narrative arc, (of pre-existent being, generative begetting as the son, sinless, loving and humble existence, divine coronation), proceeds through its gendered references in a manner similar to that of John. Attention is taken to maintain the neuter singular pronoun “it” until halfway through the third line and just shy of the stanza’s midpoint. At this point in Spenser’s

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<sup>218</sup> The Gospel of John further refers to the Son as only begotten in 1.18, 3.16, 3.18 and the first epistle of John refers to the only begotten Son in 4.9.

stanza, however, there is not one but two emphatic gender shifts. Spenser's "high eternal power" that "loved itself" appears homologous to John's Worde that both was God and was with God—both at any rate, participate in the son's emergence and both lack gender specificity. Yet when the son appears in Spenser's stanza, he appears as "*his* eldest sonne and heire" (HHB 5.31). The third person masculine possessive pronoun refers to the Father. The appearance of the masculine gender of the third person pronoun here stands in stark contrast to the neuter gender of the third person pronoun in the previous lines. The shift in gender suggests that the generative agent referred to as the "high eternal power" is distinct from "him" to whom the Son is "heire"—Spenser's eternal and generative power, in other words, is emphatically not the Father.

On the one hand, Spenser's repetitive use of the neuter pronoun in the opening lines of this fifth stanza of the "Hymn to Heavenly Love" avoids any telltale imitation of the Johannine prologue's initial nominative repetition of "Worde." On the other hand, Spenser's repetition of "it" and "itself" echoes the Johannine prologue's second series of pronominal repetitions beginning, "All things were made by *it*, & without *it* was made nothing that was made" (Jn. 1.3-5 GNV; my emphases). In both the Geneva translators' Johannine prologue and Spenser's fifth stanza the neuter pronoun "it" draws attention to the gender of the agent described. For the prologue, the avoidance of the masculine pronoun leaves interpretative room for the known but occulted quantity represented by the assimilated Wisdom tradition. The neuter pronoun thus cancels the feminine gender of Wisdom while signposting her assimilation. Spenser's stanza makes similar use of the neuter pronoun. Spenser's "It" precludes identification of the "high eternal power" (which "moved in itself by love") with the feminine Sapience/Wisdom. At the same time, "it" also and paradoxically precludes identification of the Father with the "high eternal power" as begetter of "his eldest son." This use of the neuter pronoun does not mean (as

Osgood has suggested) that Spenser does not care about precision here. On the contrary, Spenser's passage—much like Erasmus's highly controversial translation of the Johannine prologue's *Logos* by *Sermo*—draws attention to and insists upon the significance of a grammatical gender distinction within the Johannine prologue. Spenser exploits the prologue's emphatic pronoun use to signal the exegetically challenging nature of his own poetic conceit.

Spenser's "high eternal power" ("it") is presented as a monad that evolves into a dyad. The mysterious movement within Spenser's monad—that "moved in itself by love"—reproduces the mysterious movement of the Johannine assimilation of Wisdom as well as the mysterious movement or agency of the Johannine Logos in creation. The transition from the "high eternal power's singleness into duality is represented as an erotic discovery of latent bi-unity—the "high eternal power... moved in itself by love [and] It loved itself because itself was fair." That the latent bi-unity of Spenser's "high eternal power" behaves in the manner of lover and beloved suggests that Spenser's monad conjoins pre-existent equivalents of heavenly Love and heavenly Beauty.

While unnamed in the fourth and fifth stanzas of the "Hymn to Heavenly Love," Christ's latency as the portion of Spenser's monadic "high eternal power" that corresponds to heavenly Love, emerges as the begotten Son, and is ultimately crowned with divine kingship is easily discerned by the reader. The first stanza of the "Hymn of Heavenly Love" calls "the god of love, high heaven's king" (HHL 1.7). In the nineteenth stanza, the soon to be down-descending redeemer of humanity is referred to as "Lord of love" (HHL 19.127). Kingship may, of course, be attributed to the Father (with whom the Son reigns in Trinity [HHL 6.36-39]), yet the Son's primary feature—signaled by the title *Christos*—is his anointing as King. In Spenser's account,

the begetting of the Son is immediately followed (in the final line of the same stanza) by his coronation, making identification of heavenly Love/Son/Christ inescapable.

Sapience's presence as heavenly Beauty within the latent bi-unity of Spenser's "high eternal power" is obscure yet discernible. When Spenser's "high eternall powre... mov[es] in it selfe by love," it recognizes its fairness and this recognition is further described as causally related to the movement of love—"It loved itself *because* itself was fair" (my emphasis). The causal relation makes the recognized distinction of fairness ontologically prior (even if not temporally prior)<sup>219</sup> to the Son's begetting. In Spenser's era, "fair" may be read as a "characteristic of the female sex" (OED). Thus, the discovery of fairness which causes and accompanies the movement of love suggests a feminine aspect latent within the outwardly undifferentiated and monadic "high eternall powre." That the "high eternall powre" is designated by neuter pronouns can suggest two readings: either that it is a power without or beyond gender or that it combines (thereby un-distinguishing) both genders.<sup>220</sup>

Evidence of Sapience's latency as the "fair" portion of Spenser's generative monad and the cause of the loving movement of the Son's begetting, may be found in both the "Hymn of Heavenly Beauty." In Sapience's description within the "Hymn of Heavenly Beauty," Spenser's narrator proclaims, "The fairenesse of her face no tongue can tell" (HHB 30.204) before extolling her as "that faire love of mightie heaven's king" (HHB 34:235). To the extent that Spenser's Sapience may be identified with the Hebrew Wisdom, the reader may place Sapience

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<sup>219</sup> The movement of love, the recognition of fairness, and the begetting of the Son might all be imagined as occurring simultaneously, especially given that they all take place before the creation of the "world's great frame" and before the flight of "flitting Time" (HHL 4:22-3).

<sup>220</sup> The neuter pronoun "it" is, on the one hand, a hermaphroditic image (recalling the hermaphroditic image of the two lovers at the end of Book III of the *Faerie Queene*) and, on the other hand, a non-image representing union beyond the threshold of manifestation.

with the Creator “[w]hen he prepared the heavens... [and] when he appointed the fundacions of the earth.” The reader may also place Sapience in the role of “nourisher” and consort to the Creator, “daily his delite” (Wis. 8.27-30 GNV). To the extent that Spenser’s begotten Son may be identified with the Worde of the Johannine prologue by which “[a]ll things were made” (Jn. 1.3 GNV), even “[b]efore this worlds great frame, in which al things / Are now containd, found any being place” (HHL 4.22-23), the reader may place Spenser’s begotten Son, as Creator, in the nourishing and delightful company of Wisdom/Sapience.

Christ, as heavenly Love, and Sapience, as heavenly Beauty, may be placed together in the pre-existent “placelessness” occupied by both the Hebrew Wisdom (before the heavens’ preparation and the earth’s foundation) and the Johannine Worde (before “[a]ll things were made”). The “placelessness” of Christ and Sapience’s co-presence has a significant analogue inmeets in the subsistence of Spenser’s “high eternall powre” “[b]efore this worlds great frame... found any being place” (HHL 1.1-). One might think that the shared, pre-existent “placelessness” of Spenser’s Christ and Sapience (as heavenly Love and heavenly Beauty) would entail a lack of topographical description. Paradoxically, their shared “placelessness” receives a considerable amount of figurative description.

The placelessness occupied by Spenser’s “high eternal power” in the fourth stanza of the “Hymn to Heavenly Love” corresponds to the biblical figure of the “bosome” of the transcendent Father. When Christ “downe descended” to “make amends to God for mans misguyde” (HHL 20.136, 21.144), he abandoned his reigning position within “the bosome of eternall blisse” (HHL 20.134). When Sapience “rules the house of God on hy, / And menageth the ever-moving sky” (HHB 28.193-194) she does so “[t]here in his bosome” (HHB 27.183). The placeless embosoming of Christ and Sapience is the closest Spenser comes to describing the transcendent

Father's agency, and reference to "his bosome" the closest Spenser comes to offering a "physical" descriptive feature of the Father. This divine "bosome" comprises a threshold between, on the one hand the kataphatic (or manifest) Son who "man did make... out of his own like mould" (HHB 16.110, HHB 17.116), the Holy Spirit who inspires the hymns' narrator (HHL 7, HHB 2), and Sapience with whose vision the narrator is ravished, and, on the other hand, the apophatic (or unqualified/absolute) transcendence of the Father. In fact, the same corporeal figure for the threshold between what is hidden and what is seen is also found in the closing verse of the Johannine prologue: "No man hathe sene God at any time: the onely begotten Sonne, which is in the bosome of the Father, he hathe declared him" (Jn. 1.18 GNV). This same bosom-as-threshold figure is further repeated within the Geneva Bible glossator's framing of "The Revelation of John the Divine": "Christ received this revelation out of his father's bosome as his owne doctrine but it was hid in respect of us so that Christ as Lord and God reveiled it to John his servant by the ministerie of his Angel" (Jn. 1.b GNV).<sup>221</sup> The latter marginal gloss is particularly interesting given that Spenser's narrator, through the mediating ministry of the "blessed Spirit" (HHL.7.43) and "most almightie Spright" (HHB 2.8), reveals his vision of Sapience "out of [the] fathers bosome" (Rev. 1.b GNV).

The "bosome" of the transcendant Father is thus a point of origin and return for both the Son and Sapience. It was there, presumably, in the bosome or heart of the Father that the Son and Sapience were distinguished in the movement of their mingled union. This was the beginning of beginnings, before the "world's great frame... found any being place," before even Time had begun to "wag his eyas wings." "In the beginning" (Jn. 1.1 GNV), before the "endlesse glorie" of

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<sup>221</sup> "The Revelation of John the Divine" is the title to the book of Revelation which appears in the Geneva Bible.

their reign (HHL. 6.36-37), the Son and Sapience were joined in the work of creation when “heaven and earth... [a]nd all the creatures which they both containe” “first were made” by “their great Maker... [t]hrough observation of her high behest” (HHB 29.197-203). And it is there, presumably, in the bosome or heart of the Father, that the Son and Sapience join together again in “soveraignty” following both the Creation and Christ’s incarnate mission of mercy. (HHB 28.191) The relation of the Son and Sapience, the divine pair who rule by virtue of their shared participation in God’s “high eternall power,” is one of union.

As previously discussed, the Son’s “knowledge” of Sapience, through a generative “observation” that issues directly in Creation, may be read as a figure of specifically erotic union. Indeed, as the narrator of the “Hymn to Heavenly Beauty” reports, to merely “admyre so heavenly thing” as Sapience, is to be “with her huge love possest” (HHB 34.236-237). However rarefied or abstract his figure (that of a pre-existent and pre-temporal power moving in itself and moved to love itself by a fairness prior to all form), the union Spenser intimates between the Son and Sapience is no less erotic. It is a union that the narrator himself approximates in his vision of Sapience, and it is a union that Spenser’s readers are admonished to seek. “It” is a union—figuratively located within the bosom of the Father and constituting the very threshold of all manifestation—of the heavenly Love and heavenly Beauty of God.

Mohinimohan Bhattacharje describes the narrator’s ascent in the “Hymn of Heavenly Love” as an act of *imitatio Christi*. Thus, through a purifying process corresponding to “the Christian Ideal of (moral) Perfection typified in the life of Christ Himself... the man-Christ leads the soul [represented by the hymn’s narrator] to God-Christ” (*Platonic Ideas* 158-59). This journey attains its end when “the ravished soul has a sight ... of the very ‘Idee of his pure glorie’” (159). Bhattacharje later cites a passage from Pico della Mirandola’s *A Platonic*

*Discourse upon Love* that might well serve as a Florentine Neoplatonist template for the participatory heavenly ascent of Spenser's narrator:

This is the Image of Celestial Love, by which Man ariseth from one perfection to another, till his Soul is made an Angel. Purged from Material dross and transformed into spiritual flame by this Divine Power, he mounts up to the Intelligible Heaven, and happily rests in his Father's bosome. (175)

The one thing that is missing from both Pico's "Father's bosome" and Bhattacharje's otherwise illuminating interpretative account is Spenser's Sapience. Bhattacharje is content to leave her out of the narrator's final "transport from flesh into the spright" (*Platonic Discourse* 175 HHB 37.259). In the visionary "Hymn to Heavenly Beauty, however, Sapience is precisely the one figure who cannot be overlooked within the "Father's bosome."

Spenser's figure of Sapience constitutes the insistent reintroduction of an inexpressibly beautiful Hebrew Wisdom into multiple Christian narratives—from the scriptural participatory creation of the earth and heavens by Wisdom/Christ to the contemplative Christian's ascent towards a participatory and visionary union in the "Father's bosome." What the narrator of the "Hymn to Heavenly Beautie" discovers when he ascends into "the Father's bosome" is "the view of her celestia face," and it is precisely there, in contemplation of the "celestia face" of Sapience, that "All joy, all blisse, all happinesse have place" (HHB 35.242-243). The deliberately gendered and intensely sensual language that Spenser uses to describe the culminating vision of *The Fowre Hymnes* is insistently erotic. The "transport from flesh into the spright" does not (as Bhattacharje suggests) provide "an antidote to erotic mysticism" (159); it rather insists upon the latter's sanctity.

## Imitating Heavenly Ravishment

The purifying fire that the narrator of the “Hymn of Heavenly Love” experiences (and admonishes his reader to emulate) in relation to Christ is manifestly erotic:

With all thy hart, with all thy soule and mind,  
Thou must him love, and his beheasts embrace;  
All other loves, with which the world doth blind  
Weake fancies, and stirre up affections base,  
Thou must renounce, and utterly displace,  
And give thy selfe unto him full and free,  
That full and freely gave himselfe to thee.

Then shalt thou feele thy spirit so possest,  
And ravisht with devouring great desire  
Of his deare selfe, that shall thy feeble brest  
Inflame with love, and set thee all on fire  
With burning zeale, through every part entire,  
That in no earthly thing thou shalt delight,  
But in his sweet and amiable sight. (HHL 38.260-39.273)

The process in which the lover concentrates his love entirely upon the singular object of Christ leads to a possession, ravishing, and devouring of the self by a purificatory fire ushering in divine vision, “[b]linding the eyes and lumining the spright” (HHL 40:280). When the narrator tells the reader, “Thou must him love, and his beheasts embrace,” the behests come from Christ who is the beloved and they command the narrator’s loving service. Later, in the “Hymn of Heavenly Beauty,” the narrator writes of the “great Maker” being commanded by the “high behest” of Sapience. The analogy suggests that the great Maker’s performance of creation is in loving service to Sapience as his beloved. Thus, in the act of loving Christ, the narrator of the “Hymn of Heavenly Beauty” is also imitating Christ in the act of loving Sapience.

When the narrator is “ravisht with devouring great desire / Of his [Christ, as god of Love] deare selfe,” this love pervades and inflames him, utterly purging him of his former desire. Far from being purged of *all* desire, however, he is only further “ravisht” by “heavenly thoughts”

and sights that fill all his “spirits” “[w]ith sweete enragement of celestiaall love” (HHL 41.281-6). In other words, the narrator relinquishes his own earthly love and desire for love of Christ, and in doing so he is filled not only by love for Christ but by the “celestiaall love” that Christ is. The “Hymn to Heavenly Love” ends with the narrator’s transport in visionary union with Christ, a union signaled by the narrator’s “sight of those faire things above” (HHL 41.287).

The “Hymn of Heavenly Beauty” represents the continuation of the narrator’s ascent yet, strangely, the ensuing vision contains very little mention of Christ. The narrator’s vision of Sapience in the “Hymn of Heavenly Beauty” bears significant resemblance to the vision of the heavenly city in Revelation: “And I John sawe the holie citie newe Jerusalem come downe from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride trimmed for her housband” (Rev. 21.2 GNV). Indeed, it is as the “bride” of heaven’s king that Spenser’s rapt narrator describes Sapience. She is “that fair love of mighty heaven’s king” and anyone “whom God so much doth grace, / And lets his own beloved to behold” may count himself a “thrise happy man” (HHB 34:235, 35:239-241). In this final visionary flight of *The Fowre Hymnes*, the narrator beholds God’s beloved and, “with her huge love possessed,” burns as only a heavenly lover can. Thus, as a consequence of his initial heavenly ravishment in love of Christ, the narrator not only burns with the flame of Christ’s own heavenly Love, but he shares in Christ’s vision of the heavenly Beauty that is Sapience.

To ascend to the Father’s bosome and there to know the Beauty of Sapience is to fulfill Christ’s redemptive promise for humanity by becoming God’s Love. Just as, in Spenser’s “The Visions of Petrarch,” the union of “heavenly grace and vertue” present themselves to the lover as the true objects of admiration within the breast of his beloved, so the vision of Sapience in the “face to face” of divine union is that which the lover beholds when joined with Christ in the

bosom of the Father.<sup>222</sup> This participatory vision of Sapience, enabled by Christ's "possess[ing] the sight of the [narrator's] soul," is an act of erotic *imitatio Christi* that completes all of Spenser's previous figures of harmonious human and divine love (Sidney, *Defence* 90).

Spenser's Sapience is irreducibly in excess of Wisdom's manifest and occulted depictions in both the Hebrew and Greek Scripture. Fully embodying the qualities of the Hebrew Wisdom, Spenser's Sapience is a personified figure who remains distinct from the Father. At the same time, she is an essential participant within a Christ-narrative proper to the Greek Scripture. In Sapience's exceeding of her scriptural sources, Spenser exemplifies the genuinely prophetic biblical mimesis of the Erasmian theologian: he has brought forth from his heart, "like from the provident householder... '*new things* and old'" (*Ratio* 341; my emphasis). In his participatory vision of Sapience, Spenser represents the consummation of heavenly love in the "face to face" of divine union. The significant accomplishment thereby achieved is twofold. First, Spenser fulfills the prophetic poetic office imagined by Erasmus by "reveal[ing] the hidden meaning of Scripture's mysteries" (1 Cor. 13.12 GNV). And second, Spenser achieves the immortality of a Christian fame for the erotic muse of amatory poetry.

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<sup>222</sup> "And ye faire Ladie, in whose bounteous brest /All heavenly grace and vertue shrined is" (YSP 457.91-2). (1 Cor. 13.12 GNV)

## Chapter 4

### Milton's Prophetic Office of English Poetry: The Faithful Bard as

#### *Theodidaktos*<sup>223</sup>

#### Introducing the True Poet

John Milton's English Protestant poetics is more radically evangelistic in its ambition than that of Edmund Spenser (or Philip Sidney) before him.<sup>224</sup> Milton's texts in verse and prose repeatedly imagine the ideal vocation of poet as a superlative ethical and spiritual pedagogical office combining the authority of classical *auctore* (as author and statesman), scriptural prophet, and humanist grammarian. In his early anti-prelatical writings, Milton's educational autobiography represents poetry as teaching and transforming readers by drawing them into affective participation in the matters and virtues represented.<sup>225</sup> These early writings relate Milton's own transformative completion of a spiritually regenerative Christian Humanist education. It is the exemplary accomplishment of this education, the anti-prelatical pamphlets suggest, that ultimately demonstrates Milton's qualification for the morally and theologically authoritative office of divine poetry he repeatedly describes. In his later epics, Milton's scriptural characters wrestle their way through affectively charged moral and theological interpretative

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<sup>223</sup> The Greek term "theodidaktos" translates as "one instructed by God." The term is used by Erasmus to describe the homilist who has fully assimilated the tradition of *sacrae litterae*, thereby transforming his "heart into a library of Christ" (*Ratio* 341).

<sup>224</sup> Jameela Lares writes, "Sidney [in the Defence of Poesy] is taking a far different position on the nature of poetry than Milton does later in *Reason of Church-Government*... Sidney's authorities are almost all classical, whereas Milton rejects "Dame Memory and her Siren Daughters." Sidney celebrates the conventional poet as *vates*; Milton warns that he will be judged by his fruits" (*Milton and the Preaching Arts* 45). Milton associates his own religious zeal with prophetic office in *Animadversions* (CPW 1:663; 1:700).

<sup>225</sup> Milton's early anti-prelatical writings—examined below—contain extensive accounts of his exemplary humanist education—the manner in which his diligent reading, paired with the generous gifts of nature, served to fashion him in accordance with and in likeness of the very best models of virtue.

entanglements. These entanglements implicate their Christian readers as well, impelling the latter towards the reexamination of both their faith and their habitual readings of Scripture in the interest of transformative understanding.<sup>226</sup> Throughout his career, Milton hearkens back to Old Testament paradigms of national and vocational election in conceiving a prophetic poetics that combines a Puritan's reforming zeal with the pedagogical ideals and exegetical practice of Erasmian rhetorical theology.

In his early anti-prelatical prose works, Milton makes conspicuous use of common-place Christian Humanist pedagogical theory in representing his education as a process of conscious self-fashioning.<sup>227</sup> Indeed, the strategies by which Milton claims pedagogical and prophetic authority for his works and for himself as a true poet, in both his early prose and his later poetry, are profoundly indebted to Christian Humanist pedagogy—both the generally secular pedagogy embodied by the curriculum Milton followed as a school-boy at St. Paul's,<sup>228</sup> and the more particularly theological pedagogy that aimed at the creation of a new caste of rhetorical

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<sup>226</sup> This process is clearly and concisely set out by Barbara Kiefer Lewalski in her essay "Milton, the Bible, and Human Experience." See, for instance, her account of Adam's instruction (through interpretative trial and error) when Michael tells him the tale of providential history and "teaches him to read history emblematically... [and] typologically... lead[ing] Adam at last to find God's goodness and justice confirmed in history, despite its misery and grief" (228).

<sup>227</sup> Given the range of Milton's learning, it would seem ill-advised to attempt building a case for the direct influence of Erasmus upon Milton. Erasmus is, however, an exemplary representative of the Christian Humanist tradition whose pedagogical and theological method is fundamental to Milton's poetics. Furthermore, Erasmus had a determining influence upon the curriculum at St. Paul's and the education Milton received at St. Paul's appears to have had a determining influence upon Milton's poetic art and sense of vocation. As Maurice Kelley writes, "[b]etween the 'Theme on Early Rising' and the suave logic, the artful patterning, and the subtle echoing of the ancients in Lycidas, there are indeed great differences; but both works nevertheless have their origins in St. Paul's School. The mature poet is still writing in essentially the same way that he was taught in the school of Colet and Erasmus" (136-37 "Grammar School Latin and John Milton").

<sup>228</sup> As subsequent arguments will show, Milton's humanist education has a great deal to do with the Christian exceptionalism that Stephen Fallon reads as undermining Milton's exalted self-representations in his study of *Milton's Peculiar Grace*.

theologians.<sup>229</sup> The central importance of divine reason<sup>230</sup> and the concomitant method and of the grammarian-exegete in scriptural matters were essential elements of the cultural repertoire that Christian Humanism bequeathed to the English Protestant discourse of the seventeenth century.<sup>231</sup> The role and authority of the scholarly grammarian-exegete within Christian Humanist rhetorical theology shed considerable light upon Milton's shifting yet fundamentally consistent characterizations of poetic and prophetic authority.<sup>232</sup>

The explicitly prophetic poetics of Milton's epics shares the Christian Humanist aims of interpreting, renewing, and enlivening the divine Word(s) of Scripture "to make the apostolic

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<sup>229</sup> Barbara Kiefer Lewalski's account of Milton's depiction of himself (at the outset of *De doctrina Christiana*) "as a model of the right use of Scripture" illustrates the extent to which Milton's approach to Scripture is consonant with that of Erasmian rhetorical theology: "In his chapter 'Of the Holy Scripture' he endorses the often-cited Augustinian requisites for sound textual analysis—"linguistic ability, knowledge of the original sources, consideration of the overall intent, distinction between figurative and literal language, examination of the causes and circumstances, and of what comes before and after the passage in question, and comparison of one text with another, as well as attention to 'the anomalies of syntax' (YP 6.582-83)" (80 "Interpreting God's Word"). These "requisites for sound textual analysis" may be Augustinian in origin, but it was owing to enormously influential Christian Humanist works like Erasmus' *Novum Testamentum* and its *Annotations* that they had entered into the mainstream of the English cultural discourse surrounding "the right use of Scripture."

<sup>230</sup> Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle describes the manner in which Erasmus appropriated the Scholastic exaltation of reason as a central attribute of Christian divinity: "It is historically, if ironically, true that because scholastic theologians could argue that reason establishes not only the existence of God but the method by which his attributes can be derived from this *esse*, Erasmus needed no longer attribute pagan wisdom about God to their reading of Hebrew Scripture" (CPW 16). The rational conception of God—the equation of Logos with divine reason—allowed Erasmus to naturally enfold pagan wisdom within Christian truth. This same rational conception of God also conditioned the manner in which prophecy and prophetic teaching might be conceived—a fact which (as I show below) has significant bearing upon the critical controversy regarding the nature of Milton's prophetic claims. For a brief yet insightful overview of the prominent voices and positions within this controversy see Steadman's *Moral Fiction in Milton and Spenser* pp.4-6.

<sup>231</sup> As Margo Todd writes, in view of her surveys of Cambridge and Oxford university student notebooks of the period), "graduates of the arts and divinity courses of Cambridge and Oxford were well prepared to disseminate the humanist evangel in Elizabethan and early Stuart England. Whether self-consciously Erasmian or not, they had been exposed to the key documents of Christian humanist ideology" (*Christian Humanism* 92; cited in *Exploiting Erasmus* 66).

<sup>232</sup> The conjunction of poetry and prophecy in Milton's works is a topic that has received a great deal of critical attention. Noteworthy landmarks within this horizon of criticism, to which my own work is deeply indebted, include Richard Helgerson's *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton and the Literary System*, John Spencer Hill's *John Milton: Poet, Priest and Prophet*, William Kerrigan's *The Prophetic Milton*, Barbara Kiefer Lewalski's *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms*, Louis L. Martz's *Milton: Poet of Exile*, C.A. Patrides' *Milton and the Christian Tradition*, Mary Ann Radzinowicz' *Toward Samson Agonistes The Growth of Milton's Mind and Milton's Epics and the Book of Psalms*, John M. Steadman's *Moral Fiction in Milton and Spenser*, Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr.'s *Visionary Poetics: Milton's Tradition and His Legacy* among many others.

teaching dramatically present and ‘applaudible’ to an otherwise unreceptive audience” (“Erasmus’s Paraphrases” 34).<sup>233</sup> Following Erasmus (and other humanist theologians), Milton engages in elaborative paraphrase involving the insertion of fictional I-narrators into scriptural narrative. Following Spenser,<sup>234</sup> Milton’s poetry goes a step further than Erasmian paraphrase by inserting substantive supplementary fictions within the frameworks of biblical narrative. Milton, however, far exceeds Spenser in the extent of this scriptural supplementation.

Spenser’s poetry made occasional dramatic raids into theological territory—as with his figure of Sapience re-inserting the feminine Hebrew Wisdom into the New Testament retelling of Creation.<sup>235</sup> In Milton’s works, contrary to the intermittently ascendant yet primarily secular role of Spenser’s poetic persona, the offices of true poet and of true theologian and preacher appear consistently interchangeable. Sidney and Spenser had begun to cultivate a prophetic voice within their poetic repertoire<sup>236</sup> and had thereby arrogated some portion of theological authority for biblicizing works of English poesy. In Milton’s anti-prelatical prose works—and most specifically in “The Reason of Church-Government Urged against Prelaty”—the vocation of true poet is given equal footing with that of church ministry.

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<sup>233</sup> The citation is drawn from Mark Vessey’s discussion of Erasmus’s use of a fictional first person narrator within his gospel paraphrases. (“Erasmus’s Paraphrases and the Arts of Scripture,” in *Holy Scripture Speaks*, p.34. This is especially true of Milton for whom the “internal Scripture” and judgment guided by the Spirit may be required to supplement the “external scripture, particularly the New Testament, [which] has often been liable to corruption” (CPW 6:587). See also Elizabeth Biemann’s discussion of Spenser’s concept of mimesis in *Plato Baptized: Towards the Interpretation of Spenser’s Mimetic Fictions* pp.137-144. Biemann endorses John C. Ulreich’s conclusion that, in Spenser, mimesis is conceived “as a reproduction of the Logos, a lively image of the Divine Word itself, which the poets only deliver” Ulreich, ““The Poets Only Deliver”: Sidney’s Conception of Mimesis” (pp.83-84) in Biemann, (p.141).

<sup>234</sup> Most particularly in the biblicizing narrative of the two heavenly hymns in Spenser’s *The Fowre Hymnes*.

<sup>235</sup> See the previous Spenser section, “A Song of Sapience.”

<sup>236</sup> In cultivating this prophetic voice they were following Du Bartas and others participating in the wider European development of divine poetry. Cf. J.H. Sims “Milton and the Bible” in *Milton & the Art of Sacred Song* pp.3-21. See also John M. Steadman’s discussion of DuBartas and Spenser in *Moral Fiction in Milton and Spenser* pp. 11-42.

Milton's biblical fictions ambitiously overstep the boundaries of imitative decorum that had previously circumscribed exercises of scriptural translation and paraphrase. Already in the early "Nativity Hymn,"<sup>237</sup> Milton's interpretative fictions consistently (and insistently) insert themselves within biblical narrative as though prior to a later and lesser complex of accretive doctrine.<sup>238</sup> In the later epics, as Regina Schwartz writes, "Milton tries to explain what is left unexplained in the biblical account... [he] presumes to fill in its background... not only light[ing] up the background of the story, but also illuminat[ing] his understanding of it... [p]ainting descriptions, seeking causes, offering explanations, exploring motives, and delineating consequences to make a fairly unintelligible story intelligible" ("Milton on the Bible" 47, 44-5).<sup>239</sup> Throughout his career, Milton's bold elaboration of biblical story (much like Spenser's vision of Sapience in *The Fowre Hymnes*) not only gives new figurative utterance to divine mysteries but consistently manifests the militant aim of "preventing" the "conformity" of doctrinal reading.<sup>240</sup> In Milton's works, as has been widely recognized, prophetic voice becomes increasingly identified with and ultimately indistinguishable from that of poetic office. What has been less remarked upon is the extent to which the prophetic office claimed for and enacted by

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<sup>237</sup> I have chosen to refer to "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" as the "Nativity Hymn" rather than the "Nativity Ode" and to distinguish between the hymn proper and its introductory proem. As Stephen Fallon points out, "[t]he hymn is always choral, and the ode only sometimes so" and it is the central dramatic purpose of Milton's poem to merge with an angelic choir. Furthermore, "[a]lthough the proem promises an ode, Milton heads the body of the poem 'The Hymn' (56). Finally, the kinship between 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity' and *The Fowre Hymnes* seems to me to warrant the privileging of 'hymn' over 'ode' as a representative reference for the poem as a whole.

<sup>238</sup> The strategy itself receives poetic treatment in the proem to the "Nativity Hymn" wherein the narrator urges his muse, "Have thou the honour first, thy Lord to greet" by placing the hymn at the feet of the Lord before the arrival of the "Star-led Wisards." (IV.26,23).

<sup>239</sup> Regina M. Schwartz suggests that for Milton "the canon is not closed, that revelation is ongoing" and argues that Milton bases his interpretative method of biblical elaboration upon a principle of charity. (44-5 Regina M. Schwartz "Milton on the Bible" in *A New Companion to Milton*)

<sup>240</sup> "Prevent" in the sense of "to preclude, stop or hinder" (OED), and also, as it is used in the "Nativity Ode", to "come before." Not only do Milton's para-biblical figures often avoid correspondence with doctrinal formulations but also his use of the conjunction "or" (as in the invocations within *Paradise Lost*) casts doubt upon their adequacy to the task of divine imitation thereby insisting upon their provisional status and preventing their subsequent "sicken[ing] into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition" (*Areopagitica* pg).

Milton's poetry is anticipated by both the concept of prophecy and the grammarian's exegetical method propounded by Erasmus.

### **Prophetic Mimesis**

As Richard Helgerson notes, the most ambitious of early-modern poets aspired to the status of laureates.<sup>241</sup> The ambition was really two-fold. First, these poets wished, after the manner of Petrarch, to revive the office of the poet laureate. Second, in the absence of such office and the royal recognition it entailed, they wished to arrogate for themselves a comparably elevated popular recognition. Such poets' laureate ambition required of them a "circumlocution of self-presentational gesture" whereby the official self was presented as "the something of great constancy at the center of [their] work" (*Self-Crowned Laureates* 4, 40). Especially pertinent to the examination of Milton's self-representations (largely concentrated within the prose works of the period 1640-1660), is Helgerson's insight that [t]he goodness of the laureate was ... the truth that underlay all the poses of his fictive art... removed from and opposed to the mad mimicry of the world" (*Self-Crowned Laureates* 42,43). In their almost obsessive preoccupation with Milton's unimpeachable virtue and dedication to mimetic truth, the early anti-prelatical writings (1640-1642) provide ample evidence in support of the "great constancy" of their author's underlying goodness.<sup>242</sup> Milton's poetic ambitions, however, as the prophetic claims of the

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<sup>241</sup> The term "laureate," as Helgerson uses it in describing Spenser, Jonson, and Milton, always implies the fuller formula "self-crowned laureates." It is both an ideal designation and the designation of an ideal specifically applicable to the highest ambitions of poets and for poetry in the generations immediately preceding the official creation of the English Laureate office.

<sup>242</sup> As Lewalski notes, with an apparent nod towards the example of Quintilian, "Milton's lengthy autobiographical passages serve... as ethical proof... the arguments and rhetoric of a good man" (*Life of Milton* 123).

invocations within *Paradise Lost* bear witness, exceed those traditionally associated with the poet-laureate.<sup>243</sup>

Helgerson suggests that it was only in his blindness (1652) and exile (post-1660)<sup>244</sup> that Milton seized upon the ultimate prophetic shape of his laureate ambition.<sup>245</sup> The sentiment is shared by Louis L. Martz: “Doubly exiled from the community of men, first by his loss of eyesight, and then by political isolation, Milton at last found the freedom to write his poem of exile” (*Poet of Exile* 79).<sup>246</sup> Blindness and exile may well have served as powerful catalysts of Milton’s poetic production, but what is more certain is that they contributed significantly to the monumentally prophetic aspect of Milton’s oeuvre. As John M. Steadman notes of Marvell’s comparison of Milton and Tiresias: “To assert, in an encomiastic poem, that the author has soared aloft “above human flight” was conventional; to compare him with a prophet was not unusual; but it is the biographical fact, the poet’s actual blindness, that gives authority and credibility to the praise: Just Heav’n thee like *Tiresias* to requite / Rewards with Prophecy thy loss of sight” (*Moral Fiction* 29).<sup>247</sup> According to this somewhat romantic yet often invoked

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<sup>243</sup> Laureate status, as dramatically recreated by Petrarch, was by no means strictly secular. Cf. Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle’s masterful study, *Petrarch’s Genius: Pentimento and Prophecy*. Thus, to a great extent Milton follows Petrarch’s example in conjoining poetry and theology within the laureate office. Nevertheless, the poetics of Milton’s later works is far more overtly biblical (in matter and style) than that of Petrarch (or Dante) let alone that of Spenser or Jonson.

<sup>244</sup> Milton’s “exile” may refer to his loss of civic standing subsequent to the restoration of 1660. It may also refer to the brief period spent in hiding following the restoration and prior to the issuing of *An Act of Free and General Pardon, Indemnity, and Oblivion* (1660), as well as to his brief imprisonment following the issuing of the general pardon.

<sup>245</sup> Helgerson does not quite say that Milton did not already conceive his poetic vocation as a “prophetic” laureateship. What he does say is as follows: “Neither the Caroline peace of the 1630s nor the civil war and Puritan Commonwealth of the 1640s and 1650s provided a way of achieving a laureate career, a way of being at once poet, prophet, and spokesman of the governing order. . . . But sometime in the late 1650s [Milton] began to forge a new role for the laureate based exclusively on the functions of poet and prophet” (*Self-Crowned Laureates* 280). I am in general agreement with Helgerson that Milton did not memorably embody a prophetic laureateship prior to his publication of *Paradise Lost*. Where I may differ with Helgerson is in conceiving Milton’s prior poetic and prose production as consistent with his prophetic conception of poetic office.

<sup>246</sup> *Paradise Lost* is first published in 1667.

<sup>247</sup> Marvell’s poem is published in the second edition of *Paradise Lost* in 1674.

analysis, Milton's blindness and exile both freed him for his epic labours and perfected the prophetic image he left to posterity. Yet Milton's posture of vehement opposition to the worldly corruption of virtue and the markedly prophetic stamp of Milton's poetic ambition are already in abundant evidence within the early anti-prelatical prose tracts of the 1640s.

Milton's reiterative insistence upon the prophetic nature of his vocation is traced by John Spencer Hill in the "waiting" period of prose production between 1641 and 1660 when, "[c]onvinced that England was a covenanted nation and that the prelates were wilfully thwarting the divinely ordained national mission, Milton took up his pen to defend the cause of continuing reformation" (*Poet, Priest and Prophet* 78). According to Hill Milton's "gradual isolation as he continued to meditate the divine will to a progressively dwindling band of the elect, manifested itself in an increasing self-identification with the Old Testament prophets" (*Poet, Priest and Prophet* 79).<sup>248</sup> Milton appears to have engaged in a progressively more strident display of prophetic identification in response to his perception that England, in spite of its election to the divine covenant of reformation, was repeating the earlier failings of Israel.<sup>249</sup> In other words, Milton's prophetic identifications could have stemmed as much from rhetorical as vocational motives. Whatever the incentive to prophetic utterance, the process by which the anti-prelatical tracts represent Milton acquiring moral, theological, and ultimately prophetic authority appears

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<sup>248</sup> In *The Reason of Church-Government*, referring to the divine compulsion to speak out against prelacy, Milton likens his thankless task to that of Jeremiah, compelled to speak the word of God burning within him, while "familiar friends watcht for his halting to be reveng'd on him for speaking the truth" (YP 1:803).

<sup>249</sup> As Hill writes, "it became a cardinal assumption of the Puritans that the Old Testament contained the blueprint for the required reconstruction of the English church and state. Israel's experience of election provided an invaluable guide and pattern for the nascent English theocracy—a conviction which is reflected even in the short titles of many of the sermons delivered to the Long Parliament between 1642 and 1647" (*Poet, Priest and Prophet* 90).

to be undergirded by a Christian Humanist scholarly method and *modus vivendi* that may be traced all the way back to his grammar school days.<sup>250</sup>

The character of Milton's poetic aspirations in the 1640s is both highly ambitious and recognizably conventional, corresponding to traditional depictions of the poets and poetry of earliest antiquity. In the essentials of poetic self-presentation, the anti-prelatical tracts are consistent with both Milton's prior formulations of poetic ambition in his correspondence with Charles Diodati and with the prophetic monumentalism of his later accomplishment. In "Elegy VI," a verse epistle to Diodati dating from 1626, Milton constructs a sustained analogy between himself as the singer of Christ's praises (in reference to his recent composition of the "Nativity Hymn") and the ascetic and prophetic bards of antiquity.<sup>251</sup> Similarly, in *Reason of Church Government* published in 1642, Milton recalls having made the following resolution: "That what the greatest and choicest wits of *Athens*, *Rome*, or modern *Italy*, and those Hebrews of old did for their country, I in my proportion with this over and above of being a Christian, might doe for mine" (CPW 1.812). The sweep of this last statement covers not only Greek and Latin *auctores* and Italian humanists (and/or proto-humanists) but, importantly, biblical prophets as well.

Milton, like divine poetry's apologists and aspiring laureates before him, wished the poet and the office of poetry might once again be as they were commonly reputed to have been in earliest antiquity. In the words of Erasmus, "[i]n ancient times poets and theologians were held to be the same people" (CWE 23.74). In the words of George Puttenham, the ancient poets were

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<sup>250</sup> Both method and *modus vivendi* because the scholarly method aims at affective transformation of the subject. As I argue below, Milton can represent himself as, in Lewalski's words, "a learned scholar...whose essential characteristic is an intellectual independence ...from human authorities" because he also represents himself as having so fully assimilated the traditions of *bonae* and *sacrae litterae* (in the manner recommended by a Christian Humanist education) that he can speak for these traditions—his authority is participatory (*Life of Milton* 122).

<sup>251</sup> Elegy VI appears in *Works* 3.149 and is explored at length in the next section.

“the first Priests and ministers of the holy misteries... the first Prophetes or sears ... the first lawmakers to the people, and the first polititiens” (*Arte of Poesie* 4,5).<sup>252</sup> Puttenham’s characterization of the “most ancient” and original “profession and use of Poesie” might well serve as a general inventory of Milton’s characterization of the poet’s divine abilities and poetic office—“of power beside the office of a pulpit”—throughout the anti-prelatical tracts. Puttenham’s characterization of the philosophical, theological, prophetic, and civic authority of poetry represented a conventional ideal that was the object of considerable contemporary nostalgia. What distinguishes Milton from other humanist-educated apologists for poetry and aspiring laureates is the extent to which he argues for the revival of this exalted office of poetry as a practical contemporary possibility.<sup>253</sup>

The ambition that Milton represents in his anti-prelatical tracts is to become a poet in the fullest (ancient and idealized) traditional sense of the word. The anti-prelatical tracts represent Milton as having pursued this goal through the type of Christian Humanist education conceived by Erasmus and institutionalized in the statutes of Colet’s St. Paul’s, the grammar school responsible for Milton’s early formation. The impression made upon Milton by his experience at St. Paul’s School—in which, according to Donald Lemen Clark, “the educational theories of Erasmus form the dominant influence” (*Milton at St. Paul’s* 100)<sup>254</sup>—appears to have been quite

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<sup>252</sup> *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) is also sometimes attributed to Richard Puttenham, as well as to John Lumley. Citation drawn from Chap. III. “How Poets were the first priests, the first prophets, the first Legislators and polititiens in the world.”

<sup>253</sup> The ambition Milton expresses in the *Reason of Church-Government* pointedly joins together the categories of poet that Sidney distinguishes in the *Defence*. There is no sense in any of Milton’s works that the Davidic office is unrecoverable or that any poet worth his salt would fail to “imitate the inconceivable excellencies of God” (*Defence* 86:22).

<sup>254</sup> Not only did Erasmus help design the curriculum at St. Paul’s but he composed *De Duplici Copia Verborum ac Rerum* at Colet’s request specifically for use at St. Paul’s. As Kenneth Charlton writes, “In a proliferation of texts produced to aid both teacher and pupil one above all stands out... the *De Copia* of so many school statutes and book lists of the period... became the standard work in grammar schools all over Europe” (*Education in Renaissance*

significant. Clark notes of Milton's *Tractate of Education*, that Milton "approved of the traditional grammar school so emphatically that he would extend and enrich it and abolish the universities altogether save for professional training in law and medicine" (*Milton at St. Paul's* 250).<sup>255</sup> Still further, "[i]n *Meanes to Remove Hirelings* [Milton] stated that the clergy needed no training but "by the scripture and the original languages therof at schoole" (251).<sup>256</sup> Milton, in other words, conceives the ideal general and theological education as that of a Christian grammarian after the example promoted and exemplified by Erasmus—"an expert on the structure and functions of words... who, distrusting dialectic as a method of reaching and teaching theological truth, applied linguistic knowledge in order to clarify biblical and patristic texts and contexts, interpreting them by the aid of all the arts and all the ancient testimony" (CWE 23.xxiii-xxiv).<sup>257</sup> There is nothing particularly remarkable about either Milton's education at St. Paul's, or the high esteem in which he seems to have held it, or even the kinds of moral lessons he represents himself (in the anti-prelatical tracts) as gleaned from his readings. What is remarkable is the extent to which Milton appears—as attested within his anti-prelatical writings—to have earnestly embraced the central tenets of this education as the effective means both of regenerative spiritual transformation and of the renewal of the office of divine poetry.<sup>258</sup>

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England 110-11). For an account of Erasmus's general influence within early modern England see above, General Introduction, "The Legacy of Erasmus's Rhetorical Theology in Early Modern England," pp. 9-15.

<sup>255</sup> The *Tractate of Education* first appears in 1644.

<sup>256</sup> Milton's *Means to Remove Hirelings* dates from 1659.

<sup>257</sup> This definition of the Christian grammarian appears as typifying Erasmus in Craig R. Thompson's "Introduction" to volume 23 of the *Collected Works of Erasmus*.

<sup>258</sup> The fact that St. Paul's is representative of the best grammar schools in Milton's time and thereby demonstrates the ascendancy of humanism over the scholastic method should not obscure the fact that this same scholastic method continued to dominate the universities. Thus Milton's grammar school education was typical but his appreciation of its quality—particularly in relation to that of his Cambridge studies—may have been greater than most. Clark writes that Milton "was so happy in the congenial surroundings of his humanistic grammar school that he was well prepared to hate, as hate he thoroughly did, the medieval scholasticism of his university when he proceeded to Cambridge in 1625" (*Milton at St. Paul's* 4).

The Christian Humanist education that Milton received at St. Paul's—largely the same standard humanist education available to any of Milton's contemporaries who attended one of the better English grammar schools<sup>259</sup>—provides an essential key to resolving controversy surrounding the relation of Milton's poetics to his claims of prophetic inspiration. The two poles of this controversy may be represented by passages from William Kerrigan on the one hand and John M. Steadman on the other. Kerrigan has noted that "Miltonists—defensive about his ambition, appreciative of his humanism—find many ways to neutralize [Milton's] constant identification with the prophets of God" (*Prophetic Milton* 10). Steadman, in turn, declares that "the prophetic and visionary stance [Milton] assumes in his major epic is not only a conscious adherence to (and reformulation of) a well-established poetic convention but also an important facet of a deliberately contrived vatic persona... [providing] no conclusive evidence that (like his proto-Romantic admirer and disciple William Blake) he literally regarded himself as prophetic and visionary" (*Moral Fiction* 6). For all the apparent irreconcilability of these two positions, Milton's accounts of his education suggest that (as Lewalski writes in a related context), there is no necessary contradiction between Milton's rational, imitative, and rhetorically contrived literary art and his authentically prophetic role. (*Rhetoric of Literary Forms* 25)

In describing and appraising Milton's conception of prophetic poetics, Kerrigan differentiates it from Sidneian poetics. Of Sidney, Kerrigan writes,

For a man whose work suggests the influence of Plato and Neoplatonism, he remained far indeed from any genuine endorsement of the poet as a prophet. *Furor poeticus* dissolved into mimesis: "The chiefe both in antiquitie and excellencie were they that did imitate the inconeuable excellencies of GOD"... Imitating an excellent subject, the poet becomes excellent. The correspondence of

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<sup>259</sup> On grammar schools see Kenneth Charlton *Education in Renaissance England*, "The Grammar Schools" pp.89-130.

excellence submerges any possible correspondence of inspiration” (*Prophetic Milton* 56).

In spite of the close resemblance of Milton’s motto-like formula of the true poet as true poem<sup>260</sup> to Kerrigan’s formulation of the Sidneian conception that in “[i]mitating an excellent subject, the poet becomes excellent,” Kerrigan wants to insist upon a non-rational element in Milton’s prophetic poetics—something approaching, if not identical to, the pagan *furor poeticus*. Kerrigan finds this element in the notion of the divine breath in the Genesis story of the creation of Adam: “The narrator of *Paradise Lost* is the vessel for infused knowledge, the model of which is the first inspiration and first gift of human “being”—the breath of God giving *anima* to the dust of Adam” (*Prophetic Milton* 171).<sup>261</sup> The latter example is, I believe, perfectly appropriate to Milton’s inspiration in composing *Paradise Lost*, but in Milton, as in Erasmus, the creative power of divine breath manifests in the Logos or copious discourse of God. Indeed, Kerrigan seems to make this same connection between divine breath and discourse when he goes on to note that “God repeats this miracle [“that of giving *anima* to the dust of Adam”] when Michael gives the prophetic Adam his “fill / Of knowledge, what this Vessel can contain”” (*Prophetic Milton* 171).<sup>262</sup> The “infused knowledge” that Michael imparts to Adam as “Vessel” is represented by Milton as discourse. Through the shift in perspective that equates divine breath and discourse, it becomes possible to appreciate how a genuinely prophetic<sup>263</sup> utterance may result from an altogether rational (though no less divine) process of mimesis. Indeed, just such a

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<sup>260</sup> The formula appears in *An Apology against a Pamphlet* (YP 1:890) and is examined in the following section, “A True Poem against Prelaty.”

<sup>261</sup> The biblical account appears at Genesis 2:7.

<sup>262</sup> Kerrigan is quoting from *PL* Bk.XII. 558-59.

<sup>263</sup> While recognizing that there are a variety of forms of prophetic discourse, for the purposes of my arguments in this paper “prophetic” refers to human utterance that participates in divine utterance. In other words, I am defining prophecy in the Erasmian sense of Logos participation. Cf. Elizabeth Biemann on the conjunction of *mimesis* and *methexis* (imitation and participation) in the Renaissance idea of prophetic/participatory mimesis *Plato Baptized* 137-8.

rational yet genuinely prophetic method is propounded by Erasmus in relation to the Christ-Logos—God, conceived primarily as discourse.<sup>264</sup>

Erasmus offers no brief for the profession and use of divine poetry. That said, the idea of prophecy that informs his use of the term *theodidaktos* conjoins poetic, interpretative, and visionary inspiration.<sup>265</sup> Erasmus exhorts the aspiring preacher in specifically prophetic terms: “You should prepare your heart for this gift so that you may also be worthy to be called by the prophetic word *theodidaktos* [one taught by God]. Simple and dovelike let the eye of faith be that perceives nothing but the things of heaven” (*Ratio* 76). Here it is not a question of productively imitating but rather of imbibing an excellent/heavenly subject. This is not quite the form of imitation Kerrigan describes as characterizing Sidney’s version of the poet’s prophetic mimesis. Erasmus is describing a preparatory stage of imitation that consists in the activity of following the Christ-Logos by laboriously digesting *sacrae litterae* (divine letters). This assimilative imitation both prepares for and anticipates a further stage of expressive imitation. Erasmus’s key library analogy is precisely to the point in illustrating how mimesis can be construed as genuinely prophetic:

[M]ake your heart itself into a library of Christ...From it, like from the provident householder, you can bring forth “new things and old” as they should be needed. For these things which come forth from your own heart, as it were, practically alive, penetrate far more vividly into the souls of your listeners than those things which are gathered from a hodgepodge of other authors. (*Ratio* 341)

Here digestive mimesis leads to the transformation from diligent reader to copiously instructive library and this transformation, enacted through digestive, participatory mimesis, enables the

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<sup>264</sup> The original Latin title of Erasmus’s *Method* is *Ratio seu methodus compendio perveniendi ad veram theologiam*. See n.37 of the General Introduction “Participatory Poetics and the Grammar of Christ: From Erasmus to Sidney.”

<sup>265</sup> See “Participatory Method” within the Introduction.

expressive mimesis of prophetic utterance.<sup>266</sup> The utterance emerging from the Erasmian preacher's heart is prophetic in the sense that it participates in the life and power of Christ as divine Logos and it is by this life and power that it penetrates and effects the souls of listeners (and readers).

Within Erasmus's *Ratio (Method of True Theology)* the goal is not only to speak but to embody the word of God. The method for attaining this goal of creative participation in the divine Logos is diligent study of Scripture following upon comprehensive literary and linguistic training. Erasmus's aim in conjoining *bonae litterae* and *sacrae litterae* is the achievement of prophetic eloquence and Milton's prophetic poetic method in his epics shares much in common with this Erasmian project. As Mary Anne Radzinowicz notes, "[i]n the interweaving of sacred and secular precedents, [Milton] upheld the historical and aesthetic priority of biblical over classical model, working within a humanistic educational tradition that constructed a harmony from both" (*Milton's Epics and Psalms* 6,7).<sup>267</sup> Radzinowicz specifically links the conjunction in Milton's works of divine inspiration and the poet's "critical art of composition" (or, as she writes, the "concurrence between "divine and humane things" in poetry") with the formative humanist educational paradigm to which he was exposed at St. Paul's:

[C]ollocations of the classics and Scripture appear in the stylistic annotations in marginalia in Milton's library, suggesting that Hebrew and Greek poetry were introduced to him as objects of comparison at Saint Paul's School through a critical method derived from Greek and Italian Renaissance rhetoricians" (*Milton's Epics and Psalms* 7,8).

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<sup>266</sup> What I here call "digestive mimesis" corresponds to "methexis" (participation) in Biemann's highly instructive explanation of Renaissance mimesis which is explored below in a subsequent section.

<sup>267</sup> Radzinowicz specifically links the conjunction in Milton's works of divine inspiration and the poet's "critical art of composition" (or, as she writes, the "concurrence between "divine and humane things" in poetry") with the formative humanist educational paradigm to which he was exposed at St. Paul's: "collocations of the classics and Scripture appear in the stylistic annotations in marginalia in Milton's library, suggesting that Hebrew and Greek poetry were introduced to him as objects of comparison at Saint Paul's School through a critical method derived from Greek and Italian Renaissance rhetoricians" (*Milton's Epics and Psalms* 7,8).

The conjoining of *bonae litterae* and *sacrae litterae*, through comprehensive and painstaking study, in the pursuit of prophetic eloquence is a formula well-suited to tagging the respective projects of either Milton or Erasmus.

Erasmian mimesis concerned with prophetic participation in the Logos, and Erasmian mimesis concerned with the cultivation of scholarly classicizing eloquence share one and the same method. Erasmus's concept of the mimetic transformation of the reader (digestive mimesis), receives exemplary theological treatment in the *Ratio*, with the preacher's heart becoming a library of Christ. The corresponding concept of the mimetic transformation of texts (expressive mimesis), however, receives particularly instructive treatment in the ostensibly secular *Ciceronianus*:

That must be digested which you devour in your varied daily reading, must be made your own by meditation rather than memorized or put into a book, so that your mind crammed with every kind of food may give birth to a style which smells not of any flower, shrub, or grass but of your own native talent and feeling; so that he who reads may not recognize fragments culled from Cicero but the reflection of a well-stored mind. Cicero had read all his predecessors and weighed carefully what was worthy of sanction or censure in each; yet you would not recognize any one of them in particular in Cicero but the force of a mind animated by the thoughts of them all. (81-82)<sup>268</sup>

In spite of its secular tenor, this passage from Erasmus seems ready-made for reconciling Kerrigan's notion of Sidneian mimesis with his notion of biblical inspiration, and both of these together with Steadman's notion of the contrivance of Milton's prophetic style. Here, in the *Ciceronianus*, the digestive process results not only in the unifying synthesis and mimetic mirroring of excellent materials (Sidneian mimesis) but in the concomitant animation of the

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<sup>268</sup> *Ciceronianus, or A Dialogue on the Best Style of Speaking*, Columbia University Contributions to Education, Teachers College Series, No.21 (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1908). Cited in *The Light in Troy* 183.

participating mind (inspiration). Moreover, textual digestion and spiritual inspiration become interchangeable when that which animates the participating mind is the living embodiment of the Logos. The utterance that then issues forth from this mental animation (even in the spiritually salutary instance of Logos-participating mimesis), is still bound to reproduce a generically recognizable ‘taste’ lent to it by the “well established poetic [and rhetorical] conventions” of its scriptural sources. (*Moral Fiction* 6)

One of the most venerable and elegant figures used to describe the process of imitation (mimesis) is the apian metaphor, with notable classical examples in Lucretius, Horace, and Seneca.<sup>269</sup> Surveying (and renewing) such classical examples, Petrarch writes: “This is the substance of Seneca’s counsel, and Horace’s before him, that we should write as the bees make sweetness, not storing up the flowers but turning them into honey, thus making one thing of many various ones, but different and better” (Greene 98).<sup>270</sup> Such passages make abundantly clear the transformative aspect of mimesis. As Thomas M. Greene notes, “[t]he familiar apian analogy implies a capacity for absorption and assimilation on the part of the poet, a capacity for making one’s own the external text in all its otherness” (*Light in Troy* 98). The essential to remember when considering Milton’s mimetic task in composing his biblical epics, is that, from the Christian Humanist perspective, the “otherness” of his scriptural sources, the “excellent subject” (*Prophetic Milton* 56) in which the mind participates through imitation, is the otherness and excellence of “the living image of His holy mind and the speaking, healing, dying, rising

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<sup>269</sup> See Thomas M. Greene’s *The Light in Troy*—a veritable treasure-trove of insights upon classical and humanist theories of imitation. Greene explores the apian figure in his sections on “Themes of Ancient Theory” (73-4) and “Petrarch and the Humanist Hermeneutic” (98-9).

<sup>270</sup> Green is borrowing his translation of the Petrarchan passage from *Letters from Petrarch* trans. Morris Bishop (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1966).

Christ himself' in and as Scripture. (*Paraclesis* 108)<sup>271</sup> The Christian humanist method of assimilative study thus allows for an effective bridging of Kerrigan's argument for the literal value of Milton's claims to prophetic authority and Steadman's insistence upon the conscientious and even "contrived" activity of the poet's mimesis. In terms of the perspective promoted in Erasmus's *Paraclesis*, to effectively absorb and assimilate the "excellent subject" of Scripture is literally to become *theodidaktos* (one instructed by God) and to participate in the creative power of Christ as Logos.<sup>272</sup> Yet to be thus instructed and to compose prophetic utterance that gives voice to the Logos does not entail a fundamental change in the rules of grammar nor does it entail an alteration in the inspired speaker's ability or responsibility to convey this inspired utterance in appropriately eloquent and persuasive form.

If Erasmus does not authorize the poet's prophetic eloquence, neither does he imagine that the power possessed by sacred texts of Scripture should not invest the poet (or any other man or woman<sup>273</sup>) endowed with reason adequate to understanding and the favourable guidance of the Spirit. Furthermore, if Erasmus does not authorize the poet's prophetic eloquence he

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<sup>271</sup> Translation by John C. Olin in *Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Selected Writings of Erasmus*. The *Paraclesis* appears as preface to the 1516 edition of Erasmus's New Testament.

<sup>272</sup> An idea analogous to Milton's prophetic or Logos participating mimesis is that of the poet's echoing of grace. Paul Stevens writes: "In his maturity, [Milton] comes to understand the echoic function of grace not only in voice but in verse, where imitation creates originality over and again" (Review of *Milton's Peculiar Grace* E181). *Modern Philology* Feb. 1 2011. Vol. 108 issue 3. 177-182. This analogy notwithstanding, I realize that my present argument seeks to resolve precisely the contradiction that Stevens argues underlies the discontinuities in Milton's self-representations: "In the final analysis, then, Milton's otherness consists... in the genuine discontinuity... created by the intense pressure of two authoritative but contradictory models of self-construction, the one, rooted in the Protestant rediscovery of the living Word, which denies the self-transforming value of human activity, and the other, rooted in the Humanist rediscovery of classical education, which idealizes it "industrious and select reading, steddly observation, insight into all" ("Discontinuities in Milton's Early Self-Representation" 275). I am arguing that the humanists discover the living Word via transformative grammar and that this option of self-construction is available to and seized upon by Milton.

<sup>273</sup> In the *Paraclesis* Erasmus offers access to the biblical text of his *Novum Testamentum* so that "all can be theologians." See Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle's *Erasmus on Language and Method in Theology* 7.

nevertheless cultivates a curiously ambivalent position regarding the nature of eloquent theology and its relation to poetry. In a passage of dialogue within his *Antibarbari* Erasmus writes:

In ancient times poets and theologians were held to be the same people, and I frankly admit that the writings of eloquent authors on theology delight me no less than Cicero. The modern ones – well, I often try them and force myself to read, but nausea overcomes me as I go on, I am so disgusted by the barbarous style and confusion of thought.” (CWE v.23 p.74)

It is not entirely clear whether the “eloquent authors on theology” who are comparable to Cicero and who thus delight the speaker are exclusively theologians, or also ancient poets of theological inclination. Nor is it clear whether these delightful “eloquent authors on theology” are exclusively Christians or whether they might also include a number of providentially illuminated pagans. It is similarly unclear whether the “modern ones” who nauseate the speaker are again only modern theologians, or also modern poets. Erasmus here has acknowledged that poets and theologians were once held to be identical and has then proceeded to identify only “barbarous style and confusion of thought” as factors in the poetry and/or theology’s modern decadence from that earlier delightful state.

Whether the decadence of “barbarous style and confusion of thought,” to which Erasmus’s speaker objects in the *Antibarbari*, is attributed to theology alone or poetry alone or to both theology and poetry together, the remedy required is, by inversion, the joint cultivation of eloquent style and clarity of thought. In other words, if the cultivation of eloquent style and clarity of thought were pursued, and if this remedy were truly effective, what it restored would resemble the ancient state of things when “poets and theologians were held to be the same people.” Thus, while Erasmus does not authorize a contemporary profession or use of divine poetry, here in the *Antibarbari* he suggests that by the cultivation of an eloquent style and clarity of thinking the poet who writes “on theology” might appear indistinguishable from the

theologian. Something resembling this sentiment is at work in Milton's descriptions of his poetic aspirations throughout the anti-prelatical tracts. It is equally evident that Milton's descriptions of his exemplary course of instruction—through the participatory imitation of models of virtue—answers to the humanist educational paradigm enshrined in St. Paul's Grammar School, whereby an ideal of Christian eloquence is to be taught and pursued through imitation of wise, virtuous and linguistically refined models. The possibility of a familial relation between Milton's ideal educational program—essentially an educational soteriology—and that of Erasmus's *belle-lettriste* theology goes a considerable way to explaining Milton's confidence in his scholarly approach to the true poet's prophetic office.<sup>274</sup> In such a perspective, the poet's *Paradise Lost* and the rhetorical theologian's *Novum Testamentum, Annotationes*, and *Paraphrases*, might take their respective places as living, and unifying, and complementary proofs of effective Christian remedy revivifying the example of ancient times when "poets and theologians were held to be the same people."

### The Poet's Purview

From May 1641 to April 1642 Milton composed five anti-prelatical tracts: *Of Reformation, Of Prelatical Episcopacy, Animadversions, The Reason of Church Government*, and *An Apology against a Pamphlet. The Reason of Church Government* was the only one of these to openly announce Milton's authorship, yet all five involve autobiographical sections in which Milton

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<sup>274</sup> Something along these lines is also at work within Colet's divising of the curriculum of St. Paul's to remedy "barbary," "corupcion," "blynde folis" and its adulterating of the "old Laten speech" and other such "fylthynesse" and "abusyon" through instruction in "suych auctours that hathe with wisdom Joyned the pure chaste eloquence" (Cited by Jonathan Arnold in *Dean John Colet of St. Paul's: Humanism and Reform in Early Tudor England*, 2007, p. 100-101, 105. Arnold is citing J.H. Lupton, *The Influence of Dean Colet upon the Reformation of the English Church* 226-7, and *Registrum* p.234.

represents himself not only as a righteous enemy of episcopacy but as a divinely elected poet from whom great works may be expected.<sup>275</sup> As Stephen Fallon notes

Part of the work of the anti-prelatical tracts is to establish a voice that will lend authority to [Milton's] arguments even as he makes those arguments. The anonymity is provisional and partial, deployed to be seen through. (MPG 80)

It is a remarkable feature of Milton's anti-prelatical writings that in a debate concerning the doctrine and discipline of the English church, he should choose "to be seen" and to fashion his authority in theological argument as a poet. The office of poet, as it stood in the early 1640s, could not of itself lend authority to Milton's anti-prelatical cause. Instead, his consistent self-representation as a "true poet" throughout the anti-prelatical tracts lends authority to the exalted idea of poetic office—one conjoining the pulpits of puritan divine and orator-statesman (in the era of print)—that Milton's anti-prelatical employment advances. As David Loewenstein and Paul Stevens note in relation to this exalted poetic office, Milton claims the following intent: "not simply God's glory, but "Gods glory by the honour and instruction of my country"; his purpose is to write, in his "native tongue," great poetic works "doctrinal and exemplary to a Nation"" (*Early Modern Nationalism* 4).<sup>276</sup> To the degree that Milton succeeds within the anti-prelatical controversy as a true poet, to that same degree he demonstrates that theological controversy, and the governance of church and state, fall within the true poet's purview.

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<sup>275</sup> Milton represents his authorial position as that of a poet of divine promise even in the least autobiographical of his anti-prelatical writings, *Of Reformation*. In *Of Reformation* Milton's poetic ambitions are not absent, only less directly stated. To this effect, Stephen Fallon writes, "In the peroration [to *Of Reformation*], Milton moves seamlessly from what God will do to what man, and specifically Milton can and will do.... "Then amidst the *Hymns*, and *Halleluiahs*, of *Saints* some one may perhaps bee heard offering at high *strains* in new and lofty *Measures* to sing and celebrate thy *divine Mercies*, and *marvelous Judgements* in this land throughout all Ages..." (*Milton's Peculiar Grace* 83 citing CPW 1:616).

<sup>276</sup> Loewenstein and Stevens are citing *The Reason of Church-Government* (CPW 1:810-15). *Early Modern Nationalism and Milton's England*

In the chronological arc of Milton's anti-prelatical tracts, the bulk of scholarly argument concerning episcopacy and the proper form of church government occurs early on, particularly in *Of Reformation* and *Of Prelatical Episcopacy*. The *Reason of Church Government*—in which Milton is at pains to ground his anti-episcopal stance in Scripture—responds principally (and more or less respectfully) to two tracts, one by Lancelot Andrewes and the other by James Ussher.<sup>277</sup> In *Animadversions* and *An Apology against a Pamphlet* Milton is involved in a rather bitter (and at times disconcertingly vicious) exchange with Joseph Hall—a learned bishop with considerable prior success within the arena of theological controversy—and one of Hall's collaborators.<sup>278</sup> In these anti-prelatical exchanges, Milton's interlocutors are men of considerable intelligence, learning, and reputation. Milton's willingness to enter into controversy with these particular men is indicative, at the very least, of his confident assurance in both his own learning and the effectiveness of his rhetorical gifts.

Milton's zeal in these early polemical works is inextricably bound up with his sense of national and theological vocation as a poet. The anti-prelatical tracts contain a wealth of autobiographical material concerning Milton's learning, poetics, and poetic ambition employed,

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<sup>277</sup> In *Reason*, As Ralph Haug notes, Milton's combative rhetoric is relatively mild and there is even some respectful concession to the learning of Andrewes and Ussher. (*Reason* Preface CPW 1.738-9)

<sup>278</sup> In 1640 bishop Joseph Hall published *Episcopacie by Divine Right*. In 1641 Hall published a shorter companion piece entitled *An Humble Remonstrance*. The *Remonstrance* was published anonymously but was recognizable as a "précis of Hall's much longer *Episcopacie by Divine Right*" (Jameela Lares 112). Five Puritans (the collective author Smectymnuus) attacked the shorter of Hall's works with *An Answer to a Book Entitled An Humble Remonstrance* (March 1641). Hall responded to the Smectymnuans with *A Defence of the Humble Remonstrance* in April and it is in response to this *Defence* that Milton begins his direct engagement with Hall. There are four principle texts in Milton's pamphlet-battle with Hall. *Animadversions Upon the Remonstrant's Defence Against Smectymnuus* (July? 1641) responds to Hall's *Defence*. A younger collaborator of Hall's camp counters *Animadversions* with *A Modest Confutation of a Slanderous and Scurrilous Libell, Intituled, Animadversions etc.* (January? 1642). Milton responds to the the *Modest Confutation* with the final tract, *An Apology Against a Pamphlet Called a Modest Confutation of the Animadversions upon the Remonstrant against Smectymnuus* (April 1642). The *Apology* takes aim at the new author of the *Modest Confutation* while continuing in its general attack of Hall and Hall's positions. For an overview of the controversy in terms of "Hall's" and Milton's respective self-authorizing self-representations see Thomas Kranidas' "Style and Rectitude in Seventeenth Century Prose: Hall, Smectymnuus and Milton," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 46, no.3, Summer 1983, pp. 237-269.

in Helgerson's words, to represent "the truth that underlay all [Milton's] poses" (*Self-Crowned Laureates* 42). As Stevens observes, however, the gestures by which Milton establishes his vocational authority are so fluid and theatrical they risk suggesting that Milton merely "writes himself into the roles his culture admires" ("Discontinuities" 268). Stevens detects a certain "insensitivity" or "indifference" in Milton towards the actual tumult of "publick events" which leads to the "disjunction between the tenor of [Milton's] rhetoric and the circumstances in which it is employed" ("Discontinuities" n.33. 279).<sup>279</sup> Stevens' account of this disjunction is comically appalling:

In early January 1642 when *The Reason of Church-Government* was completed... Milton was anything but alone and pitted against fearful odds. Over a year before, in November 1640, when Parliament had reassembled and fifteen thousand Londoners had presented the Root and Branch petition, the old regime collapsed.... In January 1642 then, at the moment Milton was representing himself in the tradition of Protestant martyrdom, not only had the machinery of episcopal power been dismantled, the Star Chamber abolished, and the Bishops effectively excluded from Parliament... but most of the Bishops, fifteen of the remaining twenty-two, were either retired or in prison... In the context of the Bishops's abject state... Milton's deployment of the rhetoric of the persecuted, begins to look disconcertingly theatrical. ("Discontinuities" 270-271)

One possible reason for the apparent temporal disjunction is that, as Thomas N. Corns writes, Milton may have entered into controversy with the express intention of "reanimat[ing] a flagging campaign" against episcopacy with the express intention of undermining "the middle ground emerging in 1641-42 between moderate Presbyterians and anti-Laudian episcopalians" ("Antiprelatical Tracts" 40).

In spite of what seems an obvious and jarring disjunction between Milton's rhetoric and his actual circumstances, it is questionable, in this instance, whether Milton conceived a clear

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<sup>279</sup> I am following Stevens discussion in n.33 p.279 of "Discontinuities in Milton's Early Public Self-Representation."

distinction between the *truth represented* and the *truth of the representation*. In other words, it is not clear whether he would have applied this distinction to his own self-representations differently than it might be applied to Xenophon's feigning of Cyrus. Indeed it is impossible to determine whether Milton's point in the autobiographical passages of the anti-prelatical tracts is to represent himself as he truly is, or "to bestow a Cyrus upon the world to make many Cyruses," or whether it is (more or less consciously) a little of both (*Defence* 85).

In the antiprelatical tracts Milton represents his own agency almost exclusively in terms of the understanding and instruction involved in textual reception and production.<sup>280</sup> As Elizabeth Sauer notes, Milton's poem *Lycidas* (1637) was published at the height of Laudian influence and would be retrospectively framed by Milton as an early contribution to his work of anti-prelatical reformation: "At a time when Laud had forbidden preaching, the poet-polemicist steps into the fray... [t]he pastoral poem 'Lycidas'... perform[s] the work of public service and edification in the manner of the preacher, and Milton identifies the art of poetry as his ministry" ("Caroline Church Government" 212). Such a conception of heroic agency (as a ministerial potential for edifying instruction) squares well with Milton's preoccupation with truth as the ultimate object and measure of both learning and eloquence.

As Stanley Fish notes, just as Milton equates "eloquence and the love of truth" thereby characterizing eloquence as a potential for rather than a quality of expression, so too he equates "his conception of action ... not with any physical gesture but with an inner readiness that may issue (or not issue) in any gesture at all" (*How Milton Works* 118). According to Fish, what

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<sup>280</sup> Even when it comes to the actual conflicts being waged in the streets, Milton waits to hear of their issue and to construe their meaning as that, essentially, of a historical text in the making. In other words, the anti-laudian conflict seems to only become present to Milton—as something in which he may participate—through the mediation of texts.

makes a Miltonic man of action is his total self possession. In such an agent there is no losing the self in reaction to outward events. In his “singlemindedness [such an] agent ... see[s] the world as a space or tablet on which only one interpretation—known in advance and hewed to—can and should be inscribed” (*How Milton Works* 33). In other words, in the process of learning Milton becomes that which he learns and in action or utterance he chooses and speaks that which he is. Given such a soberly restrained conception of ideal action, Milton may have been entirely self-aware and content in identifying his own agency (in the antiprelatical tracts) in terms solely of the reception and production of literary fictions.<sup>281</sup>

Perhaps the most disturbing discontinuity that Stevens notes in Milton’s self-representations (this one in the *Defensio Secunda*) concerns the young poet’s noble return to embattled England: “‘I thought it base [Milton writes] to be travelling for amusement abroad while my fellow-citizens were fighting for liberty at home.’ Once home, however, ‘als soon as I was able, I hired a spacious house in the city for myself and my books, where I calmly awaited the issue of the contest, which I trusted to the wise conduct of Providence and the courage of the people’” (“Discontinuities” n.33 p.279).<sup>282</sup> One is inclined to cringe a little at Milton’s apparent indifference to “the people” and events on the ground. The disaffection of this self-discovery seems most blame-worthy if Milton is unaware of his manifest bias. But what if this bias is consistently and deliberately central to Milton’s self-representations as part of a culturally recognizable and ostensibly virtuous authorial persona? In a startling passage of the *Antibarbari*, (and explicitly iterating the position of the venerable Jerome) Erasmus argues for the superiority of “saintly learning” over “saintly simplicity”:

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<sup>281</sup> Consistent with this notion of a preference for textual engagements and textual mediations of the self is Milton’s famous line from *Areopagitica*, “A good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit” (272)

<sup>282</sup> (*Defensio Secunda*, Fellowes trans., *John Milton: Complete Poems*, ed. Hughes, 829-830)

Worth without learning will die with its possessor, unless it be commended to posterity in written works. But where there is learned scholarship, nothing stops it from spreading out to all humanity, neither land nor sea nor the long succession of the centuries. I would not like here to bring up an invidious comparison as to which has been of most value to our religion, the blood of the martyrs or the pens of the learned writers. I am not disparaging the glory of the martyrs, which a man could not attain to even by unlimited eloquence; but to speak simply of usefulness to us... There was indeed a plentiful supply of martyrs, but very few doctors. The martyrs died, and so diminished the number of Christians; the scholars persuaded others and so increased it. In short, the martyrs would have shed their blood in vain for the teaching of Christ unless the others had defended it against the heretics by their writings. (CWE 23.82-3)

In Erasmus's account, that particular goodness is most useful which is embodied through the representations of public scholarship. Erasmus's passage implicitly equates the Christian life with learning. The martyrs have not shed their blood for Christ, but for the "teaching of Christ." Erasmus is not speaking of the significance of the martyrs' sacrifices in and of themselves. Instead, he is speaking of the significance of the martyr's sacrifice as instructive examples. The point Erasmus makes is that an example can only be instructive if it has been recorded, and this same example will be most instructive when it has been interpreted, magnified, and disseminated in the form of its recording.

There is a curious (and slightly discomfiting) harmony between Milton's calmly awaiting "the issue of the contest" and Erasmus's scholars making good on the blood of the martyrs. Yet, as Elizabeth Sauer observes, Milton's writings consistently establish a "correspondence between the writer's and the politician's national contributions. In the *Commonplace Book* and *Areopagitica*, such accomplishments are represented by a program of reading, writing, and education modeled for an active citizenry, a liberty-loving Reformation nation" ("Reading Practices" 449-50). And indeed, as Milton wrote of his blindness, "they also serve who stand and wait." Milton might well have felt it base to be travelling abroad when, as a scholarly poet of

divine calling, he ought to be home, with his reference library suitably disposed, awaiting the issue of his nation's travails and his task of commending its worth to posterity.

## **Honey and Gall**

In the autobiographical sections of the anti-prelatical pamphlets, by interweaving ethical proofs with testimony to his exceptional learning, Milton represents himself fusing the classical virtue of the perfect orator with the charisma of the biblical prophets. On the one hand, Milton employs the virtue and charisma of this poetic persona to attack episcopacy on behalf of the English public. On the other hand, he employs his engagement in the anti-episcopal debate (as heroically war-faring scholarly Christian) to set down for posterity his exalted vision of poetic office and to prophesy the worthy issue of that office—the great work which his nation may expect of him.

The confrontation that Milton constructs in *An Apology against a Pamphlet* (henceforth *Apology*), is between the ethically compromised episcopal office of Bishop Joseph Hall,<sup>283</sup> and the ideal office of true poetry whose blameless pursuit Milton has interrupted to advance reformation. On the one hand, Hall and his Laudian caste are represented (somewhat misleadingly, as Stevens points out, given actual circumstances) in possession of “the pompous garb, the Lordly life, the wealth, the haughty distance of Prelaty.” On the other hand, Milton represents himself “beholding the bright countenance of truth in the quiet and still air of delightful studies” in patient preparation and hope of the divine employment of inspired poesy. (CPW 1:825-6; 821-2). In Milton's debate with Hall, as Thomas Kranidas writes, both authors

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<sup>283</sup> Recognizing the historical uncertainty of the identification, my referring to the Confuter as Hall reflects their general identification in Milton's tract.

expend significant energy “establishing their own authority and reliability, not only in their skill and comprehensiveness in presenting evidence, but in the actual presentation of self as truth-teller” (“Style and Rectitude” 239). Hall was an established and accomplished ecclesial figure, a bishop reputed both for his learning and his success in religious controversy, whose authoritative voice was already well-established. Milton was a zealous but as yet unaccomplished young man who combined in his person an excellent humanist education, exceptional writing ability, and the confident assurance of being called to a superior destiny as an English national poet.

In the *Apology* Milton produces his autobiographical passages in response to personal libel. The *Modest Confutation* had suggested Milton was both superficially educated and given over to immoral living:

Where his morning haunts are I wist not; but he that would finde him after dinner, must search the Play-Houses, or the Bordelli, for there I have traced him. It is like hee spent his youth, in loytering, bezelling, and harlotting. Thus being grown to an Impostume in the brest of the University, he was at length vomited out thence into a Suburbe sinke about London” (“To the Reader,” *Modest Confutation*)<sup>284</sup>

Of course, in claiming he has spent his youth “in loytering, bezelling, and harlotting,” the *Modest Confuter* is merely throwing back at Milton the latter’s own libel suggesting the clergy “spend their youth in loitering, bezzling, and harlotting, [and] their studies in unprofitable questions, and barbarous sophistry” (*Animadversions* CPW 1. 677). In returning Milton’s own puerile insult, however, the *Modest Confuter* finds his interlocutor unusually well-armed to defend. As his private correspondence with Charles Diodati attests, Milton was given to (or, at the very least, both idealized and affected) a chaste seriousness and near-ascetic devotion to studies.<sup>285</sup> The disciplined pursuit of virtue and learning was a field in which Milton felt himself

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<sup>284</sup> The passage appears in footnotes 94 and 85 to *An Apology Against a Pamphlet*, CPW 1:885,884.

<sup>285</sup> This correspondence is explored in section 2, “A Song of Christ.”

exceptionally equipped to engage his episcopal adversary—and not only equipped to engage but inclined to drag him, something like a fallen Hector, at length about the facing ramparts.<sup>286</sup>

Answering the Modest Confuter's charges of immorality and slight learning, the *Apology* represents dedication to virtue in general and chastity in particular as both the guiding principle of Milton's education and the distinguishing mark of his poetic election. In Milton's account, the same heroic dedication to virtue that mandates the poetic office to which he aspires compels him to speak out against episcopacy. His employment in the controversy is represented as an act of sacrifice, a rather ignoble trial that keeps him from the more noble and natural endeavour of poetry. It is a trial he must "endure," in which he finds himself forced into "the dim reflexion of hollow antiquities sold by the seeming bulk," and in which he is expected to "club quotations with men whose learning and belief lies in marginal stuffings" (*Reason* CPW 1:821-2). This complaint accomplishes a great deal as a negative portrait of the office of poetry. First, it suggests what everyone knows—that the poet's natural occupation is the composing of poetry. While confirming this fact it also records a hierarchical distinction—poetry is a more worthy and elevated endeavor than religious controversy. Second, and more surprisingly, it suggests that this particular poet possesses a superior theological education to that of his theologian-adversaries. Indeed, Milton goes on to distinguish his "learned pains" from his opponents' "unlearned drudgery" (*Reason* CPW 1:821-2). The difference in their learning is not one of degree but of

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<sup>286</sup> It seems worth acknowledging that the asperity of some of Milton's arguments against Hall, perhaps even more than the suggestion of blamelessness, are rather at odds with his self-portraiture as the poetic picture of perfect virtue. The tension does not escape Milton who wishes to avoid being "taxt of levity or insolence" for the "sinewy force" of his "lowring smile," the "anger" and "grim laughter" he employs in "disclosing" Hall as a "false Prophet" and the "proper object of indignation" (Preface to *Animadversions* CPW 1:663-4). Milton's "rough handling" of Hall is examined by Fallon in his discussion of *Animadversions* within chapter four of *Milton's Peculiar Grace*, pp. 85-88.

kind. Milton suggests that there is a fundamental difference in their very method of learning as witnessed by the drudge-like vulgarity of his opponents' method of argument.<sup>287</sup>

Milton depicts the theologian Bishop Hall (and/or his authorial proxy) as one whose "learning and belief lies in marginal stuffings." The phrasing ambivalently conveys two charges, both of which declare the inauthenticity of Milton's opponents' learning. On the one hand, throughout the anti-prelatical tracts Milton objects to his opponents' constant employment of "hollow antiquities," which is to say passages excised from the Church Fathers—the very types of references, together with biblical citations etc, that were often included in extensive, authority-bolstering, marginal notes. As Stephen B. Dobranski notes, Milton "attacks the anonymous author of *A Modest Confutation*... for making such extensive marginal notes that 'he must cut out large docks and creeks into his text to unlade the foolish frigate of his unseasonable authorities'" (*Authorship and the Book Trade* 29).<sup>288</sup> On the other hand, for his opponents' learning and belief to lie in "marginal stuffings" may also imply that their understanding is quite simply not the product of their own pains-taking assimilation of original sources. Their understanding does not emerge out of wide reading as the organic product of digestive transformation and it is, thus, manifestly not in accordance with "the authority of the Spirit, which is internal, and the individual possession of each man" (YP 6:587).<sup>289</sup> Instead, Milton implies that his opponents' learning and belief is had by the direction of marginal glosses and adherence to the "hollow antiquities" of passages from the Fathers quoted therein (sadly

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<sup>287</sup> The OED defines "drudge" as, "One employed in mean, servile, or distasteful work; a slave, a hack; a hard toiler."

<sup>288</sup> Dobranski is citing CPW I:921-2.

<sup>289</sup> The citation is from Milton's considerably later *De doctrina Christiana*.

divorced from both context and sense) and the institutional authority these variously and vacuously represent.

In *Of Reformation*, Milton represents the Fathers themselves as having had “scarce half the light” that he and his (truly learned) contemporaries enjoyed. The source of that additional illumination lay in humanist advances in the methods of textual study and the previous century’s attendant explosion of classical, biblical and patristic scholarship. Indeed, when Milton famously praises his “sage and serious” precursor Edmund Spenser above Scotus and Aquinas he is invoking, drawing attention to, and insisting upon a disparity between the greater and lesser light of their respective scholarly methods. He is, in fact, imputing to Spenser (as English Protestant poet) the pedagogical credentials of humanism and humanist theology—credentials which in earlier works like the *Reason* Milton artfully associates with himself.<sup>290</sup>

William Poole writes that “the ecclesiastical dimension of Milton’s reading [between 1632 and 1641] is particularly pertinent: for he was, in his own way, studying as if for the Baccalaureate in Divinity, and as if he had never left Christ’s College” (“Milton’s Scholarship” 26).<sup>291</sup> Consistent with the pains-taking employment of his time in a systematic study of the history of divinity “Milton writes as a scholar for scholars, deriding the intellectual shortcomings of his opponents” (“Milton’s Scholarship” 26-7).<sup>292</sup> In *Reason* where he represents himself

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<sup>290</sup> Milton’s superlative praise of Spenser occurs in *Areopagitica*. Christian Humanists (including Erasmus) never tired of pointing to the severe handicap represented by Aquinas’ and other great scholastic doctors’ relative lack of Greek.

<sup>291</sup> Poole notes that he follows Gordon Campbell’s suggestion “that Milton’s personal study functioned as a private continuation of the academic *cursus*, in accordance with his MA oath to spend the next seven years in study” (“Milton’s Scholarship” 26).

<sup>292</sup> According to Poole, “Milton concentrated his first studies in four major areas: the church history of the patristic era (Eusebius, Socrates Scholasticus, Evagrius Scholasticus, Sulpicius Severus,), slotting into Byzantine history (Procopius, the *Historia Miscella*..., Nicephorus Gregoras, Cantacuzenus); with some Italian vernacular literature (Dante, Boccaccio, Ariosto); and finally some general patristic study, such as with which he might have commenced his BD had he remained in Cambridge (Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, Prudentius, Ignatius, Tertullian, and Justin Martyr)” (“Milton’s Scholarship” 26).

constrained to “club quotations with men whose learning and belief lies in marginal stuffings,” Milton’s figure of derision for his opponents is that of “good sumpters” laying down “their horse-loads of citations and fathers.” They are men who trade in quantities of ancient quotations “sold by the seeming bulk” with no sense for the latter’s individual and irreducible qualities. Poole notes that Milton’s “preferred insult is to call someone ‘stupid,’” and that is the gist of the insult here as well, but Milton’s “good sumpters” are accused of a particularly inelegant stupidity (“Milton’s Scholarship” 27).

Petrarch’s humanist (or proto-humanist) developments of the apian figure—relating to the interplay of learning and style—speak to the particulars which, in *Reason*, Milton finds lacking in his drudge-like opponents’ argumentation: “Take care [Petrarch writes,] that the nectar does not remain in you in the same state as when you gathered it; bees would have no credit unless they transformed it into something different and better” (Greene 99).<sup>293</sup> Milton is writing for humanist scholars like himself who know that “we should write as the bees make sweetness, not storing up the flowers but turning them into honey” (Greene 98). Milton’s “good sumpters,” on the contrary, carry their patristic quotations about by the cartload. Not only do they fail to understand what they have in their possession but this failure is glaringly shown by the absence of any internalization or transformation whatsoever—following the bulk transit of authorities in their care, “ye may take off their pack-saddles, their day’s work is done” (*Reason* CPW 1:821-2). Anticipating his later praise of Spenser over Scotus and Aquinas, Milton makes abundantly clear that, unlike his drudge-like adversaries, “the right [he has] to meddle in these [theological]

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<sup>293</sup> The passage is taken once again from *Letters from Petrarch* trans. Morris Bishop (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1966)

matters” has everything to do with the Christian humanist method of elegant and eloquent learning he possesses as a true poet (*Reason* CPW 1:821-2).

According to Erasmus, true understanding of the Word of God in Scripture and the Word of God mediated by the providential design of history (with its harvest of learning), is an affective knowledge that penetrates and inhabits the heart thereby transforming its possessor. The fruit of the eloquent Erasmian theologian’s properly assimilative divine reading has the organic integrity of a single mind’s creation, in marked contrast to the un-digested assemblage the preacher might “gather” from “marginal stuffings” (*Reason* 1:822) and the superficial cribbing from a “hodgepodge of other authors” (*Ratio* 341). The preacher as Erasmus imagines him in the *Ratio* bears little resemblance to the Laudian “sumpters” decried in Milton’s anti-prelatical pamphlets. Instead, as an eloquent participant in the divine Logos, Erasmus’s preacher anticipates Sidney’s figure of the poet as “divine maker” and Milton’s figure of the “poet as poem.” In each instance there is permeability between the self and divinely transformative language and knowledge. In his individual assimilation of the divine letters the preacher/maker/poet becomes the living and productive embodiment of the Logos. The great virtue that distinguishes his teachings, increasing their penetrative power to affect their hearers, lies in their being practically alive, in their being authentic expressions of the preacher/maker/poet’s mind. The preacher’s speech and the poet’s uttered poem lend to the revelation of God that which, in the cultivated transformation of their hearts, the preacher and poet have become.

## **“To Aim at Perfection”**

Whereas the Bishop Joseph Hall, in his initial condescension to controversy, insists upon the legitimacy of the “great name” or title he possesses, Milton, in challenging, insists upon the purity and excellence of the path he has diligently pursued through the “wearisome labours and studious watchings, [of]... almost a whole youth” (CPW 1:869). In answering the Modest Confuter’s accusations Milton not only extols his own virtue, he also constructs an ideal representation of the poetic office to which he aspires. In circular fashion, this ideal office of poetry represents the nature of the authority Milton wishes to have attributed to him in the debate with Hall and against the proud and presumptuous authority of episcopacy. Milton first uses the exceptional dedication to learning and virtue that has marked his education as collateral upon which to promise the great works of a true poet. He then uses the great works he has promised as collateral upon which to borrow the true poet’s divinely sanctioned truth-telling authority. All the while, Milton invites his opponent to take aim, not at the poet he is, but at the poet he would be. If the target is accepted the game is rigged, for there is nothing tangible to accuse within Milton’s elaborate projection of ideal hopes.<sup>294</sup>

Milton is able to trade on his poetic aspirations, in part, because of the process-centered, transformative nature of his conception of disciplined reading and poetic making.<sup>295</sup> As David Ainsworth writes, for Milton, “the strenuous reading of books takes its place alongside

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<sup>294</sup> Of course, as Stephen Fallon has shown, Milton does expose himself to attack on the grounds that his insistence upon his own blamelessness suggests the hubristic denial of post-lapsarian sin. As I will argue in this chapter, however, Milton may have felt confident his self-representations were in fundamental agreement with the principles enshrined not only in the Christian humanist statutes of St. Pauls but in the ongoing reformation of theology enacted through the humanists’ scholarly renovation of both classical and biblical studies.

<sup>295</sup> The distinction between a product-centered and process-centered conception of poetic production is developed by Elizabeth Biemann in *Plato Baptized: Towards an Interpretation of Spenser’s Mimetic Fictions*. Biemann’s understanding of participatory mimesis will be discussed below.

traditional modes of worship as a means of expressing devotion to God as well as a means of spiritual exercise. A book represents an externalization of the process of choice between good and evil” (Ainsworth 148). The true poet’s poetry, as the manifest image of his devotional reading practice, not only consists of the composition the poet makes but also of the composition that the poet has become:

[H]e who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himselfe to bee a true Poem, that is, a composition and patterne of the best and honourablest things; not presuming to sing high praises of heroick men, or famous Cities, unless he have in himselfe the experience and the practice of all that which is praise-worthy. (CPW 1:890)

In representing “heroick men, or famous Cities” the true poet imitates virtues that he himself has incorporated. In other words, the poet’s authority is a consequence of his participation in the perfections he praises. As Paul Stevens observes, in this passage of the *Apology* Milton is “[c]arefully adapting and articulating the central self-fashioning purpose of his humanist education as his own discovery” (“Janus-faced” 249). Milton’s argument for exemplary moral and truth-telling authority looks very much like wish-fulfilment. To counter actual, institutional episcopal authority Milton represents the model towards which he merely aspires in the immaterial terms of “a composition and pattern of the best and honourablest things.” What makes this wish-fulfilling self-representation more than mere fancy, however, is Milton’s rhetorically eloquent (if sometimes heavy-handed) demonstration of learning. He is, in the tract itself, fashioning an image of himself as “composition and pattern” according to “the best and honourablest” and most rhetorically compelling biblical and classical models.<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Milton thus constructs an “Aristotelian ethical proof [whereby one] purchases authority by demonstrating one’s own gravity and virtue” (*Peculiar Grace* x) resembling Quintilian’s construction of the perfect orator as “truly wise, not blameless in morals only... but accomplished also in science and in every qualification for speaking” (Institutes 12.3; Preface 18). Milton’s ethical proof, however, further fuses the Pauline prescription to know and glorify the

Milton's figure of the poet as poem develops upon an earlier linking (still in the *Apology*) of eloquence and true virtue cultivated in accordance with the dictates of "regenerate reason":

[T]hat indeed according to art is most eloquent, which returnes and approaches neerest to nature from whence it came; and they expresse nature best, who in their lives least wander from her safe leading, which may be call'd regenerate reason. So that how he should be truly eloquent who is not withall a good man, I see not. (CPW 1:874)

In this passage, which plays upon humanist imitation theory, Milton is preparing an attack upon false eloquence and its corollary of proud obstinacy in the prelates who refuse divine instruction. Reference to a "*regenerate* reason" (my emphasis) suggests a prior or customary *degenerate* reason thereby blending rhetorical tradition with biblical history and suggesting that the passage should be read under the sign of fallen creation. In other words, if "regenerate reason" is an imitative/participatory faculty standing in remedial relation to the fall then the nature(s) towards which it leads is presumably unfallen.<sup>297</sup> Milton's regenerate reason serves a function analogous to the exceptional mimetic gift of Sidney's poet who "lifted up by the vigor of his own invention, doth grow, in effect, into another nature" (*Defence* 84). In this particular passage in Milton, however, the emphasis is not on delivering Sidney's golden world but on being led, by regenerate reason, to resemble one's unfallen nature and to express the latter's manifold perfections.

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Creator in the creature (Romans 1.20-1), the Augustinian prescription to songs of praise as a means of seeking and knowing God (*Confessions* 1.1), and the Christian Humanist conception of education as participatory knowledge.

<sup>297</sup> Milton appears to be following both Aristotle and Quintilian in universalizing mimesis to refer to both the imitation of nature and the imitation of models. As Green writes, "Aristotle apparently subsumes both meanings of *mimesis* under a single, more general concept.... This universalization would recur in Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*.... Both Aristotle and Quintilian assimilate the learning process in children to adult activities presumed to be inherent in human existence" (*Light in Troy* 54-5).

That which underwrites Milton's most fundamental claim concerning the poet—that the true poet must himself be a true poem—is the very possibility of imitative participation. It is, however, not only the poet's gift to participate in the excellent models he admires but also his ethical responsibility to approach most nearly to the perfections he praises. The language of the poet (in Sidney as in Milton), like the language of the eloquent preacher (in Erasmus), has a special power not merely to instruct but to move and transform its hearers. Sidney characterizes this power as a gift of grace, insisting that by this gift the poet himself participates in the creative power of God: "give right honor to the Heavenly Maker of that maker, who, having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature" (*Defence* 86.1-4). Like God, the poet is an artificer and "the skill of each artificer standeth in that *idea* or fore-conceit of the work, and not in the work itself. And that the poet hath that *idea* is manifest, by delivering them forth in such excellency as he had imagined them" (*Defence* 85.35-8). In other words, through the fore-conceits according to which he composes his golden fictive worlds, the poet participates in the realm of eternal heavenly ideas by which God composes the material world. It is by this activity of participation "beyond the works of that second [temporal, worldly] nature" that the poet's writing possesses the power to "pierce [and] possess the sight of [the reader's] soul" thereby raising the reader into realms of understanding from which he or she was previously excluded. (*Defence* 90:27-8)

In Sidney's account of the visionary assimilation of the poet's words, readers are represented as participating in the divine fore-conceit of the poet just as the poet is represented as participating in that of his Maker. As Elizabeth Biemann has shown,<sup>298</sup> such imitative

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<sup>298</sup> Biemann's examination of the Neo-Platonist understanding of participatory mimesis is central to her study of Edmund Spenser's poetics in *Plato Baptized: Towards an Interpretation of Spenser's Mimetic Fictions*.

participation corresponds to a Neoplatonic (rather than Aristotelian) understanding of mimesis not as imitative product but as an imitative process “through which the imitator grows actively to identify with the imitated model” (*Plato Baptized* 17).<sup>299</sup> According to this view—one of considerable significance within Renaissance culture—mimesis (imitation) merges with methexis (participation):

In such a dynamic system ‘imitation’ resembles initially the action of establishing a conduit of power. Even if the decision to ‘imitate’ a literary model is at the outset understood and undertaken in the mechanistic ‘mirroring’ sense, the very act of attending to the model will conform the poet’s attentive activity to the dynamic originating pattern: mimesis will become methexis as a matter of unanticipated natural course. (*Plato Baptized* 137-8)

Sidney’s Davidic poet is given to understand the heavenly things of God and, in his own divinely inspired fore-conceits, he is led to conceive the ideas of God. As Biemann notes, this poetic conception establishes “a conduit of power” that invests the poet’s words with the affective power to “strike” and “possess” the reader.

Something very much like the “conduit of power” investing the mimetic work of Sidney’s “maker” is evidently at work in Milton’s formula of the “poet as poem.” In the *Defence of Poesy*, Sidney argues for the poet’s preeminence as a teacher of virtue. In the *Apology against a Pamphlet*, Milton argues that, in order to be a true teacher of virtue (that is, to be and to be worthy of being this teacher) the poet must possess the virtue he teaches to a preeminent degree. As Michael Lieb explains, according to Milton’s understanding, “God’s accommodated presence as revealed in the biblical text... is portrayed in a manner that corresponds to the shape and form of man as *imago Dei*. Perfecting the image of God in himself, man becomes a fit reader of the

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<sup>299</sup> The conjunction of mimesis and methexis in the Neoplatonizing Renaissance version of mimesis that Biemann describes is similar to that of Aristotle in that it conjoins both imitation and emulation (imitation of nature and imitation of models) but it is much closer to the idea of mimesis that Milton is constructing because its primary emphasis is upon affective transformation.

biblical text [within]... a hermeneutics of reciprocity” (*Theological Milton* 149). To cultivate and imitate the human virtues in becoming a “composition and patterne of the best and honourablest things” is simultaneously to cultivate and imitate the divine image for the human virtues are already, in and of themselves (as one learns in Genesis 1.26) in the likeness of God. In both Sidney and Milton the poet’s power flows from his participation in the things he imitates. Sidney’s poet’s capacity for participation in the divine ideas or fore-conceits has its analogue in the “regenerate reason” by which the poet “returnes and approaches nearest to [that] nature from whence [he] came” (CPW 1:874). To the extent that the “Heavenly Maker of that maker[’s]” nature is Christ, the poet’s vocation ultimately comprises the work of *imitatio Christi* (*Defence* 86.1-4).

The suggestion that Milton’s true poet is engaged in mimesis as *imitatio Christi* is not only supported by the idea of the poet imitating nature as Creation. Milton’s conception of the poet’s path being conceived in study has a significant analogy in the Lucan depiction of Jesus as a “child [who] grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom” (AKJV 2.40) The Lucan story appears in Milton’s *Paradise Regained* where Jesus is described “Among the gravest Rabbis disputant / On points and questions fitting Moses’ chair” (CPW 4.218, 219<sup>300</sup>) Milton’s passage not only points up the young Jesus’s studious precocity but aligns his teaching in the Temple with prophetic office. As Gregory Chaplin notes of the young poet’s formative years at St. Paul’s:

Milton frequently would have said the prayers that Colet and Erasmus wrote to express [the school’s dedication to the boy Jesus]: “We pray unto thee, Jesus Christ, who as a boy twelve years old, seated in the temple, taught the teachers themselves, to whom the voice of the Father, sent from heaven, granted authority

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<sup>300</sup> The passage from *Paradise Regained* appears in Chaplin’s discussion.

to teach all men, saying: This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased: hear him.” (Education 286)

Milton, like all the other boys of St. Paul’s, was encouraged to emulate the boy Jesus in the earnest pursuit of transformative wisdom. Even more illuminating for the present discussion, however, is a second prayer that Milton would have recited at St. Paul’s in which we read: “I petition thee that in this thy school, of which thou art protector and defender, wherein I am taught daily in letters and wisdom, that I may chiefly come to know thee, Jesus, who art thyself the true wisdom, till that through knowledge of thee I worship thee and imitate thee, and so in this brief life to walk in the path of thy teaching, following in thy footsteps” (*Milton at St. Paul’s* 45). Taken together with the anecdote in Luke, these two particular prayers—part of the daily religious ceremonies in which Milton participated at St. Paul’s<sup>301</sup>—provide a Christological precedent to Milton’s formulations of a participatory educational ideal which is aptly anchored within the historical site and ceremony of his humanist education.<sup>302</sup>

As Gregory Chaplin has observed “the classical idea of the *vir humanus*” is subsumed by Milton (and the founders of St. Paul’s School) “under the biblical ideal of Man as the Image of God” (Education 290).<sup>303</sup> What this means, touching upon both the idea of the providential harvest of pagan learning and the providential path of works set before the poet, is that Milton can take Christian instruction from Quintilian’s counsel:

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<sup>301</sup> I am here paraphrasing Clark. See *John Milton at St. Paul’s School* 44-46.

<sup>302</sup> Stephen Fallon finds that Milton’s claims to blameless virtue suggest “an exemption from the universal condition of fallenness” as though “learning, with the possible addition of a promising disposition, can make grace unnecessary” (*Peculiar Grace* 106). Milton, however, does not boast that by his studious labours he has been saved but rather that in the labours proper to his poetic election he is following in the good works God has ordained for him—imitative and participatory works by which he knows, glorifies, and resembles his God.

<sup>303</sup> Chaplin is citing from and adapting Brendan Bradshaw’s “Transalpine Humanism,” in *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450-1700*, p.103.

[W]e are... to aim at perfection, for which most of the ancients strove, who, though they thought that no wise man had yet been found, nevertheless laid down directions for gaining wisdom. (Institutes Preface 19-20)

For Milton the perfection of eloquence is equally the perfection of virtue and to be perfect in speech and virtue is to restore in one's self the image of God. Like Quintilian in the above passage, Milton limits his self-representations to the hopeful striving towards perfect virtue. And like the Christian humanists who founded St. Paul's, he appears persuaded that the godly path providentially prepared for the poet elect is one of diligent education in the best authors.

In the "Tractate of Education" Milton writes that the manner in which we may come to know, to love, and to most nearly resemble God is by "possessing our souls of true vertue." The phrase recalls Milton's requirement of the true poet in the *Apology against a Pamphlet*. In becoming the "true poem" as "pattern of the best and honourablest things," as in becoming like unto God by "possessing our souls of true vertue," Milton conceives of education as a means not only of glorifying but of participating in God.

Milton's love of learning and his assurance in its inherent value is ultimately consistent with the Lucan picture of the studious boy-Jesus. It is similarly consistent with the idea expressed in Ephesians of a providential path of good works—works not good in themselves but good in their constituting a practice of divine imitation (*supra*). The right way forward is made recognizable by providential design. The understanding and discernment of the high perfections worthy of praise (the objects of the poet's participatory imitation) is assured by "naturall disposition." The challenge lies in remaining faithful and constant with respect to these perfections. Indeed, it is altogether possible, in Milton's conception, to stray from the path that God has prepared. In fact, of those select few who receive the "inspired guift of God rarely bestow'd" Milton contends that "most abuse." In this instance "most" does not refer to most

people or most Christians but to “most” among those select few who receive the rarely bestow’d inspired gift of God. The gift of grace is thus by no means an assurance of salvation or sainted perseverance, but comprises merely the ability to both recognize the path and to participate in imitative practice of “the good works” that God has prepared. The distinction of the poetic vocation, as Milton conceives it, is equally its liability. On the one hand, the true poet—in the participatory act of praise—is ennobled by the object he praises or, conversely, the truth inherent in the cause he defends. On the other hand, failure to honour these perfections or truths constitutes the very offence that Paul vituperates in Romans 1:20-1 and leaves the poet without excuse in the great reckoning of accounts.

### **Mimetic Fidelity**

In Milton’s construction of the “poet as poem” within the *Apology against a Pamphlet*, participatory imitation of “high perfections” is emphatically accompanied by the requirement of perseverance in fidelity to the perfection praised. This mimetic fidelity is treated at some length in the *Apology* within Milton’s discussions of the lessons he has learned from model authors regarding verbal and physical chastity:

[A]mong those lofty Fables and Romances, which recount in solemne canto’s the deeds of Knighthood founded by our victorious Kings... I read it in the oath of every Knight, that he should defend to the expence of his best blood, or of his life, if it so befell him, the honour and chastity of Virgin or Matron. From whence even then I learnt what a noble vertue chastity sure must be, to the defence of which so many worthies by such a deare adventure of themselves had sworne. And if I found in the story afterward any of them by word or deed breaking that oath, I judg’d it the same fault of the Poet, as that which is attributed to Homer; to have written undecent things of the gods” (CPW 1:891).

Milton not only learns from the poets “what a noble vertue chastity sure must be” but adopts from them the knight’s oath to protect that chastity. Curiously, Milton’s enactment of the knight’s duty is confined to the poet’s fiction—he censures the poets, whose pictured oath he imitates, when these break that oath “in the story afterward.”<sup>304</sup>

Milton’s passage concerning the lessons on chastity gleaned from fables and romances describes his approach to his studies as a process involving three interrelated stages of imitation. First, there is imitation as a participatory experience of the virtues represented by model authors—becoming the poem. Second, there is imitation as a participatory practice of the virtues represented by model authors—uttering the poem. Third there is perseverance of imitation in maintaining and upholding the virtues sung in one’s subsequent utterance. To accomplish this final stage of imitation is to practice verbal chastity.

Of the model authors whose works supplied the most welcome recreation of his youth, Milton represents Dante and Petrarch as particularly praiseworthy:

[A]bove them all [I] preferr’d the two famous renowners of Beatrice and Laura, who never write but honor of them to whom they devote their verse, displaying sublime and pure thoughts, without transgression” (*Apology* 1.693-4).

As “poetic theologians” and *auctores* working in the *volgare*, Dante and Petrarch were powerful pictures of Milton’s own ambition for the future.<sup>305</sup> In the *Apology*, however, Milton focuses on their exemplarity as models of chaste speech. The two Italians are singled out precisely as poets

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<sup>304</sup> The manner in which Milton locates not only his learning by example but also the subsequent enactment of this learning within the arena of textual reception may explain the curious “democratizing indifference to the subtleties of class boundaries” to which Paul Stevens has drawn attention in relation to Milton’s chivalric oath of chastity: “Ironically, the particular role the quintessentially bourgeois Milton imagines for himself in this passage is that of one of Spenser’s aristocratic knights” (“Janus-faced” 250).

<sup>305</sup> Dante and Petrarch anticipate Milton in their attempts to exalt the poetic office and to invest it with a theological authority. According to Christopher Ocker, the “poetic theologian was rescued from neglect and hostility only in the fourteenth century... promoted by the early Paduan humanist Alberto Musato and, more famously, by Dante and Petrarch” (*Biblical Poetics* 3).

who keep their vows: the nobility and constancy of their poetry of praise being consistent with the ideal devotion they profess.

The accepted influence of Dante and Petrarch is used by Milton to draw attention to the concurrent application of uncompromising judgment in relation to those other poets who fail to uphold the same degree of mimetic fidelity. Indeed, Milton represents his sensibility to the moral qualities of his authors developing to such an acute degree that it compels judgment:

For by the firme setting of these perswasions I became, to my best memory, so much a proficient that if I found those authors anywhere speaking unworthy things of themselves or unchaste of those names which before they had extolled, this effect it wrought with me, from that time forward their art I still applauded, but the men I deplored” (CPW 1.890).

Within a discussion requiring consistency between poet and poem, such censure suggests that Milton himself possesses the same virtue he requires of his authors. Contrary to an unconscious anxiety concerning influence,<sup>306</sup> Milton’s framing of highly selective praise in relation to Dante and Petrarch manifests a conscious insistence upon the cultivated capacity to negotiate the terms and extent of poetic influence. As John Guillory writes, (in relation to *Areopagitica*), Milton insists upon “the freedom to choose his own teachers... [a freedom made manifest] retrospectively in the power to reject what has already been taught” (*Poetic Authority* 135). Milton was educated according to a Christian Humanist model the governing principle of which was the artful negotiation of a copiously varied tapestry of influence. Milton’s insistence upon his judicious ability (and inclination) to separate the auctorial wheat from the tares even among

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<sup>306</sup> I refer here to Harold Bloom’s thesis in his work *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* and concur with Richard Neuse when the latter refers to the “breath-taking independence of stance” that characterizes Milton’s relationship even with those originals whose influence he most fully owns and cultivates.

those “authors which are most commended” (CPW 1.889)<sup>307</sup> serves as proof of the effectiveness of this education, and of the ideal fulfillment of its aims in Milton’s own person.

The description, in his *Apology*, of Milton’s educational parcours is an aggressive variation upon the traditional appeal to authorities: rather than insisting upon his knowledge of and conformity with the most commended of authors, Milton insists upon his authority to judge them on moral grounds. As Fish notes, by claiming authoritative judgment, Milton is engaging in self-acknowledgement and self-praise: “The praiser of the worthy testifies to his own worthiness, and [by the sharing of this judgment] this circle of acknowledgment is extended to him who can praise the praisers of the worthy” (*How Milton Works* 121). Perhaps most importantly, in terms of Milton’s rhetorical self-presentation in the antiprelatical tracts, is that this “circle [of acknowledgment] is self-validating—it seeks no external confirmation” (*How Milton Works* 121). In this particular instance of self-acknowledgment, the exceptional ability to judge the mimetic fidelity of his authors indicates Milton’s suitability for poetic office.

[H]aving observ’d [those authors which are most commended] to account it the chiefe glory of their wit, in that they were ablest to judge, to praise, and by that could esteeme themselves worthiest to love those high perfections which under one or other name they took to celebrate, I thought with my selfe by every instinct and presage of nature which is not wont to be false, that what imboldn’d them to this task might with such diligence as they us’d imbolden me (CPW 1:889)

In Milton’s conception, the virtuous re-formation of readers through the “perfect pictures” of transformative fiction (like the ideal ministry Milton opposes to episcopacy) is a task properly reserved to an ethical elite. In aspiring to the office of the true poet by becoming a true poem, Milton may be described as taking an oath of mimetic fidelity. The responsibility thereby

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<sup>307</sup> This ability is consistent with what Guillory refers to as “the right [according to Milton in *Areopagitica*] of the individual to this power of negation” (*Poetic Authority* 145). But this “right” is merely the bare possibility. Milton is at pains to demonstrate a superlative ability in exercising this right.

accepted is threefold. First, the poet must in-graft exemplary virtues. Second, from the husbandry of indwelling virtue the poet must bear fruit in virtuous utterance. Third, the poet must maintain and defend the virtue he has cultivated. The third duty applies not only to upholding in the poet's self those virtues he has sung—those virtues in which he has known and through which he has glorified God—but also to reproving those of unchaste tongue who have failed to uphold the virtues of their songs.

The *Apology*'s first illustration of the practice of mimetic fidelity in the true poet's education involves the examples of Dante and Petrarch. From these, Milton represents himself as having come to know and in-graft the virtue of chastity. The *Apology*'s subsequent praise of the two "renowners of Beatrice and Laura" comprises the good fruit or exemplary utterance of the virtue sown by and cultivated through the poet's youthful study. The critique of Homer and the formulation of the general principle of disapprobation for those who fail to persevere in honouring the objects of their praise comprises the poet's defense of the virtue he has in-grafted and cultivated. The particulars of these first illustrations of mimetic fidelity and infidelity are drawn—recalling the Erasmian daily practice of meditative reading feeding into the "well-stored mind"—from the store of secular letters. In beginning with the ethical lessons learned from secular literature Milton is at pains "to shew ... [his] reserv'dnesse of naturall disposition" and to validate the role of secular literature in affective ethical instruction.

In the section of educational autobiography by which the *Apology* answers the ethical charges of the Modest Confuter, Milton leaves his instruction in "the precepts of Christian Religion" to the fourth and last page. This placement of scriptural education "[l]ast... as perfection is last," is consistent with the Christian Humanist belief that a comprehensive formation in grammar and rhetoric (inseparably bound up with ethical instruction) through the

study of *bonae litterae* was the necessary preparation for the study of *sacrae litterae*. Confirming the effectiveness of this method of study, Milton employs his principle of mimetic fidelity to virtue—the ethical principle of poetic making according to which he judged and approved Dante and Petrarch—to the interpretation of Scripture and the appraisal of theological authorities.

The poet/maker's principle of mimetic fidelity, when applied to Scripture, becomes a principle of faithful exegesis the distinguishing feature of which is its affective understanding and participatory assimilation of scriptural meaning. In the scriptural application of mimetic fidelity, Milton links together two Pauline passages that allow him to interpret chastity in relation to imitation of a model pattern or image:

[H]aving had the doctrine of holy scripture unfolding those chaste and high mysteries with timeliest care infused, that “the body is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body,” [1 Cor. 6:13] thus also I argued to myself: that if unchastity in a woman, whom St. Paul terms the glory of man, be such a scandal and dishonor, then certainly in a man, who is both the image and glory of God, it must, though commonly not so thought, be much more deflowering and dishonorable; in that he sins both against his own body, which is the perfecter sex, and his own glory, which is in the woman, and, that which is worst, against the image and glory of God, which is in himself.[1 Cor. 11:7] (CPW 1:892)

Milton's coordination of Pauline precepts allows him to extend the common interpretation of the requirement of chastity to include men and then further alters this ostensibly common interpretation by demonstrating that it applies pre-eminently to man as the image and glory of God. (1 Cor. 11:7)<sup>308</sup> The Christian is bound to know the heavenly virtues of God by the virtues

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<sup>308</sup> The question of Milton's ambivalently progressive view of the mutuality of marriage and of the nature of the relationships between the genders is peripheral to my discussion of Milton's “mimetic fidelity.” That said, underpinning Milton's insistence on the pre-eminent applicability of the requirement of chastity to men is his unequivocal endorsement of an idea of the inherent superiority of man over woman as the original image of God. Mary Nyquist has provided a close-studied and compelling account of Milton's “historically specific,” “stridently masculinist,” and “radically bourgeois view of marriage” and of its anchoring in Milton's idea of woman—grounded in his interpretation (most particularly in *Tetrachordon*) of the two creation accounts in Genesis—as a gift “passed from maker to man” (“Gendered Subjectivity” 115, 107, 106, 114 in *Re-Membering Milton*).

he recognizes in himself as both creature and revelatory image of the Creator. It then follows from duty of knowledge that the Christian (man) shall be without excuse if he fails to glorify and honour his God by cultivating his resemblance to the latter's perfections. The Christian man of Milton's discussion of chastity is thus analogous to Milton's poet as poem—as the image and glory of God, he recognizes that he carries within himself a “patterne of the best and honourablest things” which it is, ultimately, his responsibility to resemble.<sup>309</sup>

Milton's interpretation of the requirement of chastity emphasizes the importance of mimetic fidelity. In its application to himself, Milton's interpretation of the requirement of chastity applies equally to all those of his gender. Milton's argument is difficult to controvert on its own terms and the very simplicity of the reading contributes to its argumentative force. At the same time, though far from obscure, Milton's reading represents its author as compelled by conscience into championing an uncommon and unpopular perspective.<sup>310</sup> The readiness to provide unwelcome moral instruction is an essential aspect of the prophetic, lyre-playing teacher whom Erasmus declares “should sing prophetically... with no other aim than the glory of God. Such was the lyre player who said: ‘Am I now seeking to persuade men or God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still pleasing to men, I should not be a servant of Christ’” (23 vol. 65; citing Gal 1:10). The anticipation of popular resistance to his scriptural exposition bolsters

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<sup>309</sup> Milton's “patterne of the best and honourablest things” is marked by an unfortunately strident patriarchal bias. As Mary Nyquist has argued, egalitarian interpretations of the creation of man and woman in Genesis were likely known to Milton and it will not do to rationalize his masculinist bias as the inescapable consequence of his time nor to imagine that his truly progressive concept of marriage—founded upon psychological mutuality and an ideal of human companionship rather than divinely enjoined procreation—implied the correlate of gender equality.

<sup>310</sup> To the extent that Milton's arguments—concerning his precocious discovery that the scriptural doctrine of chastity must apply pre-eminently to man as the pre-eminent image of God—are meant to convince his readers of his exceptional virtue and discernment, we may assume that his arguments were not, in fact, as uncommon as his rhetoric suggests. That said, Milton's arguments on the right to divorce and remarry on grounds other than fornication (the question of what constitutes chaste union) did meet with powerful resistance.

Milton's claim to exceptional moral and theological discernment. Moreover, his readiness to displease men shows him equipped with the singular resolve necessary to prophetic office.

The readiness to adopt embattled positions is a recurrent and important theme in Milton's self-representations. In a discussion that mirrors his appraisal of Dante and Petrarch, Milton combines an account of his theological studies with an appraisal the moral character of bishops that ultimately leads into his dismissal of the ecclesial authority of the episcopal Councils of the Church. In a manner closely resembling his selective approval of Dante and Petrarch (over and against those less mimetically faithful to the perfections they praise) the praise that Milton utters in relation to the rarely favoured patristic authority confirms his own dissenting positions in relation to the wider patristic tradition.

Particularly striking, in Milton's dismissal of the Councils' authority, are the grounds by which they are judged. He does not address the Councils' conclusions or arguments on any particular point of doctrine or exegesis. As Elizabeth Sauer notes, Milton's critique of episcopacy in *Of Reformation* mounts back to "the union of church and state under Constantine [at which time] 'Through Constantines lavish Superstition', Milton judges, the clergy abandoned their true ministry and 'set themselves up two Gods instead, Mammon and their Belly'" ("Caroline Church Government" 209).<sup>311</sup> Consistent with the totalizing nature of this dismissal, Milton ignores all question of the specifics of conciliar doctrine and addresses instead the ethical failings of the individual bishops involved. Milton declares that "the most of their actions" are "weak," "turbulent," "full of strife," "flat of spirit;" the questions or interests they pursue are "trivial" or "vain;" these bishops show themselves, in the main, to be exemplars of "ambition"

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<sup>311</sup> The Yearbook of English Studies, Vol. 44, Caroline Literature (2014), pp. 196-214

and “ignorance.” The critique is predominantly moral rather than intellectual. From Milton’s Christian Humanist perspective, privileging affective over ratiocinative approaches to biblical study and faith, wisdom and the authority that accompanies it is cultivated not by abstract intellectual learning and the further acquisition of worldly title. Instead, true wisdom and true authority are cultivated through learning as an engagement in participatory imitation and the further maintaining and defense of the truths of faith one has been given to know. True wisdom, as Milton conceives it, can only be imparted properly by those who embody, uphold, and maintain the truths, perfections, and virtues they profess. It is therefore utterly impractical to seek wisdom in collective expression of any sort—let alone in the vain tattle of the motley Councils.

Underlying Milton’s dismissal of the Councils is the unrepentantly elitist and exclusionary idea that the position of a morally superior individual, such as Martin of Tours or Gregory Nazianzen, is to be preferred over the consensus of a morally compromised collective, such as the Councils. In this perspective, the two Fathers are all the more exalted in their ancient authority, for their willful isolation from and opposition to the rabble.<sup>312</sup> The rejection of the Councils’ authority that Milton shares with Martin and Gregory implies a natural association of the seventeenth-century English-Protestant poet and the fourth century Bishop of Tours and Archbishop of Constantinople on the basis of shared moral reason. In abstaining from the other bishops’ “contentions and desire of lording” and in opposing the flat-spirited, collective combustion of the Councils, the two Fathers (and Milton with them) represent the exemplary

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<sup>312</sup> Milton cites the examples of Martin and Gregory in support of his dismissal of the councils: “for his last sixteen years [St. Martin of Tours] could never be persuaded to be at any council of the bishops. And Gregory Nazianzen betook him to the same resolution, affirming to Procopius, ‘that of any council or meeting of bishops he never saw good end; nor any remedy thereby of evil in the church but rather an increase’” (CPW 1:944-5)

moral position of those who strive to resemble and refuse to dishonour their divine image. Still further, in maintaining mimetic fidelity with respect to the virtues they profess Martin and Gregory resemble those two other chaste-tongued singers of divine praise—Milton's exemplary poets Dante and Petrarch.

Milton's insistence upon his exceptional discernment in judging the theological tradition on moral grounds substantiates his claims to authoritative participation within the ranks of those exceptional few who remain true to the perfections they praise. Milton's God has invested within humanity, in the faculty of "regenerate reason," the means to cultivate resemblance to their original nature as the "image and glory of God." Jesus is described as "a perfect shape most glorious to look on," (CPW II.89) for he is the mediating image whereby all may see the divine nature they potentially share, yet whose direct apprehension is prevented by the inheritance of sin. Milton follows Christian Humanist example in imagining that, through a process of participatory imitation of virtuous models, humanity "returnes and approaches nearest to [the] nature from whence it came" (CPW 1:874). The true poet that Milton imagines himself to be, is distinguished by being a consummate searcher after the truth and beauty of God, eminently dedicated to the mimetic process of becoming a "patterne of all that is best and honourablest," and thereby erecting in himself the very image and glory of his Maker.

## Chapter 5

### **“On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” the Priestly Bard’s First Offering in the 1645 Poems**

#### **Prophetic Song**

“On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” (henceforth, “Nativity Hymn”) is the first work to appear after the publisher Humphrey Mosley’s prefatory address, “Stationer to the Reader,” in Milton’s 1645 collection *Poems of Mr. John Milton both English and Latin*.<sup>313</sup> The “Nativity Hymn” and the poetic office to which it corresponds are described within “Elegy VI,” a verse epistle penned to Milton’s close friend Charles Diodati in 1626 and appearing among the Latin works of the 1645 collection. As Barbara Lewalski writes, the “Nativity Hymn,” was “the first major realization” of Milton’s “high poetic aspirations” (*Life* 38) and Milton heralded it as such, with a touch of cautious, parenthetical prevarication, to Diodati:

But if you want to know what I am doing (if, that is, you think it of at least some consequence to know what I am doing) we are singing of the peace bringing king of heavenly seed and the blessed ages pledged in Holy Writ, God’s infant wailings, and the stabling in a poor dwelling of one who lives in the highest Kingdom together with his father, a sky giving birth to a star, hosts singing in the air and deities suddenly shattered in their very own shrines. (*Works* 3.149)

This statement draws attention to the ambitious sweep of Milton’s hymn—taking in earth and heaven, the crucial moment in time as well as the arc of ages traversed by fore-running prophecy. The description of what Milton has been doing is really a description of the nature of his poetic song and it follows upon a description of two classical types of inspired poetry—“light Elegy” sung by festive poets and the heroic song of “wars and the heavens,” sweeping from “the holy

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<sup>313</sup> The date Milton gives for the completion of the “Nativity Hymn” is 1629.

decrees of the gods above.. [to] the realms of the underworld where a savage dog barks,” proper to the priestly bards (*Works* 3.147,149). By juxtaposing his recent biblicizing poetic endeavours and these two classical employments Milton draws attention to the nature and extent of the difference between them.

Implicit within the distinguishing of poetic kinds is the distinguishing of poetic temperament and office. The first type of inspired poet Milton describes in “Elegy VI” favours the “light Elegy,” a form “cared for by many gods” among whom Milton names Liber, Erato, Ceres, Venus and Venus’ son “the delicate little Cupid.” Milton employs the second person pronoun to directly associate the elegiac disposition (both of inspiration and lifestyle) with his friend Diodati. Answering a prior epistle, in which Diodati asked to be excused if the poetry he has sent to Milton has suffered as a result of recent indulgence, Milton liberally and playfully replies,

Why do you complain that poetry is a fugitive from wining and banqueting? ... Your Massic goblets are foaming with a strain of fertile talent... to you alone are Bacchus, Apollo, Ceres propitious—doubtless it is hardly surprising that the poems you produce are so sweet since they have been born of three deities who have combined their divine powers. (*Works* 3.145,147).

Milton’s admiration of Diodati’s style is openly expressed. His tone, in view of the apparent license taken by Diodati in “wining and banqueting,” seems curiously charitable when compared with the austere persona projected throughout the anti-prelatical tracts. In terms of the Humanist cultivation of eloquence through assimilative, participatory imitation of classical models, however, Milton’s admiring approval is altogether natural. The epistolary context involves radically different rhetorical aims and methods than that of the controversial tract. The Latin verse epistle “Elegy VI” presents published testimony to a mutually admiring friendship with

Milton expressing his own eloquent appreciation of Diodati's accomplishment in letters as one cultured humanist to another.

As witnessed by the unabashedly sexual Edenic eroticism in *Paradise Lost*, Milton's poetry could achieve moments of startling sensuousness. Indeed, an early indication of this sensuous capacity is given in the luxuriant verse of Milton's fifth Elegy "On the Arrival of Spring." Nevertheless, the poetic persona that Milton publicly fashioned in the anti-prelatical tracts and that he would continue to cultivate in the prose works of the interregnum and epic work of his maturity, is aligned with the "sage and serious Spencer" rather than with Diodati and the elegiac muses.<sup>314</sup> While "[s]uch [elegiac] poets are allowed lavish banquets and frequent drunkenness on old wine"—the same may not be said either for the "true poet" of Milton's anti-prelatical tracts or for the narrating persona of the "Nativity Hymn" (*Works* 3.147).

The second type of poet Milton describes in "Elegy VI" leads a chaste and ascetic lifestyle and is represented in a manner that anticipates Milton's self-fashioning in the *Apology against a Pamphlet*, and the *Reason of Church Government*.<sup>315</sup> This poet favours a solemn heroic form particularly associated with the relating of all things martial and heavenly "under the power of a Jupiter mature in years"—a heroic form in which to "express the essence of Jove" (*Works* 3.149). As Barbara Lewalski notes, Milton's epistle to Diodati sets elegy in opposition to both

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<sup>314</sup> This is not the only occasion on which Milton's correspondence with Diodati reveals a disjunction between Milton's private forbearance and public censoriousness. As Paul Stevens writes, "In April 1647... in a letter to his Catholic friend Charles Dati... Milton steps out of his prophetic character and begs Dati's indulgence for some 'rather harsh sayings against the Pope of Rome'... Milton's submission to the absolute authority of the Word has become relative, and the Godly prophet has become a Renaissance humanist among kindred spirits" ("Discontinuities" 273). This rather shocking lack of consistency serves as an effective caution against totalizing assumptions regarding Milton's intimate positions and authorial intentions. While possibly vexing to the critic, such fissures in Milton's public persona also reveal a certain generosity of spirit sorely lacking in the austere self-fashioning of the anti-prelatical tracts.

<sup>315</sup> See previous section, "'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity': The True Poet's Spenserian Tribute."

epic and hymn<sup>316</sup> as “countergenres, arising from and expressive of contrary modes of life” (*Life* 37). This general opposition between the respective genres and modes of life adopted by the elegiac poets and priestly bards corresponds to the general opposition of character affected by Diodati and Milton themselves. “Elegy VI” displays Milton’s awareness of the vocational significance of the poetic persona and its corresponding manner of living (*modus vivendi*) and provides early evidence of Milton’s ambitious inclination towards the role and office of the “bard who is [both] sacred to ...[and] priest of the gods” (*Works* 3.149 my italics).

Immediately following his description of the priestly bard as one whose “heart and lips express the essence of Jove,” Milton turns to describe his own “Nativity Hymn.” (*Works* 3.149) The descriptions would be immediately adjacent but for a transitional turn that takes up a full two-line verse:

At tu siquid agam, scitabere (si modò saltem  
Esse putas tanti noscere siquid agam)  
But if you want to know what I am doing (if, that is, you think it of at least some  
consequence to know what I am doing) (*Works* 3.148,149).

This act of turning, which draws attention to itself via repetition, performs the dual function of linking and distinguishing the two things described. When considered in light of the associative function of the transition, the “Nativity Hymn” appears as Milton’s contribution to an ancient and sacred bardic tradition. Considered in light of the dis-associative function of the transition—as a block of text that visually interrupts and divides Milton’s sentence—the “Nativity Hymn” appears as a third type of poetry closely associated with, yet distinct from, the heroic song of the priestly pagan bards.

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<sup>316</sup> While Milton’s second type of poetry and poet most closely resembles epic the very inclusion of both Homer and Orpheus as illustrative examples suggest (in light of both the Homeric and Orphic hymns) a natural association of epic and hymn.

There is significant parallelism between the description in “Elegy VI” of the ascetic lifestyle, purity and chastity that the divine bard must cultivate and Milton’s self-fashioning in the later anti-prelatical tracts:

let him live frugally according to the custom of the teacher from Samos and let herbs afford him harmless sustenance; let a beechwood bowl of clear water stand next to him and let him drink moderate draughts from a pure spring. Added to this a youthfulness that is free of villainy and chaste, and strict morals, and a hand without stain, just like you, seer, when in sacred vestments and gleaming with the waters of purification, you rise to face the furious deities. (*Works* 3.149)

Milton’s insistence upon the blamelessness of his character, his constant attention to the cultivation of physical and verbal chastity, and his tireless devotion to studies are three of the most remarkable features of his self-representation throughout the later anti-prelatical tracts.<sup>317</sup> In his innocence, his chastity and in the irreproachability of his moral conduct the divine bard mirrors the ideal poetic persona that Milton projected within his anti-prelatical writings.

In view of the tendency to read the “Nativity Hymn” as a narrative of religious transformation, Stephen Fallon has noted how little in keeping Milton’s professions of virtue are with contemporary Puritan mores.

The idea of a conversion experience is... simply absent from Milton’s vocabulary. The theological and Puritan poet is in this way, paradoxically, not a religious poet; he lacked the conviction of sin that is both a prerequisite to and a component of conversion. The “I” of the “Nativity Ode” engages in a minute introspection of the soul, but in the process it becomes convinced not of its sinfulness and its need for grace but of its extraordinary gifts and poetic election. (*Milton’s Peculiar Grace* 54-5)

I am in agreement with Fallon that both Milton’s “Nativity Hymn” displays little in the way of either a conversion narrative or the conviction of inherent sin. Whereas the lack of these

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<sup>317</sup> As we have seen, Stephen Fallon finds Milton’s insistence upon his own blamelessness to be incongruous with his reformed faith to the extent that it suggests Milton imagines himself immune to the tarnishing effects of the Fall.

elements runs counter to Puritan orthodoxy, it is quite in keeping with the Erasmian vision of human perfectibility.<sup>318</sup> The idea of human perfectibility—admittedly contrary to the general ethos of Calvinism and Calvinistic English Protestantism—provides the underlying rationale for the Christian Humanist educational system with its preponderant emphasis upon the imitation of virtuous and eloquent models.<sup>319</sup>

Milton's self-representations throughout his anti-prelatical tracts and particularly in the "Nativity Hymn" (where his narrator combines the offices of poet, prophet and musician) are remarkably consistent with Erasmus's representations of Idythun as the ideal prophetic teacher. Idythun's character is exemplary for Erasmus on two counts: first he is an accomplished musician chosen by David; second, his name is traditionally interpreted to mean "leaping over them" (*Exposition of Psalm 38* 13). Idythun exemplifies what must be done in order to be chosen by David. "It is only the person who is a true Idythun (in other words, one who has already become a spiritual being and has leaped over all human passions) who can sing nothing but prophecies" (13). Thus, Idythun is deserving of being chosen by David because he has overleapt ("with the impatience of love") the passionate obstacles of his fallen humanity (17). Idythun is used by Erasmus as an ideal type conjoining the offices of prophet, teacher and musician whom

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<sup>318</sup> While I am stressing the continuity between Milton's thinking and that of Erasmian Christian Humanism, I am also aware that English Puritanism was by no means of one mind on the relationship of grace and human endeavour. As John Reichert observes, "Milton stresses the role of human endeavor in the working out of one's salvation more forcefully than most of his predecessors, but among English Puritans... it was not a new idea. Even William Perkins... distinguished [an] active conversion... 'whereby man being converted by God, doth further turne and convert himselfe to God, in all his thoughts, words, and deeds.'" (*Milton's Wisdom* 181).

<sup>319</sup> These models are, in Milton as in Erasmus, encountered and reproduced largely through texts. Joseph Anthony Wittreich Jr. describes a Renaissance conception of prophetic instruction and utterance that reproduces the dynamic I have outlined both here and in relation to the assimilative education of Erasmus's *theodidaktos*: "[E]ating the book' [as represented in Revelations] ... implies the patient-physician relationship... the reader's inferior self is consumed in a process that allows the spiritual man to rise up and triumph over the natural man; and the prophecy itself, administered in doses... is itself consumed as its reader finds the rungs of his ladder burning away, until... he achieves the pinnacle of vision" (*Milton and the Line of Vision* 110). Wittreich's figure bears witness to the Renaissance recognition of a text-based and mimetic/participatory process of spiritual evolution in spite of the general Calvinist insistence on the depravity of the will and human inability *to be good*.

all ought to follow (20). In his exemplary performance of the office of David, however, Idythun is also imitating Christ, “the supreme lyre player and leaper” (20). Erasmus represents Idythun, David, and Christ in a relationship of imitation. Even Christ is described in terms of this mimetic relationship as “our David... [and] the most eminent of all Idythuns” (13). Milton’s insistence upon his own striving toward moral purity answers Erasmus’s exhortation of “all who profess the name of Christ... particularly... those who are the apostle’s successors as shepherds of the Lord’s flock” to “strive to the best of their ability... emulating Idythun” (20).

Consistent with Milton’s apparent assurance of poetic election, rather in the Davidic than the secular tradition, the “Nativity Hymn” militates against the idea of its own divine poet-narrator adopting either the pagan seer or the priestly Pythagoras as a model of imitation. The seers that “Elegy VI” describes are to be imitated by the bard as models of exceptional sanctity. Yet Milton’s particular selection of exemplars to be followed is made deeply ambivalent by the latter’s proneness to mortal error. Tiresius is pierced by an arrow from Apollo’s bow after drinking from the tainted spring of Tilphussa. Linus is struck down for foolishly criticizing the semi-divine Heracles. Calchas dies of envy in the face of another’s greater gifts. Orpheus, looking back, fails to deliver Eurydice.<sup>320</sup> Milton’s exemplary seers all appear to have suffered mortal punishments. They have been punished for failing to maintain purity, for failing to honour the name of divinity, for failing to participate in the perfection they were given to know, and for failing to persevere in their heroic resolve. In other words, these seers manifestly fail the tests by which Milton would later suggest measuring the “true poet.”

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<sup>320</sup> Orpheus is also said to have been torn to pieces for failing to honour the god Dionysus—thus, punished (like Linus) for failing to honour the name of divinity.

Milton's select employment of Homer as the quintessential priestly bard confirms the impression that the exemplary figures of "Elegy VI" represent highly ambivalent models for imitation. On the one hand, they function as model-poets with whom Milton wishes to associate his poetic vocation. On the other hand, they function as exalted negative examples against which Milton wishes to be measured. Homer appears in "Elegy VI" as the exemplar uniting the customs of Pythagoras and the seers. Yet he also appears in the later *Apology against a Pamphlet* as an illustration of unchaste speech or mimetic infidelity. Having written "undecent things of the gods"—in accordance with the Platonic tradition repeated in Sidney's *Defense*—Homer is judged guilty of mimetic infidelity. (CPW 1:891) Milton thus employs Homer, contrary to the examples of Dante and Petrarch whom he lauds for speaking only honour of Beatrice and Laura, to illustrate moral failure with respect to the ideal of poetic chastity.

A threshold of significant difference separates Milton and his hymn from the priestly bards and their heroic song. In his later *Reason of Church Government*, Milton would look back to a time when he made the following resolution:

That what the greatest and choicest wits of *Athens*, *Rome*, or modern *Italy*, and those Hebrews of old did for their country, I in my proportion with this over and above of being a Christian, might doe for mine. (CPW 1.812)

In the "Nativity Hymn," Milton mixes "epic, hymnic, and pastoral topics" with an all-encompassing cosmic sweep every bit as ambitious as the one he attributed to the priestly bards (*Life* 37). As Milton tells Diodati, however, he is singing not only "the peace-bringing king of heavenly seed" but also "deities suddenly shattered in their very own shrines" (*Works* 3.149). The cultic nature of the poet's office is at issue. Milton prevents identification of the priestly bards' song and the "Nativity Hymn" by citing the latter's witness against idolatry and by shifting decisively from third to first person for its description. The hymn that I have been given,

this gift which has been given to me to sing, Milton tells Diodati, is of a kind with that of the priestly bards only, and emphatically, “with this over and above of being... Christian.” The inclusion of “those Hebrews of old” makes certain that Diodati and Milton’s later readers will include the ancient authors of Scripture among those priestly bards whose examples Milton is following. The superlative qualification of “being a Christian” makes certain the reader understands that the poetic office to which Milton aspires is neither pagan nor secular.

In “Elegy VI,” Milton refers to the verses of his “Nativity Hymn” as “the gifts we have given for Christ’s nativity; these the first light brought to me at the approach of dawn” (*Works* 3.149; my emphasis). Milton’s hymn is an offering in praise of Jesus as the incarnation of Christ. It is also an offering inspired by and in imitation of the pre-existent and eternal Christ as superlative star and “first [inspiring] light” before the dawn of Creation. This gift “given for Christ’s nativity” is itself the actualization of Christ’s gift to the poet. The “Nativity Hymn” as gift for Christ, both manifests and mirrors Milton’s discovery of his “extraordinary poetic gifts” and of his “poetic election” to Davidic office. The almost triumphantly acknowledged discovery of “poetic election” is not so much a Puritan anomaly (though it is that), as it is the wished for consequence of the Christian Humanist’s ardent and dutiful striving. The ardently desired goal was the gift—the gift of election as prophet, teacher and musician/poet in the likeness of the Erasmian *Idythun* (*Milton’s Peculiar Grace* 55). This was the ultimate goal, not only of Milton himself but of the ideal Christian Humanist education conceived by Erasmus and (however partially) practically implemented at St. Pauls where Milton’s first strivings took form.

## A Davidic Tether

In Milton's 1645 *Poems*, the opening "Nativity Hymn" is immediately followed by a paraphrase of psalm 114 and a translation of psalm 136 "don by the Author at fifteen yeers old" (CPW 3). The choice to juxtapose these two early psalm exercises with the "Nativity Hymn" at the beginning of the collection suggests both the precocity and Davidic nature of Milton's poetic calling.

The grouping of Psalm 114 and 136 immediately following the "Nativity Hymn" serves to define Milton's poetic undertaking in a number of ways. First, in the substantial addition of narrative material (lines 2 and 4-6) to the paraphrase on Psalm 114 and the expansion of each verse of Psalm 136 to a full four-line stanza, Milton's work demonstrates the expressive liberty that the paraphrast and translator was warranted to take while still remaining a faithful participant in the divine recitation of Scripture.<sup>321</sup> Second, in the additional four lines within the paraphrase of Psalm 114 and in the particular phrasing adopted in translating the opening of Psalm 136, a fifteen year-old Milton appears to anticipate the descriptions of prophetic poetic calling later published in his anti-prelatical tracts. Third, by the contiguity of these two psalms with the "Nativity Hymn," Milton presents the latter (new-made) work as being, if not the participatory repetition of a particular Davidic psalm, nonetheless consistent with the form and intention of psalms, and integral to the Davidic tradition of poets "that did imitate the

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<sup>321</sup> Such liberties would not have appeared excessive to Milton's contemporaries for the often loose Englishing of Scripture was a significant feature of sixteenth and seventeenth century English literary culture. At the same time, Milton's elaborative expansions of the biblical text suggest continuity between such Englished Scripture and the "Nativity Hymn" itself in keeping with the tradition of the Christian, devotional literary hymn (as practiced by Vida, Scaliger etc). Elaborative paraphrase and translation—exceptionally exemplified by Erasmus's *Paraphrases* on the New Testament and the Sidney Psalter—aimed at the eloquent expansion, clarification and enlivening of Scripture and entailed the addition of a fictional I-narrator (either explicitly or implicitly) to the scriptural text.

inconceivable excellencies of God” (*Defence* 86) . Milton’s paraphrase of Psalm 114 and his translation of Psalm 136 thus serve as an external scriptural anchor to which Milton tethers his “Nativity Hymn.” By supplying this specifically Davidic tether, Milton insists upon both his own prophetic ambition and his song’s participation in the scriptural mysteries and logocentric godhead it praises.

In Milton’s paraphrase of Psalm 114, the name “Israel” is replaced in the opening line with the phrase “the blest seed of Terah’s faithfull Son.” The substitution emphasizes Abraham’s faith in contrast with the idolatry of his father.<sup>322</sup> The second line—“After long toil their liberty had won”—contributes additional narrative content to the psalm associating patient labour with the “winning” of God’s grace. (Works 3.14) In the third line, Milton’s “Pharian fields” appears to deliberately echo George Buchanan’s Latin paraphrase which referred to *arva Phari*<sup>323</sup> thereby associating the hard-won freedom of Israel passing over into the land of Canaan with the Reformation and its advancement through the divine scriptural labours of Protestant Englishmen like Buchanan and Milton himself. The impression that the psalm is being subtly adapted to figure the poet’s own journey grows stronger in the three following lines. These once again contribute additional content, this time drawing attention to the psalm’s functions in guiding the faithful and providing them the requisite forms to know and praise their God:

Led by the strength of the Almighty hand,  
Jehova’s wonders were in Israel shown,  
His praise and glory was in Israel known. (Works 3 14)

To guide the faithful, to reveal God’s wonders, and to sing God’s praises are functions constitutive of the psalmist’s divine poetic office and they are functions here manifestly shared

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<sup>322</sup> Works 3.366

<sup>323</sup> Works 3.366 Milton’s “*Pharian* fields” and Buchanan’s “*arva Phari*” from Pharos, an island near Alexandria (hence signifying Egyptian).

by the young Milton addressing his fellow country-folk (liberated from the bondage of Roman Catholicism) through freely elaborative scriptural paraphrase. In likening Protestant Reformation to the liberty for which the seed of “Terah’s faithful Son” have toiled, Milton figures himself as one of the children of this new (English) Israel laboring in the Word towards the true knowledge and fit praise of God.

The labour of the blest seed in knowing and glorifying their God is balanced in Psalm 114 by figures of a divinely responsive nature. The sea, the river Jordan, the mountains and hills and earth are all animated by the knowledge of their Creator, and this miraculous animation manifests the praise and glorification owed God by all of Creation. These hyperbolic images of a joyfully rejoicing nature recall Sidney’s praise (when speaking of scriptural “prosopopeias”) for David’s poetical ‘handling’ of the language of prophecy that “maketh you, as it were, see God coming in His majesty” (*Defence* 84.24). In other words, Psalm 114 not only displays God’s continued animation of all that he has made, but also (and in keeping with Sidney’s authoritative example) the poet’s singular function in communicating to a chosen people the visual and affective knowledge of the majesty and glory of their God. Diane McColley notes Milton’s “Nativity Hymn” follows a Lucan narrative only “[u]nlike the Gospel, the ode imagines the response of Nature to this birth” (“A Table Richly Spread” 23). Indeed, McColley recognizes that Milton “pays particular attention [to describing] the response of Nature,” in spite of these details being “unscriptural” (19). Milton’s descriptions of a responsive Nature, however, are emphatically *scriptural in style*. Psalm 114 reminds the reader of the peculiarly biblical nature of such “prosopopeias” recognized (as they are by Sidney) as exemplifying the “poetical ‘handling’ of the language of prophecy” (*Defence* 84.24).

Like the paraphrase of Psalm 114, Milton's translation of Psalm 136 stresses the poet's function. Where the first three verses of the authorized King James Bible translation repeat the phrase "give thanks," Milton chooses to speak of praising: Let us with a gladsom mind / Praise the Lord, for he is kind ... / Let us blaze his Name abroad, / O let us his praises tell" (*Works* v.3.14. ll.1,2,5,9). The three initial stanzas, as Milton translates them, remind the reader that the singing of praise is a duty to which the Christian is instructed by Scripture. Still further, Milton's exhortation to sing such praise "with a gladsom mind" is suggestive of the well-known Augustinian formula to the same effect: "for he that singeth praise, not only praiseth, but only praiseth with gladness" (*Expositions on the Psalms* 334).<sup>324</sup> Augustine's formula, "'They will praise the Lord who seek for him' [Psalm 21. 27] In seeking him they find him, and in finding they will praise him" (*Confessions* 1.1). provides a succinct analogy to Milton's ethos in cultivating the true poet's office by imitating the "best and honourablest things" and thereby both manifesting and glorifying the Creator whose likeness they bear. In accordance with the Pauline prescription to seek and to know God in his creation (Romans 1.20) those who seek to know God as He is reflected in worldly virtue become images of God through their participation in that virtue. In this transformation they find what they seek. Traditionally freighted with such-like suggestion, the fifteen year-old Milton's translation of Psalm 136 recalls the nature of the true poet's dutiful calling, both as Milton conceives it in the anti-prelatical tracts and as Augustine joins the psalmist in prescribing it to all of the Lord's faithful subjects: to seek and to know the Creator through the things of this world and therein also to sing His praises with an uplifted and gladsome mind.

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<sup>324</sup> *Works of St. Augustine*, p.334.

Milton's paraphrase of Psalm 114 and his translation of Psalm 136 follow his "Nativity Hymn" something like an end-note commentary. As Stella P. Revard writes, "Psalms 114 and 136 are psalms of deliverance that rejoice at Israel's escape from Egypt and its deliverance into Canaan. The placement of these psalms immediately after the rout of the pagan gods in the Nativity Ode could hardly have failed to have special resonance among puritans in 1645" ("Design of the 1645 Poems" 209). The Psalms' rehearsal, in other words, compels Milton's English readers of 1645 to recognize the extent to which his own new-fashioned "heavenly poesy" is "doctrinal to [their] nation" (*CPW* 1:815). Yet perhaps even more than this underwriting of the doctrinal content of Milton's hymn, the two psalms are reminders that Scripture prescribes, and tradition exalts, the singing of praise. They remind the reader that Scripture itself is "a heavenly poesy" that includes passages in which mountains skip and oceans flee, in which divinity is made to appear not literally but in figures—fictional yet true.<sup>325</sup> They compel recognition of the kinship between the "Nativity Hymn" and Davidic tradition. Sidney had famously written, "the name of Psalms... being interpreted, is nothing but Songs." In terms of the poet's prophetic aspirations, the two psalms reflect the nature of Milton's "Nativity Hymn" as that most precious and transformative of discoveries: the majesty and glory of God in song.

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<sup>325</sup> The psalmic imagery of a responsive nature, like the similar imagery in Milton's "Nativity Hymn" appears to qualify as the sort of "icastic" imagery that Marshall Grossman describes as one of the defining features of Milton's prophetic rhetoric: "The important thing about icastic poetry... is that although it imitates true things, it differs from history in so far as the true things it imitates *need never have been apprehended by the senses*. Icastic poetry is most properly the sensible sign of a truth that exceeds the senses and may be grasped only with the intellect" ("Milton and the Rhetoric of Prophecy" 173).

## Spenserian Tribute

“On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” comprises two sections: an introductory proem of four stanzas, and the hymn itself, composed of 27 stanzas. The proem to the “Nativity Hymn” uses the rhyme-royal stanza form which had strong associations with both Chaucer and Spenser and therefore with the Chaucerian mantle of English Letters that Spenser had carefully appropriated.<sup>326</sup> The rhyme-royal stanza form is a particularly significant choice for the proem to Milton’s “Nativity Hymn” given its employment in Spenser’s *The Fowre Hymnes*. For the hymn proper, Milton develops a new eight-line, elegantly rhymed stanza form which also points towards Spenser by its use of a concluding alexandrine (as Spenser, the most celebrated innovator of English stanzaic form, had done in *The Faerie Queene*).<sup>327</sup>

Spenser had begun his career in pastoral, after the Virgilian manner, with *The Shepherd’s Calendar*. *The Fowre Hymnes* was among the latest of Spenser’s works and, in the “Hymn of Heavenly Beauty,” it contained the visionary confirmation of his role as a prophetic Christian poet. In beginning his 1645 *Poems* with “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” Milton launches his career with a hymn constructed about a narrative one might describe as biblical pastoral. In other words, the opening act of Milton’s career pays mimetic homage by enveloping that of Spenser. For all its overt Spenserianism, the “Nativity Hymn” makes no attempt to imitate

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<sup>326</sup> In the *Faerie Queen* Spenser claims the “infusion sweete / Of [Chaucer’s] owne spirit,” thereby imitating Ennius, the iconic father of Latin poetry, who claimed (in a fragment preserved by Lactantius) to have been instructed in dream that he was the Roman incarnation of Homer. The use of the figure of metempsychosis, implies that Chaucer’s expression had grown as strange to the English readers of Spenser’s time as Homer’s Greek was to Ennius’s Roman contemporaries. Spenser’s figure was thus not only a myth of inspired origins but also of the restitution and renovation of national treasure.

<sup>327</sup> As the Oxford editors write, “Milton invents here an original strophe for an English ode...: eight-line stanzas with lines of varying lengths (6,6,10,6,6,10,8,12) and an intricate, interlaced rhyme scheme (aabccbdd)” (III.li). For Milton’s adoption of Spenserian form see also George F. Butler “Milton’s Sage and Serious Spenser,” p. 105.

Spenser's career launching personae. Milton is emphatically not adopting a humble persona in the likeness of a Spenserian Colin Clout, let alone that of a self-effacing *immarito*. In the opening poem of his first published collection Milton foregoes the adoption of fluid poetic personae. Instead, he chooses to adopt the role he had carefully fashioned in the anti-prelatical tracts. Thus, Milton enters the poetic stage as one already composed: the true poet as true poem, an English Protestant poet worthy to succeed the "sage and serious Spenser" as he conceived him—the integral pedagogue behind the masks, "the perfecte patterne of a poet" whom the protean personae of his works clamorously articulated.<sup>328</sup>

Rosemond Tuve has suggested that "[i]t is in the architectonic and inter-animating use of massive allegorical figures with wide symbolic import that Milton learned most from Spenser" (*Images and Themes* 57). In support of this claim, both *The Fowre Hymnes* and the "Nativity Hymn" are remarkable for their employment of vast, interrelated symbolic structures. At the same time as the "Nativity Hymn" bears an unmistakably Spenserian impress, however, the particulars of both the outward form and its internal articulations maintain a calculated difference. Milton's "Nativity Hymn" is structured around a single composite figure of harmonious Creation that interprets and fuses an underlying analogy between the pagan harmony of the spheres and the Christian angelic choir. Spenser's *The Fowre Hymnes* is structured around a binary figure of mirroring yet always distinct pagan and Christian narratives representing divine Love and Beauty. Both works represent their author-narrators' participation in and celebration of divine mysteries and both effect the virtuosic humanist conversion of the pagan spoils of *bonae litterae* to Christian purpose.

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<sup>328</sup> The opening "Argument" of the October Eclogue identifies Cuddie as "the perfecte patterne of a poet" (*Shorter Poems* 170).

*The Fowre Hymnes* is a poem designed as a series of mirroring “exploded views” of a topic. Spenser draws the distinctly focused and fully articulated elements and divinities of his pagan and Christian symbolic narratives into analogy and challenges the reader to search out their intricate correspondences.<sup>329</sup> The “Nativity Hymn” is a poem designed as a single, historically linear, surface view of a topic. Milton tells a single Christian narrative in which pagan divinities appear only to be unmasked as false idols, and pagan doctrine to be threaded seamlessly into assimilative Christian figures whose articulations are only obscurely suggested. In the “Nativity Hymn’s” central representation of a harmonious Christian Creation there is no place for pagan dissonance:

Ring out ye Crystall spears,  
Once bless our human ears,  
    (If ye have power to touch our senses so  
And let your silver chime  
Move in melodious time;  
    And let the Base of Heav’ns deep Organ blow,  
And with your ninefold harmony  
Make up full consort to th’ Angelike symphony. (Works 9 XIII.125-32)

In this representation of cosmic harmony Milton covers over the mechanics of his figure’s underlying analogies. Thus, far from offering an exploded view, the “ninefold harmony” that joins with the “Base of Heav’ns deep organ”<sup>330</sup> collapses together the nine encompassing spheres of the Ptolemaic system,<sup>331</sup> and the nine ranks of angels within the pseudo-Dionysian system.

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<sup>329</sup> The interpretative mechanism of *The Fowre Hymnes* functions through analogies suggestive of, yet not reducible to typological relations between the pagan and Christian hymns. A potent example of this method is the parallel ensconcing of divinity within divinity: “Come then, O come, thou mighty god of love, / Out of thy silver bowers and secret bliss, / Where thou dost sit in Venus’ lap above.” (HL 4.22-4) “There in his bosom Sapience doth sit, / The sovereign darling of the deity. (HHB 27.183-4)

<sup>330</sup> The musical “Base” here corresponds spatially to the first, earthly sphere of the Ptolemaic system.

<sup>331</sup> As A.S. Cook notes with respect to the “ninefold harmony” of Milton’s “Crystal spheres”, “[t]he earth was the immovable centre of this [Ptolemaic] system. The outermost of the movable spheres was the Crystalline Heaven, or

The ringing out of the “Crystall sphears” suggests the Pythagorean doctrine of the harmony of the spheres enshrined within the Ptolemaic cosmological system. Milton, however, wrests these elements out of the hands of their pagan progenitors. By referring the harmony of the spheres to its final cause in heavenly grace and eternal design, Milton effectively cancels the pagan referent, thereby wholly assimilating the pagan symbol into his overarching Christian figure. The “Angelike symphony” as “consort” to the “ninefold harmony” of the spheres suggests the Pseudo-Dionysian tradition of the nine orders of angels in combination with the Dantean tradition of the angelic host singing the praises of the Creator in harmony with the silver chiming spheres.<sup>332</sup>

In the allegorical figures of Spenser’s *The Fowre Hymnes*, elements tend to be concretely located and described. In describing the pagan Love’s emergence from his embowerment in Beauty, Spenser writes: “Come then, O come, thou mighty god of love, / Out of thy silver bowers and secret bliss, / Where thou dost sit in Venus’ lap above” (HL 4.22-4). In the analogy to this embowering, Spenser describes the embosoming of Sapience: “There in his bosom Sapience doth sit, / The sovereign darling of the deity” (HHB 27.183-4). Spenser’s concrete articulation of these two images provokes comparison. The lack of precise delineation in Milton’s broadly allusive description of quiring angels and musical spheres, however, prevents the reader from constructing a fully rendered image that would allow such discrete comparison.

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*Primum Mobile*, whose revolution takes place in about twenty-four hours, carrying with it all the other eight heavens” (342). Also potentially implicit within this collapsing together of analogies are the nine Olympian muses whom poets occasionally associated with the nine spheres. Of the authors who have represented the spheres occupied by the nine muses, Cook lists Plutarch, *Symp.* Bk. 9; Martianus Capella, *De Nupt. Phil.* 1. 27, 28 (343).

<sup>332</sup> See *Purgatorio*. Canto 30, ll.92-3).

In its hesitancy to settle upon a fully articulated visual arrangement of its angelic and cosmological features, the “Nativity Hymn” anticipates Raphael’s closing caution to Adam in their discussion of cosmology in Bk VIII of *Paradise Lost*:

Sollicit not thy thoughts with matters hid,  
Leave them to God above, him serve and feare;  
Of other Creatures, as him pleases best,  
Wherever plac’t, let him dispose (PL 8.167-170)

The hierarchical disposition of the angels is not described but merely suggested by the tradition to which the language of Milton’s figure alludes. By collapsing together the figures of the nine spheres and nine angelic orders Milton deftly suppresses particularizing details that might otherwise take away from the singularity of the “Nativity Hymn’s” Christian vision. On the one hand, this method of obscure figuration may serve the purposes of chaste-tongued mimetic decorum—demonstrating Milton’s willingness to “be lowlie wise” (PL 8.173) and insisting that the truth of the divine image lies rather in the meaning than the names or signs by which it is figured.<sup>333</sup> On the other hand, Milton might also be acknowledging a “mechanical debt” to Spenser’s “inter-animating use of massive allegorical figures with wide symbolic import” (*Images and Themes* 57). In his collapsing together of pagan doctrine under the weighty dominance of Christian figures, it may be that Milton was imitating (albeit through vigorous inversion) Spenser’s method in *The Fowre Hymnes* of separating out and exposing intricately-articulated and mirroring parallels between pagan mythological and biblical narratives.<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> Such mimetic decorum would constitute an example of the practice of verbal chastity that Milton praises in Petrarch and Dante when he lauds them as poets who speak only honour of those they love. See the previous section, “Mimetic Fidelity: The True Poet’s Oath of Verbal Chastity,” pp.167-170.

<sup>334</sup> That vigorous inversion and the adoption of antithetical style is indeed one of the ways in which Milton pays tribute to those he admires is born out by his correspondence with his two close and respected friends Charles Diodati and Alexander Gil. In his correspondence with Diodati Milton frequently plays upon the antithesis between the latter’s elegiac and sensuous levity and his own heroic austerity. Similarly suggestive is Milton’s (Latin) letter of 4 December 1634 to Gil which contained “a Greek version of ‘Psalm 114’ whose heroic matter and manner contrast

Milton signposts his “Nativity Hymn” with formal elements drawn from *The Fowre Hymnes*, one of Spenser’s latest and most explicitly prophetic works. But one Spenserian peculiarity that this inaugural poem emphatically does not engage in is the pretense of an untutored origin. Where Spenser ends, Milton begins, thereby suggesting an in-grafting of the new shoot of Milton’s poetic career in the highest limb of Spenser’s oeuvre.<sup>335</sup> In its representation of world-transcending heavenly song, the “Nativity Hymn” resembles the vision of Sapience that crowns Spenser’s final “Hymn to Heavenly Beauty” in *The Fowre Hymnes*. As Richard Halpern writes, “the “Nativity Ode” is threatened at the beginning by the very un-Spenserian problem of too much vision... the imaginary transcendence of a developmental narrative is what troubles the “Ode”... [and the] collapse of the poem’s temporality” (“The Great Instauration” 18). In its visionary anticipation of the end of history, the “Nativity Hymn” is so totalizing in its sweep through time and creation that at its close there is nothing left undone. Stephen Fallon notes that the angelic song to which Milton’s hymn is joined, “binds together, inaugurates, redeems, and ends history... [and], [d]espite his earlier stance as humble spectator, Milton steps onto the timeless stage of the poem” (*Milton’s Peculiar Grace* 57). The difficulty in this transcendent choral anticipation of the *end*—a difficulty apparently recognized by its author when he interjects, “But wisest Fate sayes no, / This must not yet be so”—is that it must still make room for its author’s career (Works 9 XIII.149-50). Whereas the prophetic vision of Sapience effectively crowns Spenser’s oeuvre at or near the close of his career, Milton’s vision

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as sharply as possible with the witty, titillating epithalamium Gil had sent him” (Works 3.xxxiv paraphrasing Leo Miller, “On Some Verses by Alexander Gil which John Milton Read,” *MQ* 24 (1990), 22-5.).

<sup>335</sup> While Milton’s hymn is not properly pastoral, it not only contains pastoral elements but cultivates these in ways suggestive of Spenser’s *Calender*.

of final things loudly proclaims the prophetic character of his poetic ambition while marking his beginning.<sup>336</sup>

## Myth of Origins

In “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” Milton links his muse’s song of divine praise with that of the original angelic choir and the divine Music produced by a harmonious Creation. This representation of participatory mimesis—the hymn’s participation or joining together with the angelic choir—serves to exalt the “Nativity Hymn” above the historical horizon of the literary traditions to which it is indebted. In this way Milton provides both an extra-biblical yet orthodox Christian myth of origins for the hymn form he is employing and a heavenly antitype for his poetic office as singer of divine praise.<sup>337</sup>

In the final stanza of the “Nativity Hymn” proem, Milton asks his muse to lay his “humble ode” at Christ’s “blessed feet” and to thereby “joyn thy voice unto the Angel Quire, / From out his secret Altar toucht with hallow’d fire” (Works 3.5,6 ll.24-5, 7-8). The final line of this figure refers the reader to Isaiah:

Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and

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<sup>336</sup> There may be a profound temperamental difference at work here. Maureen Quilligan has drawn attention to a similar disjunction between the relation to temporality within Spenser and Milton’s works. Spenser, she writes, “everywhere insists that his poetry is of the *“middest”*... [and indeed] Spenser’s epic may be said to be essentially without beginning (because we never get to its end, which was to have been its narrated beginning)” (*Milton’s Spenser* 168). Milton on the other hand is much more preoccupied with the beginning and end of things, straining against and partially transcending the necessary temporality of the middle “by the personal immediacy of his inspiration, which claims no difference between Moses’ Sinai and Milton’s Sion” (*Milton’s Spenser* 167-8).

<sup>337</sup> John M. Steadman observes that, “[a]s lyric poetry correlated with a festival of the church—even though he did not design his poem for choral performance—Milton’s “Hymn” belongs to a tradition of Judaeo-Christian hymnology that includes poems as diverse as the Psalms and Canticles, Spenser’s hymns of heavenly love and heavenly beauty and the hymns of Richard Crashaw” (*Milton’s Biblical and Classical Imagery* 15).

said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. (Is. 6:6-7 AKJV)

Milton here looks both forward, to his hymn's performance of a divine service of praise, and backward, to the initiatory conception of prophetic speech in Isaiah's biblical vision. He thereby refers his hymn to the prophetic scriptural tradition while also supplying an image establishing and insisting upon the divine poet's blamelessness. The prophetic speaker is purified for heavenly speech by the live coal pressed against his lips—the live coal also functioning as synecdoche for the divine utterance in which Isaiah participates. The divinely inspired poet of the "Nativity Hymn" like both the true poet of the anti-prelatical *Apology* and the Erasmian *theodidaktos* can be confident of his own purity and fitness to utter divine praise for he has imitated (in the sense of having imbibed, digested, assimilated) and come to resemble the "best and honourablest" things comprising the heavenly poesy of Scripture. To imitate Scripture (recalling Erasmus's pronouncements in the *Paraclesis* and *Ecclesiastes*) is both to imitate the "living image of His holy mind" and to imitate Christ as the "enarrator" of that mind (*Paraclesis* 108; CWE 63). The "live coals" of Isaiah, in their purificatory and transformative function linked to prophetic utterance, are analogous to Erasmus's living image of God in Scripture.<sup>338</sup> Through his meditative and ruminative method of study—regenerate reason led by the inborn Spirit as muse—the author becomes a mirroring composition and pattern of the object(s) of his praise, an image of the Christ-Logos.<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>338</sup> With Scripture being understood as "the living image of His holy mind and the speaking, healing, dying, rising Christ himself" (*Paraclesis* 108).

<sup>339</sup> The single assimilative and participatory method of humanist study, shared by Erasmus's homiletic instruction in the *Ratio* and his oratorical instruction in the *Ciceronianus*, allows the poet as *theodidaktos* to claim a literal prophetic authority which remains partially dependent upon scholarly diligence and answerable style.

The divine, participatory nature of Milton's song is further illustrated in the idea of Milton's muse singing his hymn in symphony with the "Angel Quire" thereby both recapitulating and participating in the divine music of the harmonious Creation represented in the Book of Job:

Such Music (as 'tis said)  
Before was never made,  
But when of old the sons of morning sung  
While the Creator Great  
His constellations set,  
And the well-balanc'd world on hinges hung  
And cast the dark foundations deep,  
And bid the weltring waves their oozy channel keep.<sup>340</sup> (*Works* 3 XII.117-124 p.9)

Here Milton's hymn represents the music of the original act of worship when "the morning stars" and angelic "sons of God" joined in praise of the Creator. (Job 38:7 AKJV) Milton's muse joins his hymn to the Angel Choir represented within its lines: the poem's words and the cosmic song run together and Milton's imitation participates in its original.

In Milton's vocational formula, the poet must first become the poem he would sing. Consequently, not only the hymn itself, but also its author are transformed through participatory imitation of their divine original. The nature of the "Nativity Hymn" as heavily supplemented biblical narrative recalls Erasmus's counsel to the aspiring preacher to study in such a way that the heart becomes a "library of Christ" from which divine store he may bring forth things both new and old. The "Nativity Hymn" has "come forth from [Milton's] own heart, as it were,

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<sup>340</sup> The reference is to God's speech to Job from the whirlwind: "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? / declare, if thou hast understanding. / Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it? / Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? / or who laid the corner stone thereof; / when the morning stars sang together, / and all the sons of God shouted for joy? / Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, / as if it had issued out of the womb? / When I made the cloud the garment thereof, / and thick darkness a swaddlingband for it" (Job 38.4-9 AKJV)

practically alive” as a Davidic song illustrating the author’s own mimetic participation in “the living image of His holy mind.”

The poetic office of heavenly song represented in the “Nativity Hymn” has a significant precedent in Erasmus’s figure of the prophetic teacher. In his *Exposition of the Psalm 38*, Erasmus had represented this teacher in the guise of Idythun, the great leaping (world-transcending) lyre-playing musician: “David set apart for the worship of God certain musicians who were not only to sing but also to prophesy... He alone can produce a pure and clear sound in his prophecy whose lyre has been granted to him by David and whose sonorous instrument has been skillfully tuned by the Spirit of Christ” (*Exposition of Psalm 38* 12-14). Milton’s “Nativity Hymn” represents the practice of theology in the largely affective terms of the knowledge and performance of music. His prophetic singer executes a divine office that represents the very highest aim and employment of Christianity. Yet, as in Erasmus’s figure of the leaping, lyre playing Idythun, the prophetic office and “knowledge of divine music” proper to the “Nativity Hymn” are intimated with little or no reference to institutional church tradition. Milton and Erasmus’s figures encourage faithful imitation of Davidic and angelic models, thereby affirming, for contemporary audiences, an ancient and typological priestly paradigm in which poet/musician, and prophet/theologian are one and the same.

## Chapter 6

### Milton's Invocatory Proems to *Paradise Lost*<sup>341</sup>

#### Heavenly Song

In its invocatory proems, Milton's biblical epic *Paradise Lost* presents itself as prophetic Christian poetry and its author as a prophetic poet. Because Milton does not make fully clear how the reader is to understand his claims to Mosaic inspiration and nightly visitation by the Spirit of God, however, his overtly prophetic stance is as potentially bewildering to a Christian as to a secular audience. One response to the grandeur of the proems' claims has been to stress the rationalism of Milton's thought and to thereby minimize the religious import of his prophetic pronouncements. As William Kerrigan has noted in *The Prophetic Milton*, rationalizing *Paradise Lost* and glossing over Milton's more radical statements concerning his mosaic inspiration and the unprecedented nature of his work risks significantly diminishing the intended impact of its spectacular design.

Kerrigan has attempted to remind readers of the exceptional audacity and strangeness of Milton's project by taking *Paradise Lost* at its word and representing it accordingly:

The epic is offered as another Testament. Writing with prophetic inspiration higher than "those Hebrews of old," Milton assumes divine authority for every word, every event in *Paradise Lost* that does not appear in Scripture. His prophetic song fills in the hypotactic transitions of Genesis with an inspired parataxis, representing the conceptual logic of events missing in the account of Moses. (*The Prophetic Milton* 264)<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Books I, III, and VII of *Paradise Lost* each contain an invocation within an opening section or proem. For clarity's sake, and because these proems contain other elements besides the invocations, I will refer to them as "invocatory proems." Lewalski offers an insightful account of the structures of these proems, which she describes as "invocatory," "literary," and "complex invocatory" hymns. (*Rhetoric of Literary Forms* 27-33).

<sup>342</sup> Kerrigan is adopting terms from Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, pp.124-51.

As Kerrigan's passage makes clear, *Paradise Lost* does more than merely retell biblical narrative. It is both imitation of biblical story and new-creation of biblical story, and for both old and new it claims the authority of divine inspiration. Its central biblical narrative, its development of biblical topics, and its immediate foregrounding of divine agents of biblical inspiration notwithstanding, *Paradise Lost* also begins by echoing the central propositions and openings of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*. According to Barbara Lewalski this inclusivity suggests "that the universal and true story of humankind must necessarily contain, subsume, and endeavor to surpass the greatest poems we know" (*Rhetoric of Literary Forms* 28). From the beginning then, even as it writes its supplementary narratives into the gaps of Scripture, the biblicizing fiction of Milton's epic poem is interlaced with references to classical culture's generic forms and poetic accomplishments. Extravagantly in excess of what the genre of biblical paraphrase might condone both in terms of narrative supplement and Egyptian spoils, the very first of the invocatory proems claims for its author both prophetic inspiration in the line of Moses and the learning and artistry to vie with the classical *auctores*.

The rejection of scriptural closure implicit in what Kerrigan calls the "inspired parataxis" of *Paradise Lost* would have been unthinkable without the prior Christian humanist renovation of scriptural study. Erasmus's immensely controversial translation of the Greek *Logos* by the Latin *sermo* (copious discourse) instead of *verbum* (word) is emblematic of this renovation and of the latter's disruptive potential in enabling the Protestant Reformation. As a result of Reformation period humanist scholarship it became possible to challenge the authority of the

scriptural text with respect to a wide range of factors.<sup>343</sup> At the same time, Bible translations in the European languages proliferated—a project greatly aided by the Greek edition and Latin translation of Erasmus along with the authoritative Latin translations of other Christian humanists.

Scripture's crystalline surface of sanctity had been shattered by the grammarian's awareness of textual corruption as the inevitable consequence of transmission. The vulnerability of *sacrae litterae* to the vicissitudes of human handling brought the biblical text considerably closer to the level of *bonae litterae*. While original biblical authorship had become subject to critical suspicion and Scripture itself to contestation, contemporary translations in the European dialects had become capable of divine *copia*. As Hannibal Hamlin writes, English translations of the Psalms... were holy Scripture... *used* by English Christians every day, or at least every week, of their lives ...[while also being] *English works*"(*Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature* 6). Biblical translation made it possible for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors to assume a measure of divine authority, thereby bringing the poetic products of contemporary authors considerably closer to the level of *sacrae litterae*.

Because the rules governing Hebrew poetry were still unclear to English scholars, dramatic license could be taken in translating poetic books such as Psalms, or Job. The Sidney Psalter employs such a wide variety of stylistic schemes that it has been called a "School of English Versification"<sup>344</sup> illustrating the liberty that could be taken in biblical translation while

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<sup>343</sup> These included textual corruption, scribal error, deliberate tampering with texts, the appropriateness of the translator's style, and even the very clarity of content in the original and thus its suitability to translation of any kind—a difficulty most clearly recognized in the case of Revelations. For a discussion of the nature and impact of Erasmus' *Annotations* see Erika Rummel, *Erasmus' Annotations on the New Testament: From Philologist to Theologian*.

<sup>344</sup> Hallett Smith, "English Metrical Psalms in the Sixteenth Century and Their Literary Significance," *HLQ* 9 (1946) 26; cited by A.C. Hamilton in *Sir Philip Sidney* (1977) p. 72.

still remaining *in* Scripture. In the elaboration of biblical narrative, the difference between writing within and writing outside of Scripture was one of authority. Those who laboured upon scriptural translations were therefore attentive to the fluctuating rules governing this process of participatory inclusion. As Margaret P. Hannay notes:

The constraints of translation, especially translation of Scripture, which had divine authority, is undoubtedly one reason the Sidneys experimented more with schemes than tropes. It was the tropes, after all—the figures of thought, metaphors, images—that they derived from the biblical Psalms, and no translator could change these radically without passing into some broader genre like biblical ‘meditation’ or ‘adaptation’. (*The Sidney Psalter* xxiii)

*Paradise Lost* does what Sidney sought to avoid. Milton introduces new tropes, new figures of thought, new metaphors, and new images into the scriptural narrative. The Christian Humanist paradigm of Logos-participating mimesis, however, allows Milton to continue claiming the divinely inspired authority not only of a translator remaining *in* Scripture but of something more closely resembling the inspired authority of the original biblical authors themselves.

When Milton introduces the radical addition of his Greek muse Urania as one of two preexistent daughters of God in a retelling of the Hebrew Genesis story, he insists upon “the meaning, not the name.” In this insistence upon “the meaning,” Milton claims orthodoxy—that is, he claims not to have altered “the fundamental [scriptural] content” and to have remained in Scripture. In the *De doctrina* Milton counsels the biblical interpreter to believe that God is exactly as he has willed himself to be known through the qualities named in Scripture. At the same time, however, Milton makes perfectly clear that the qualities of God represented in Scripture “are of a different order” of meaning from the human qualities to which they correspond (Lieb 147). Milton’s answer to this otherwise bewildering interpretative impasse is to suggest that the “pre-eminent and supreme authority... is the authority of the Spirit, which is

internal, and the individual possession of each man” (CPW 6:587). Milton’s according of a “pre-eminent and supreme authority” to the internal Spirit tends, in Christian Humanist fashion, to pre-empt the dogmatic closure of interpretation. At the same time, it also provides a theoretical basis for the elaboration of biblical narrative through the addition of prophetic supplements.

Much scholarly effort has gone into interpreting the proems’ enigmatic figures and identifying the Muse or Muses they invoke in terms of Christian doctrine. In the following discussion I will cover some of this ground again, but I will not be aiming to identify theological doctrines behind Milton’s figures. Instead, I will examine the poetic method and rationale according to which Milton produces these figures and demonstrate the manner in which these reflect both the nature of Scripture’s copious revelation and the nature of the true poet’s prophetic, Logos-participating poetic gift as *theodidaktos* (one taught by God).

The prophetic poetic method of the invocatory proems insists upon Scripture’s power to generate the ever-renewing copious discourse of God. The invocatory proems’ imagery is coordinated with and made coherent (albeit often surprisingly) with narrative, imagery and language of both Greek and Hebrew Scripture. For Milton, both God’s will to be known and the forms by which he wishes to be known are embodied by scriptural language. In the *De doctrina* Milton writes,

It is safest for us to form an image of God in our minds which corresponds to his representation and description of himself in the sacred writings. . . . We ought to form just such a mental image of him as he, in bringing himself within the limits of our understanding, wishes us to form. (CPW 6:133-34)

As was the case with Erasmus’s grammatically justified translation of *Logos* by *Sermo* rather than *Verbum*, a great deal of the strangeness of the invocatory proems in *Paradise Lost* can be attributed to Milton’s mimetic fidelity. Resisting extra-scriptural, doctrinal conditioning of the

names he recites, Milton deliberately preserves original ambivalences present in scriptural narrative.

As Barbara Lewalski points out, Milton's insistence "on the necessarily fragmentary and metaphoric nature of all representations of the divine in the biblical texts... frees Milton as epic poet to make imaginative use of multiple reflections of God and his works" without thereby contradicting the original scriptural text (*Life* 83). The disorientation experienced by readers preempted from identifying set doctrinal referents for Milton's figures compels them to consider the meaning of such figures independent of customary interpretation. In disrupting the doctrinal identifications attendant upon their customary reading of Scripture, Milton's figures also encourage his readers to return to the scriptural source-texts from which Milton's images and terms are transposed.<sup>345</sup> When Milton writes that "[w]e ought to form just such a mental image of him as he, in bringing himself within the limits of our understanding, wishes us to form," then certainly he is referring to such things as anthropomorphic description. Yet there are two distinct yet mutually dependent aspects to the accommodated language of Scripture: first, there is the matter of how the accommodated language claims God is formed; second, there is the matter of how the accommodated language is formed. Milton possessed impressive polyglot learning and insisted, in both the *Tractate of Education* and the *Meanes to Remove Hirelings*, that an excellent grammar school education could better serve than university training and that the clergy need only be trained in Scripture and languages (*Milton at St. Paul's* 250-251). It is only natural that

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<sup>345</sup> The strategy of unsettling readers' doctrinal assumptions and driving them back to alternative scriptural source-texts marginalized by dominant reading traditions is a strategy that does not only appear in *Paradise Lost*. As Mary Nyquist writes of Milton's resistance to the passages in Matthew forbidding divorce except for fornication, "Milton's strategy in commenting on the verses from Matthew is to subvert their literal and accepted meaning by referring the citations back to the [contradictory and over-riding] divine words of institution" ("The Genesis of Gendered Subjectivity..." 113).

the mental images Milton conceives of God correspond, in their particularities, to the (grammatical and syntactic) particularities of scriptural language. It is this language, after all, by which and as which God brings himself before the human understanding.

In Milton's estimation God has not only accommodated himself to human understanding through the language of Scripture, but he has invested Milton (as all other individuals) with the regenerate reason sufficient to scriptural interpretation.<sup>346</sup> The Christian Humanist conception of a rational God, who both intends to be known by humanity and has equipped human kind with reason correspondent to his principled Creation, is central to Milton's prophetic poetics.<sup>347</sup> As Lewalski writes, "Milton does not expect the internal prophetic Spirit to manifest itself in enthusiastic testimony, but rather in reasoned argument that might carry conviction to others" ("Interpreting God's Word" 81). The equation of Logos with divine reason allows Milton, as it allowed Erasmus, to conceive prophecy and prophetic teaching on a continuum with the scholarly exegetical method of the learned Christian grammarian.

The importance of reason as an inner guide and final arbiter of scriptural and theological understanding is illustrated in *Paradise Lost* through a conversation between the Father and Son on the subject of grace and human responsibility:

Mine ear shall not be slow, mine eye not shut.  
And I will place within them as a guide  
My Umpire Conscience, whom if they will hear,

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<sup>346</sup> The investment by regenerate reason is consonant with the investment by grace that allows the will to choose to strive towards virtue in the first place. Dennis Danielson has explained this aspect of Milton's thought—which I have examined in relation to Christian Humanism—in terms of Arminianism: "Like Erasmus before him, [Arminius] placed emphasis on human freedom, while at the same time insisting that "free will is unable to begin or to perfect any true and spiritual good, without grace" . . . And, like Erasmus, he . . . posit[s] that sufficient grace is offered to all" (*Milton's Good God* 71) . . . like his Arminian predecessors, Milton held that God's grace is necessary in every stage of salvation and sanctification, even in the act of will by which one accepts God's gift in the first place, so that if all persons are to be free to accept or reject God's salvation, enabling grace must be withheld from no one" (*Milton's Good God* 76).

<sup>347</sup> For Erasmus's appropriation of the Scholastic exaltation of reason as a central attribute of Christianity, and of the latter's critical role in Erasmus's own theology, see Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Christening Pagan Wisdom* p. 16 ff.

Light after light well us'd they shall attain,  
And to the end persisting, safe arrive. (PL 3.193-7)

It is a remarkable feature of this passage that while dealing specifically with communication between God and humanity there is no direct mention of Scripture. This does not mean that Scripture is not still imagined as the primary vehicle for communication between God and his faithful, but the emphasis of the passage is upon the in-dwelling conscience as an authoritative guide distinct from Scripture. For one seeking divine guidance, this passage implies that through the inner “Umpire Conscience” one may not only hear/receive the message of God, but also use the ongoing dispensation of guiding light to achieve further good ends. The Father’s continuing dispensation of “[l]ight after light” in *Paradise Lost* is consistent with Erasmus’s position on the continuity of prophetic teaching within the church: “that earlier kind of prophecy which was once highly regarded in the synagogue has... been put into the shade [by the radiant light of the gospels]... and yet in fact the church is now more than ever provided with prophets who feed the Lord’s flock with spiritual teachings” (*Exposition of Psalm 38* 13). Countering any assumption the reader may have of prophecy’s confinement to Scripture, the Father’s providential gift of progressive illumination is also consistent with the prophetic liberty Milton takes in retelling biblical narrative within his poetic works.

The invocatory proems have resisted critical attempts to define their figures in doctrinal terms because they are designed to do so. As Susanne Woods notes, Milton “challenge[s] orthodox biblical hermeneutics... by recasting biblical materials in his poetry...[in ways that] capture attention and provoke often radical rethinking... push[ing] his reader out of complacency and toward more complex interpretations” (*Milton’s Rival Hermeneutics* 4). While they may suggest classical echoes, the central figures within the invocations and apostrophes—the dove-

like Spirit, holy light, Wisdom—are drawn primarily from Scripture. Their strangeness arises from their being transposed and re-cited in an equivocating manner that, contrary to conditioned expectation, strips them of the dominant doctrinal narratives which tend to pre-determine and stabilize their meaning. Milton's invocatory proems arrange and contextualize their central figures in ways that undermine dominant traditional connotations while recalling distinct alternatives from a variety of less ideologically privileged source-texts and contexts in an unsettling orchestration of scriptural voices.

The invocatory proems draw significantly upon the grammatically varied depictions of Wisdom in the apocryphal *Wisdom of Solomon* and *Ecclesiasticus* as well as in *Proverbs*.<sup>348</sup> As a consequence of this employment, the feminine Hebrew Wisdom and the source-texts in which she appears are brought into prominence. Milton thereby achieves three remarkable results. First, without any direct challenge to the overarching superstructures of essential Christian doctrine, he exhorts his readers to investigate what the meaning of Wisdom might be in the original contexts of the source-texts in which she appears. Second, in associating his Wisdom figure(s)<sup>349</sup> not only with *Proverbs* but with the apocryphal literature he may be intentionally tethering his extra-biblical fiction, Wisdom's sister Urania, within an uneasily policed domain of Scripture.<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> By "*Ecclesiasticus*," I am referring to the apocryphal book entitled "*The Wisdome of Jesus the Sonne of Sirach, called Ecclesiasticus*." I cite the apocryphal *Ecclesiasticus* and the *Wisdom of Solomon* from the Geneva Edition (1560), as they do not appear within the Authorized King James Version.

<sup>349</sup> A poetical personification of wisdom is suggested in Books I and III and explicitly employed in Book VII. This use accords with the passage in the *Christian Doctrine* in which Milton writes, "But as for Prov. Ch. 8, I should think it is not the son of God but personified Wisdom who in accordance with poetical custom is being brought in there as a speaker, as at Job 28: 20-7" (Works 8.285).

<sup>350</sup> The lesser status of the Apocryphal books would seem to have lessened the necessity of controlling their interpretation. Passages within the Geneva Bible (1560) containing analogous accounts of Wisdom in *Proverbs* 8 and in the *Wisdom of Solomon* 7 illustrate the discrepancy. The surrounding margins of *Proverbs* are close to being entirely filled with commentary a substantial part of which guides the readers in their identification of Wisdom with Christ. The surrounding margins of the *Wisdom of Solomon* are close to being entirely empty with only a few notes to indicate parallel passages.

Third, by making Urania the sister of Wisdom—"Urania, Muse of Astronomy, baptized by Du Bartas a century earlier as Muse of Christian poetry" (*Rhetoric of Literary Forms* 30)—he suggests their interchangeability or near identification as mirroring sisters of prophetic poetry and spiritual understanding. Indeed (as I show in the final section of this study), in the sibling kinship of Urania and Wisdom Milton ultimately fashions a myth of origins that accounts for the ancient identification of the true poet and the true theologian and therein also for the nature and providence of his own superlative poetic authority.

The poetic method of the proems appears to correspond to the grammarian's advice that Erasmus (employing the example of anthropomorphic narrative in Genesis) offers to ministers when they find themselves confronted by the appearance of absurdity or non-sense in Scripture:

Inasmuch as ... [a given scriptural] expression offends the reader at first glance, it suggests to him that beneath this covering there lies hidden some deeper meaning. Thus he investigates what the meaning of this allegorical [symbol] might be ... what [for instance] the distinction of days might be, what the rest from work might be, what the planting might be, what the tree supplying the knowledge of good and evil might be, what the noontime might be, what God's walking in the evening breeze might be, what the hiding of Adam might be, what the countenance of the Lord might be and what the hiding from him might be. (*Ratio* 298-9).

Milton's method of composing pre-doctrinal scriptural figures appears to involve a poetic application of the cautiously tentative and free-ranging interpretative and homiletic method of his Christian humanist forebears. Milton first brings a grammarian's focus to bear upon the semantic and syntactic anomalies peculiar to specific biblical passages and persons. In the case of Wisdom and Urania, he then reproduces these anomalies, or rather produces figurative elaborations of these anomalies, within his invocations. In this way, an insistence upon interpretative freedom and upon the individual's final responsibility for his or her scriptural understanding permeates Milton's language.

In keeping with Milton's insistence upon interpretative freedom, the unorthodox figures within the invocatory proems not only resist traditional, doctrinal readings but also serve to exalt the copious variety of Scripture. As hymn-like songs of divine praise, ranging in mood (like the psalms) from celebration through trembling to lamentation,<sup>351</sup> the invocatory proems do not contest the various names and figures recorded in Scripture. Instead, the invocatory proems collect them, in all their variety, in imitation of the copious nature of the scriptural revelation with which God has gifted humankind. The primary intention of the invocations, in other words, is not to fix or define but to participate through imitation in the divine *copia*.

The greatest novelty of Milton's poetic method in the proems to *Paradise Lost* is thus also its most literally and paradoxically conservative aspect.<sup>352</sup> In *Areopagitica* Milton writes:

Truth is compared in Scripture to a streaming fountain; if her waters flow not in a perpetual progression, they sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition. (CPW 2.543).

For Milton, the truth of Scripture may also be compared to a streaming fountain, whose health and clarity depends upon its constant renewal, from the source, in divine utterance. If the prophetic outpouring of *Paradise Lost* succeeded in being such an utterance, and Milton thereby succeeded in fulfilling the Mosaic office of his professed aspirations, then the invocations—as “Light after light well us’d”—might be likened to a gracefully non-conformist striking of the rock of Scripture.<sup>353</sup> In any event, *Paradise Lost* as a whole—and within it the invocations most

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<sup>351</sup> Lewalski offers detailed analyses of each of the hymnic proems. The first she describes as an “invocatory hymn” featuring a Virgilian invocatory formula and two apostrophes, the second as a “literary hymn” mixing a variety of poetic modes and “celebrating the *numen* of a god,” and the third a “complex invocatory hymn... welding elements from epic invocation, Horatian ode, and Psalmic lament-prayer” (*Rhetoric of Literary Forms* 27-33).

<sup>352</sup> Paradoxical in the sense that Milton's method gains by losing: it labours to conserve the potential for meaning of the original scriptural text and that in this very process it overturns the ancient doctrinal interpretations that have accrued to this text.

<sup>353</sup> On Moses striking the rock in Horeb causing water to flow out from it—Exodus 17:6 and Numbers 20:11. On God rebuking Moses for his prior disbelief—Numbers 20:12. On the rock being Christ—1 Cor. 10:14. On the water of Christ as a well of water springing up into everlasting life—John 4:14.

spectacularly—comprise Milton’s right-handed response to the divine command recorded in the gospel of Matthew and echoed in Erasmus’s counsel to the preacher: “every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old” (Matt. 13.52 AKJV).<sup>354</sup>

### **Prophetic Equivocation: Heav’nly Muse and Spirit**

*Paradise Lost*, in recapitulating (while radically supplementing) biblical narrative, functions as a poetic interpretative paraphrase. The interpretative guidance offered by the invocatory proems, however, is tentative and equivocal. Each of the invocatory proems, to Books I, III, and VII<sup>355</sup> begins by employing conjunctions that prevent the reader from anchoring Milton’s poetic figures to any one particular scriptural place. The feeling recorded by Stevie Davies and William B. Hunter in response to the invocations’ disorienting use of conjunctions provides a perfect illustration of the way in which I imagine Milton wished to affect his readers: “The manner [of the poem’s topographical description] is tentative, conditional, as if the poem were thoughtfully searching out the compass and sources of its inspiration in a world whose vestigial holy places memorialize the locations of God’s long- past acts of communication with mankind” (“Milton’s Urania” 97). Whereas Davies and Hunter imagine that the sources of inspiration are one or other of a variety of divine figures—the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit—I read the invocations as

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<sup>354</sup> The passage is cited in the *Christian Doctrine* where Milton employs it to authorize the latter treatises’ method wherein “nothing new is being taught: rather, I seek only, for the sake of the [reader’s] memory, to place at his fingertips things which are read in dispersal in the holy books, by bringing them together for convenience into a single body, so to speak, and by distributing them under definite headings”(Works 8.19) In the *Reason of Church Government* Milton refers to his prose works as the (inferior) labors of his left hand. (CPW 1.807-8)

<sup>355</sup> The present work restricts its investigation to these three proems.

unsettling such identifications and thereby sending their readers back to the sources of their imagery in Scripture. That is, if Sion Hill is the site invoked, then the reader is sent back to the mention/description/engagement with Sion Hill in Scripture. The use of conjunctions unsettles the readers in their encounter with familiar scriptural topoi and forces them to consider multiple interpretative options as they “investigate what the meaning of this [or that] allegorical [symbol] might be” (supra). To the extent that the invocations themselves avoid providing any final orientation, any stabilizing sense the reader might crave must be sought through a return to the scriptural sources.

In the opening invocation of Book I, by using the conjunction “or” to link alternative place names, Milton avoids privileging any one of the biblical holy sites associated with his divine addressee.

Sing Heav’nly Muse, that on the secret top  
Of Oreb, *or* of Sinai, didst inspire  
That shepherd who first taught the chosen Seed  
In the beginning how the heavens and earth  
Rose out of chaos; *or* if Sion hill  
Delight thee more, and Siloa’s brook that flowed  
Fast by the oracle of God, I thence  
Invoke thy aid (PL 1.6-13 my emphasis)

In the hesitancy of these lines Milton shows himself remaining faithful to both the scriptural record and to the variety of the scriptural record.<sup>356</sup> He shows himself open to the possibility, yet unwilling to presume, that the “Heav’nly Muse” would prefer to be invoked via Sion hill and Siloa’s brook, as sites associated with Jesus’s ministry, rather than via Mount Oreb or Sinai, as sites associated with the Mosaic dispensation. I do not disagree with the wealth of reference that

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<sup>356</sup> Thus, Steadman writes, “[t]he ambiguities that his readers have found in Milton’s Muse are analogous to those that he himself, in a different context, detected in both Old and New Testament references to Spirit” (*Milton’s Biblical and Classical Imagery* 80).

critics have found evoked by these holy sites. At the same time, however, considerable significance lies in the mere fact of their cornucopian collection. Visualized, their accumulation conjures an impossible jumbling together of monumental topographies suggestive of the vastness and variety of Scripture itself. Furthermore, in the “tentative,” and “conditional” *sur-vol* effected in these lines, the author appears to have refused to give either topographical or topical priority to the dispensation of either Greek or Hebrew Testament.

The holy mountains, burning bushes and fountains of prophecy are theophanic places beheld “by the eyes of the mind” (*Defence* 84.24–8) through the contemplative reading of Scripture. For Milton, as for Erasmus, it is in the writings of Scripture that one encounters “the living image of His holy mind and... Christ himself... so fully present that you would see less if you gazed upon Him with your very eyes” (*Paraclesis* 108).<sup>357</sup> Prophetic vision in Milton flows as “a streaming fountain... in a perpetual progression” out of Scripture, and it is the task of the prophetic interpreter to prevent the “sicken[ing]... of conformity and tradition” (CPW 2.543). Through their strategic equivocation, the invocations remove the familiar covering of pre-determined mute sense attendant upon the “vestigial holy places” that ought still to be communicating with, thus flowing forth for, mankind (“Milton’s Urania” 97).

The invocation to Book I identifies Milton’s “Heav’nly Muse” as the agent of Moses’ inspiration before proceeding to announce the work’s intention “to soar / Above th’Aonian mount, while it pursues / Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme” (PL 1.14-16).<sup>358</sup> Following

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<sup>357</sup> Citation from Erasmus’s *Paraclesis*, included within the prefatory material to Erasmus’s 1516 New Testament, transl. by John C. Olin in *Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Selected Writings of Erasmus*.

<sup>358</sup> While my reading of the invocatory proems concentrates upon scriptural and theological aspects, the irony of using a direct translation to announce the ambition to attempt “Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme” suggests that Milton does not wish for the reader of *Paradise Lost* to lose sight of its author’s quintessentially syncretic humanist culture. At the same time, by citing Ariosto in this way, Milton includes him among those he intends to

this announcement of intent, however, a curious thing happens—Milton seems to begin a second invocation, this time addressing the “Spirit.” An abbreviated and slightly modified citation will serve to highlight the parallels between these two invocations:

Sing Heav’nly Muse...I / Invoke thy aid .../ That...[I may] pursue[...] Things  
unattempted yet in prose or rhyme. (PL 1.6,12-16)  
And chiefly thou O Spirit, that dost prefer / Before all temples th’upright heart and  
pure / Instruct me, for thou know’st,.../ That.../ I may assert Eternal Providence, /  
And justify the ways of God to men. (PL 1. 17,19,24,-26)

In this appeal, the prophetic poet indirectly asserts his fitness for divine correspondence as a living temple for the accommodation and worship of divinity in accordance with scriptural prescription.<sup>359</sup> To identify “Muse” and “Spirit” as one and the same divine entity, the reader need only interpret the conjunctive phrase “[a]nd chiefly” as introducing the “chief” or foremost among the author’s requests. In such a reading, the apostrophe “O Spirit” is made not to introduce a new addressee but to interrupt and distinguish between the poet’s requests. The poet calls upon the Muse/Spirit, taken as a single objective referent, to witness its own preference for those who have cultivated purity and upright virtue.

The plausibility of their conflation notwithstanding, a reading of the Muse and Spirit (in Book I) as distinct entities and subject to two distinct invocations is more compelling, particularly when considering structural parallels between all three invocatory proems (to Books I, III, and VII) as a group. In this view, each proem involves a central pair of figures representing twin sources of prophetic knowledge within the godhead. Steadman does not appear to identify, as I do, the pairs of figures central to each of the invocatory proems as interchangeable variants

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overleap. As Lewalski notes, the translation is of the phrase “*Cosa non detta in prosa mai ne in rima*” from Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* (cited in *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms* 290 n.9.).

<sup>359</sup> Milton’s scriptural echoes in these lines include, 1 Cor 3:16 and Ps 125:4.

of a single fundamental pairing of divine qualities.<sup>360</sup> He does, however, come very close to doing so and, in fact, he provides two essential keys for such a reading. First, Steadman notes that the two preexistent sisters Wisdom and Urania represent “the ideal union of wisdom and poetry... analogous to the ideal combination of *sapientia et eloquentia*” (*Moral Fiction* 46).<sup>361</sup> Second, he notes that, in Book III, Milton’s heavenly Muse is credited with enabling the poet “to venture down / The dark descent and up to reascend,” but when “heightened intellectual vision is essential for beholding and relating the things of heaven; the poet appropriately addresses his prayer rather to ‘Celestial Light’ than to the muse of Celestial Song” (*PL* 3.19-20; *Moral Fiction* 50). Steadman thus suggests that, in Book III, Milton distinguishes between the heavenly Muse and holy Light precisely to the extent that this light represents “heightened intellectual vision” or knowledge of heavenly things rather than instruction in the means to descend and reascend in the *expression of things* both hellish and heavenly.<sup>362</sup>

To distinguish the “Heav’nly Muse” and “Spirit” of the invocatory proem of Book I, “chiefly thou” may be read as referring to the “chief” role that the “Spirit” plays in the poet’s instruction in divine knowledge. Playfully ambivalent, the adverb “chiefly” can also imply that the “Spirit” does not have an exclusive monopoly on “instruction” but rather shares this activity with the “Heav’nly Muse.” That divine knowledge is the object of instruction follows by virtue of the contiguity of instruction and knowledge in the phrasing of the request—“Instruct me, for

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<sup>360</sup> Steadman concludes that there is “considerable justification for regarding the first 26 lines of *Paradise Lost* as two distinct invocations to two different powers—the first, a personification of the gift of sacred utterance or ‘Celestial Song’; the second, God himself” (120). As the subsequent discussion will show, I disagree with the final form of Steadman’s reading in equating Milton’s “Spirit” and “God himself.” Steadman’s discussion of Milton’s Urania, however, is deeply impressive for both the range of its scholarship and the clarity with which it is selectively presented.

<sup>361</sup> As Steadman has noted, both David Masson and A.W. Verity read the invocatory proem of Bk.1 as involving “two separate invocations, to the muse and spirit respectively” (*Moral Fiction* n.9 175)

<sup>362</sup> Steadman’s “Celestial Light” refers to 3.51 which is a variation upon the initial “holy Light” of the opening apostrophe “Hail holy light, offspring of Heaven firstborn” (3.1).

thou know'st.” In other words, this reading infers a division of roles in which the “Spirit” holds the “chief” office of instruction while acknowledging that the actual differentiation of these roles is obscure.

The impression of a continuity of roles between the “Heav’nly Muse” and the “Spirit” is reinforced by their parallel with the figure of the preexistent sisters Urania and Wisdom in Book VII. The kinship of Urania and Wisdom entails a continuity of roles in keeping with the essential nature of poetic utterance as a combination of art and learning. E.R. Gregory observes that by joining Urania with Wisdom as preexistent daughters of God, Milton foregrounds two highly significant associations. First, Urania’s nature as a preexistent “‘poetical personification’ of Divine Art” suggests the ancient and popular “image of God as Artist”—the fathering source and author of all art just as he is the source and author of all wisdom (*Milton and the Muses* 120-1). Second, by placing the heavenly muse Urania with Wisdom in and before the beginning of Creation (in Book VII), Milton insists upon his earlier allusion (in Book I) to the poetic character of the Mosaic dispensation:

The poet-shepherd association... not only associates Moses with poetry, ...but [also] poetry with the greatest of the Old Testament teacher-prophets. (*Milton and the Muses* 121-2)

The harmonious, sisterly relationship between Wisdom and Urania, equally present in the beginning and equally pleasing to God, determines the relationship between their worldly manifestations. *Sapientia* and *eloquentia* are harmonious, sisterly faculties, equally present in the beginning and equally pleasing to God, embodied by the “heightened intellectual vision” of *theology* and the affectively persuasive vision of *poetry*.

In my reading, the “Heav’nly Muse” and “Spirit” (Bk I) are distinguished just as the “heavenly Muse” and “holy Light” are distinguished (Bk III), and just as Urania and Wisdom are

distinguished (Book VII). In each instance, Milton's divine pairings balance sapiential illumination with inspired utterance. As John Reichert proposes of Urania: "She is not Wisdom precisely, but as the "voice divine," she is so closely akin to her as to make them one." (*Milton's Wisdom* 226). Steadman's observations upon the relation between the two invocations, the first addressed to the Heav'nly Muse and the second to the Spirit, in the proem to Book I are perfectly to the point:

In its request for illumination [Milton's] invocation to the Spirit [Bk I] shows greater affinity with the subsequent appeal to 'celestial Light' [Bk III] than with the initial address to the Heavenly Muse, and the instruction he asks from the Spirit [Bk I] belongs properly to the province of Eternal Wisdom [Bk VII] rather than to that of her sister Urania. In function and office, the "Spirit" of line 7 ["And chiefly thou O Spirit"] bears a closer resemblance to divine wisdom and the inner light than to the Muse. From the one he implores 'knowledge'; from the other, appropriate 'utterance'. (*Milton's Biblical and Classical Imagery* 116)

That some manner of identification pertains between the "Heav'nly Muse," "heavenly Muse," and "Urania" as the heavenly source of inspired utterance is more or less obvious. As Steadman notes, however, "Spirit," "holy Light," and "Wisdom" also bear a close, albeit not obvious, resemblance in their connection as Milton's sources of illuminating knowledge. By tentatively identifying "Spirit," "holy Light," and "Wisdom," my argument is not seeking to resolve and thereby minimize the variety or copia of Milton's figures but rather to stress their homologous function in relation to the poet's self and his prophetic work.

### **Prophetic Equivocation: Heavenly Muse and Holy Light**

In the apostrophe to "holy light" that opens the invocatory proem of the third book, Milton again employs the equivocating conjunction "or," this time to link alternative figurative accounts of

Creation.<sup>363</sup> Here, as before in the proem to Book I, Milton preempts determinative reading. In this instance Milton's equivocation concerns doctrinally freighted biblical metaphors and concepts (such as light, primogeniture, coeternal divinity) in combination with descriptive phrases echoing a variety of Old Testament and New Testament passages. Like the topographical sites of the first proem, the metaphors and concepts employed within the apostrophe in Book III represent a gathering of disparate elements from disparate places in Scripture.<sup>364</sup> The equivocating apostrophe of Book III bristles with numinous complexity:

Hail holy light, offspring of Heaven firstborn;  
Or of the eternal coeternal beam  
May I express thee unblamed, since God is light,  
And never but in unapproached light  
Dwelt from eternity, dwelt then in thee,  
Bright effluence of bright essence increate?  
Or hear'st thou rather pure ethereal stream,  
Whose fountain who shall tell? (PL 3.1-8)

Milton's fluid, equivocating formulae invite contemplative inquiry while cautioning the reader against attempting to arrest the referential movement of the passage. The apostrophe, in other words, resists the readers' efforts to fix its phrasing within any single, monolithic conceptual place.

In the first reading of Milton's apostrophe to "holy light" those familiar with the commonplaces of Christianity will register an implicit apostrophizing of the Son. Thus, W.B. Hunter writes, "I think that the collocation of the two images light-sun and stream-fountain reveals that Milton had in mind the identification of this Holy Light with the Son of God" ("Milton's Muse" 149). On the face of it, I do not disagree. I think that Milton was very likely to

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<sup>363</sup> The apostrophe forms the opening of the invocatory proem to Book III. The invocation proper forms the concluding five lines (51-55) of this proem.

<sup>364</sup> There are, to be sure, plentiful echoes of the classical tradition but Milton emphatically subordinates them to the scriptural topoi of which they thereby become the vestigial reflections.

have this identification in mind and to have anticipated that this identification would be uppermost in the minds of his then-contemporary English readership. The weight of Christian tradition naturally inclines towards a privileging of the Greek Scripture and of creedal doctrine as interpretative keys to scriptural figures. Paul identifies Christ with “the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (1.Cor.1.24 GNV). The Nicene Creed identifies Christ with “Light after Light.” The Johannine prologue assimilates Hebrew scriptural characterizations of Wisdom and light to its description of Christ as Logos. Finally, the church Fathers not infrequently describe the relation of the Son to the Father using both the light and fountain metaphors that Milton employs in his invocation. Readers in both Milton’s time and our own, conditioned to privilege Christ as divine signified, have ample reason for inclining towards an interpretation of Milton’s apostrophe to “holy Light” as referring primarily if not exclusively to Christ.

In terms of contemporary criticism, William B. Hunter’s conclusion concerning the identity of Milton’s “holy light” in his essay “Milton’s Muse” is representative of a genre of erudite interpretations that treat Milton’s invocatory proems as doctrinal puzzles. While Hunter has much revised the arguments of “Milton’s Muse” in a more recent work written collaboratively with Stevie Davies, I will nevertheless cite the former essay here because it provides a perfect illustration of the type of reading that I believe Milton’s poetic method both anticipates and labours to undermine. Hunter writes,

Let us make an end of the matter. Just as the Father dwells in the Holy Light of the opening of Book 3 which is the “Bright effluence” of his own “bright essence,” so his power and virtue are made manifest in the Son. In all of the invocations in *Paradise Lost* Milton is praying for help from the Spirit, that is, from the virtue and power of the Father as they are manifested in the Son, whom he addresses variously as Holy Light, as Spirit, and as Urania... Since the Incarnation, man calls upon God only through Christ... There is nothing in the least revolutionary or surprising here: Protestants of all persuasions have always prayed to the Father “in the name of Thy Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.” (156)

In terms of its own logic, Hunter's interpretation is sound. But that is the problem—Hunter is trying to definitively reduce Milton's invocation to a single fixed doctrinal sense even if it means entirely ignoring the language and feeling of Milton's text. Hunter equates Holy Light, Spirit and Urania and suggests that all of these may refer to the Son in glaring disregard for the contradictions of gender and number that this would involve.

As one reads and re-reads Milton's apostrophe to holy Light, it becomes progressively more difficult to imagine that a stable, unequivocal solution such as Hunter proposes could possibly explain or even vaguely resemble the unrelentingly fluid equivocation of Milton's varied apostrophic formulae. As J.A. Wittreich writes,

[T]he prophet employs a series of strategies...[including] generic mixture... designed... to bring before the eye what it has not been able to see before.... Both the obscurity of prophecy and its allusiveness are calculated to generate an antagonistic relationship between the prophet and his audience... [s]ince his responsibility is to shake men loose from the orthodoxies to which they subscribe. ("A Poet Among Poets" 105)

Hunter expresses the wish to "make an end of the matter" but to do that he has to bring in his own matter—the Father, power and virtue in the Son, the Spirit as the virtue and power from the Father, the Incarnation, universal man, Christ, Protestants of all persuasions—and he has to build a static structure entirely alien to the spirit of Milton's apostrophe. The apostrophe taken on its own terms, however, will decidedly not "make an end of the matter." Instead it will hesitantly, tentatively, doubtfully and delicately recite multiple traditions of address, and it will return again and again to interrogative formulas questioning their suitability.

The opening line of the apostrophe is dramatic. Milton's "Hail" functions both as a greeting with respect to "holy Light" and as an exhortation to his reader to join him in seeing, and thereby to bear witness to, the phenomenon he is about to profess. Again, for a readership

familiar with the commonplaces of Christianity, the first association of “holy Light” is likely to be with Christ as the “light of the world” and “light of life” in John 8:12. But if the association of “holy Light” with the Son will have been a natural, almost reflexive response, the initial “Hail” will also have naturally suggested Gabriel’s greeting of Mary:

Haile, thou that art freely beloved: thy Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. (Luc. 1.28 GNV).

Milton’s initial “Hail” does not silence the Johannine suggestion of Christ’s part in Milton’s “holy Light.” Nevertheless, the feminine associations of the initial greeting serve as a cue or signal alerting the reader to the possibility that feminine gender may be a meaningful factor within the apostrophe’s construction of sense. Indeed, in its designation of Mary, a woman who is beloved of God, the Lucan “Hail” may prompt consideration of another heavenly figure beloved of God—the feminine Wisdom, of whom it is written, “the Lord of all things loveth her” (Wisdom 8:3 GNV). Given the obvious analogy between the “heavenly Muse” (Book III) and Urania (Book VII), an analogy between an allusively feminized “holy Light” (Book III) and Wisdom (Book VII) seems likely. This pairing would suggest that as Wisdom is sister to Urania, so holy Light is kin to the heavenly Muse.

The feminine Wisdom, considered as *adiaphora*, is a particularly interesting scriptural figure for poetic manipulation. First, she is not considered to be a divine person (of the order of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit) and this allows for greater comparative freedom in terms of her poetic development. Second, she plays an important scriptural role in relation to prophecy and, consequently, through her careful cultivation the poet may arrogate for himself something of that prophetic dimension. Third, Wisdom is fully assimilated into the figure of Christ within Johannine and Pauline texts as well as within later exegetical tradition, but the precise nature of

this enfolding is unclear within the Greek Scripture. Thus, not only her nature, but the nature of her relation to prophecy and to the Christian godhead itself is open to speculative elaboration.

Scriptural descriptions of the feminine Wisdom within the Hebrew Bible provide a host of source-texts to which Milton's invocatory descriptions of "holy Light" bear striking resemblance. Milton describes "holy Light" as the "offspring of Heaven firstborn." Ecclesiasticus records Wisdom's "creat[ion] before all things" (1.4 GNV) Milton tentatively claims that the "holy Light" he is apostrophizing is the same "unapproached light" in which God has "Dwelt from eternity." He thereby appears to echo both Ecclesiasticus, proclaiming that "wisdome... hath bene ever with him" (1.1), and the Wisdom of Solomon, that "she is the brightnes of the everlasting light, the undefiled mirroure of the maiestie of God, and the image of his goodnes" (7.26 GNV). To be an "undefiled mirroure" of God, nothing but God may be reflected. Thus, as "unapproached light," noone but God has "been ever" with her. Milton further apostrophizes "holy Light" as both "[b]right effluence of bright essence" and "pure ethereal stream." Again, these phrases appear to echo the Wisdom of Solomon when it declares that Wisdom is the "brightnes of the everlasting light" and also a "pure influence that floweth from the glorie of the Almighty" (7:26,25 GNV). While avoiding identical repetition of apocryphal source-texts as well as any explicit identification of his "holy Light" with the feminine Wisdom, Milton appears to weave enough allusive echoes into his apostrophe to suggest their intimate association if not their total identification.

The final line of Milton's apostrophe to "holy Light"—"Whose fountain who shall tell?—reiterates the cautionary message of the preceding equivocations. "The worde of God moste high" is given in Scripture as a "fountaine of wisdome" whose streaming course may not be told: that is, it may not be determined in fixed and final doctrinal interpretations, for there is

no end to the telling (Ecclesiasticus 1.4 GNV). Precisely because there is no end to its telling, the fountain of Scripture must be told again and again by a succession of prophetic voices. And this may be why—within the same unbroken line—the question, “who shall tell?” opens immediately into Milton’s re-telling and re-citation of all that he has been instructed with respect to “holy Light”: “Before the sun, / Before the Heavens thou wert” (PL 1.8-9).

Milton’s “holy Light” shares with the feminine Wisdom of the Hebrew Scripture the contradictory qualities of being pre-existent (“Before the Sun, / Before the Heavens”) and the first of God’s works (“offspring of Heaven firstborn”).<sup>365</sup> Milton’s “Holy Light” is also described performing a role in Creation which mirrors that of Wisdom when “Before the Heavens ... and at the voice / Of God ... [she] didst invest / The rising world of waters dark and deep. (PL 3.9-11). The interaction of “holy Light” with the “voice / Of God” clearly suggests a distinction between “holy Light” and the Son/Logos who utters Creation. By the same token, identifying the “voice / of God” with the Son enables a reading of Milton’s “holy Light” as intimately associated with, if not identical to, Wisdom—at least for all those Christian readers who consider the Son to be the agent of Creation depicted in Proverbs 8:

When he prepared the heavens, I was there, when he set the compass upon the  
depe. (8:27 GNV)

When he gave his decree to the Sea, that the waters shulde not passe his  
commandement: when he appointed the fundacions of the earth. (8:29 GNV)

Milton’s “holy Light” is “Before the Heavens” much like Wisdom is “there” “[w]hen he prepared the heavens.” Similarly, Milton’s “holy Light” bears auditory witness to “the voice / of God” much like Wisdom bears auditory witness “[w]hen he gave his decree.” This host of

parallels is too consistent to be ignored and seems to argue strongly for the identification of the holy Light of Book III and Wisdom of Book VII.

Holy Light and Wisdom are functionally identical yet Milton chooses not to openly identify them. In the final analysis, the relation of sisterhood cannot be properly applied to holy Light for the simple reason that holy Light is not a personification. This basic fact pushes the reader to consider what, given the apparently perfect functional homology between the two figures, this difference might mean. It has already been mentioned that Milton distinguished the Wisdom of Proverbs 8 from the divine person of Christ on the grounds of Wisdom's being simply a "poetical personification of wisdom"—which is to say, the divine wisdom integral to and always possessed by God. One consequence of this position with respect to traditional Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Scripture, is that the conventional feminine form by which divine Wisdom is represented may be considered arbitrary in much the same manner that Athena's adoption of the aspect of Mentos (when approaching Telemachus in the *Odyssey*) may be considered an arbitrary affectation of the grey-eyed goddess.

The variously dissimilar pairs of figures in each of the three invocatory proems are meaningfully correspondent in their communication of prophetic utterance and illuminated knowledge. The Homeric analogy remains instructive. Telemachus is correct to surmise that Athena speaks to him in the form of Mentos. But she might have appeared altogether differently. When she encounters Odysseus in the magnificent port city of Phaeacia she appears as a local girl. When she takes her leave of sandy Pylos it is in the form of a sea eagle. The guise of Mentos, being arbitrary, is sufficient to the communication of Athena's divinity in that precise instant. Telemachus would be a fool to imagine that Athena's divinity was eternally or essentially dependant upon this particular cipher. The guise she has adopted in her first encounter

with Telemachus is only essential because she knows it is the guise fitted to the occasion, the guise by which he may be made to understand her instruction.

The various and variously dissimilar guises that Milton lends to his divine, dual sources of prophetic knowledge and eloquence are sufficient to communicating a particular aspect of their underlying divinity. Milton's paired figures—like the masquing Athena—will not permit unequivocal identification. Even where identification is closest to certainty, as with the “Heav’nly Muse” of Book I and the “heavenly Muse” of Book III, the irritant of minor, orthographic equivocation insists upon the provisional nature of that identification. The equivocation of their varying descriptions serves Milton's purpose of mimetic fidelity: they speak only honour of the divinity they name by declaring, not that the one “Heav’nly Muse” is to be distinguished from the other “heavenly Muse,” but that the sign of neither, *in truth*, can fully convey the reality from which it issues. Instead, each of these scripturally derived heavenly guises is answerable or formed with respect to a faithful understanding. Each one is lovingly made—essential to the reader's capacity for understanding, and sufficient to the godhead's will to be known.

As Maureen Quilligan notes, “[w]hen Milton first thought of writing a drama of the fall, he posed himself a difficult... problem: how to present events that happened before the fall” (129). One of Milton's early answers, she goes on to write, was “a traditional debate among three of the four allegorical “daughters of God”—Justice, Mercy, and Wisdom—on what “should become of man if he fall” (129).<sup>366</sup> The staging of three allegorical daughters of God appeared to

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<sup>366</sup> The four sisters of these medieval allegorical traditions (mounting back to Hugo of St. Victor and Bernard of Clairvaux) are elaborations of the four figures of Psalm 85:10 as daughters of God: “Mercy and truth shall meet, righteousness and peace shall kiss *one another*” (GNV). Mercy, Truth, Justice, and Peace all appear in “On the Morning of Christ's Nativity.”

Milton a fit means to represent “events that happened before the fall.” Wisdom and her sisters appeared to be particularly suitable for this purpose precisely as icastic imagery, that is, as symbolic figures capable of imitating “true things... [that] *need never have been apprehended by the senses*” (“Milton and the Rhetoric of Prophecy” 173). Milton possessed and deployed the Christian Humanist grammarian’s acute attentiveness to scriptural language. Alert to the nuances of prophetic rhetoric and wishing to faithfully imitate Wisdom’s scriptural representation, a poet such as Milton might not only be concerned with reproducing the feminine and anthropomorphic traits present in the Hebrew Scripture. Such a poet might also be concerned with reproducing something of the nature of the Hebrew Wisdom as icastic image, thereby paying tribute to an icastic particularity of God’s image in Hebrew Scripture. Thus, Milton’s holy Light revives and illuminates an aspect of the mental image of God projected in Scripture which the apostolic authors and their subsequent interpreters, ignoring particularities of gender and number, and folding Wisdom(s) into Christ, had obscured.

### **Wisdom(s)**

It remains to explore the meaning that Milton declares is not in the name of Urania. The proem to Book VII opens in invocation:

Descend from Heaven, Urania, by that name  
If rightly thou art called, whose voice divine  
Following, above the Olympian hill I soar,  
Above the flight of Pegasean wing.  
The meaning, not the name I call: for thou  
Nor of the muses nine nor on the top  
Of old Olympus dwell’st, but heavenly born,  
Before the hills appeared or fountain flowed,  
Thou with eternal Wisdom didst converse,

Wisdom thy sister, and with her didst play  
In presence of the almighty Father, pleased  
With thy celestial song. (PL 7.1-12)

After an initial equivocation over the appropriateness of the name Urania to the divine reality he invokes, Milton proceeds to a second in which he declaims—to his Muse and readers alike—that it is “[t]he meaning, not the name, [he] calls.” Renewing his equivocation a third time, Milton firmly denies that the Urania of his invocation has her origin among the pagan Muses and ascribes to her, instead, the pre-existent genesis of Wisdom in Proverbs 8.

The opening equivocation anticipates the reader’s misgivings. The conjunction “if” seems to introduce the poet’s uncertainty regarding the appropriateness of a fiction in which a pagan goddess is called down from a Christian Heaven. But Milton’s equivocations are not merely the expressions of inward misgivings humbly proclaimed. They are the proudly humble, instructive and exemplary inward misgivings of the prophetic interpreter who brings remedy to the “muddy pool of conformity and tradition” (CPW 2.543).

The opening equivocation tenders an archly provocative question—“what’s in a name?” And because Milton, cognizant of the rarity of fit readers (PL 7.31), is speaking in anticipation of not being heard, he proceeds to tell an all but heretical fiction whose partial aim would seem to be the disabusing of his audience’s misguided faith in a name. Milton’s tale concerns the pre-existent genesis of a pagan and Greek Urania together with the feminine Wisdom of the Hebrew Bible. Urania represents the Christianized secular poetic tradition while Wisdom represents the Christianized Mosaic and Davidic theological tradition. Yet Milton’s figure presents them together, born together, before all creation, conversing and playing in intimate companionship in “the presence of th’ Almighty Father.” Milton’s tale assigns scriptural divinity—that is, divinity professed and witnessed in Scripture—to one who resembles nothing so much as the “empty

dream” of a pagan idolatry. (PL 7.9) Then Milton goes one better as he recounts how God himself approved the sisters’ song. If the reader is inclined to object to Milton’s fiction, that same fiction sets the reader’s displeasure against the pleasure of “th’ Almighty Father.”

Milton’s invocatory genesis tale provokes the doctrinaire reader’s objection to a poet allowing a pagan muse to masquerade in Scripture. The oddity in such provocation, however, lies in Milton’s repeated, prior convictions of Homer for “writing undecent things of the Gods” (CPW 1:891). The tremendous importance Milton elsewhere and persistently accords to mimetic fidelity—the requirement of participation by which the poet must always speak only honour of the high perfections he praises—suggests that Milton’s provocative show of blame is an invitation to discover an unguessed-at purity.

In describing the genesis and pre-existence of Urania, Milton follows the account in Proverbs.<sup>367</sup> He even appears to repeat parts of the scriptural text verbatim.<sup>368</sup> Milton thus takes pains to show his readership that he is following Scripture closely. The reader is being prompted to wonder first, what the meaning—that meaning not expressed by the name—behind “Urania” might be. And then, since Milton is being so particularly careful with his imitation of scriptural passages, the reader is prompted to wonder what meaning might be gleaned from Scripture that might possibly make sense of Urania’s anomalous apparition.

As noted above, there are scriptural grounds for Milton’s fashioning of a sister for the Hebrew Wisdom. Both Proverbs 1.20 and Proverbs 9.1 contain plural forms of the Hebrew noun for Wisdom. In the Geneva edition (1560), the translation of both of these passages makes no

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<sup>367</sup> Genesis: Urania is described as “heav’nly born.” Pre-existence: “Before the hills... [Urania] with eternal Wisdom didst converse.”

<sup>368</sup> “Before the hills appeared, or fountain flowed,” repeats “before the hills” (Prov. 8.25 GNV) and the “fountains” of “when there were no fountains abounding with water” (Prov. 8.24 GNV).

mention of the plural form: “Wisdom cryeth without: she uttereth her voyce in the streetes” (Prov. 1.20). The marginal gloss on this verse reads only, “This wisdom is the eternal worde of God.” The second verse reads, “Wisdom hath buylt her house, & hewen out her seven pillars” (Prov. 9.1 GNV). The marginal gloss on this verse reads, “Christ hath prepared him a Church.” For readers like Milton, readers who were competently familiar with the peculiarities of the Hebrew text, the plural form of Wisdom in such places of Scripture retained its significance. By way of analogy, English translators of the seventeenth centuries had not yet discovered the rules governing the Hebrew poetry of the Psalms—yet they did not, for this reason, consider the Psalms’ poetic form to be insignificant. The copious invention of the Sidney Psalter was, at least in part, a reverent acknowledgement of the unsounded significance of the rules of Hebrew poetry. The Hebrew Scripture, in other words, continued to be a theologically and poetically productive site of mystery in the seventeenth century.

The genesis of Wisdom in Proverbs is the source Milton proposes for “the meaning” of his muse. Urania and Wisdom are generated from shared scriptural sources as symbolic representations of prophetic utterance and divine understanding. The rooting in Scripture of the twinned figure of Urania and Wisdom suggests that the qualities by which Urania is to be known—the qualities by which she will be discovered in *Paradise Lost*—also flow from the scriptural sources she shares with Wisdom. Indeed, in addition to places in Scripture representing multiple Wisdoms, there are places in Scripture where Wisdom is explicitly represented accompanied by a sister. In Ecclesiasticus, a verse relating the genesis of Wisdom has her accompanied by Prudence, a second, pre-existent personification of divine understanding: “Wisdom hath bene created before all things, and the understanding of prudence from everlasting” (1.4 GNV). As Harris Francis Fletcher has noted,

[T]he commentary of Ben Gerson... has, in [its] treatment of the Spirit of Wisdom [in Proverbs 8], anticipated Milton's two accompanying Spirits, one of whom was Wisdom. Ben Gerson stated that God had with him at Creation not only Wisdom ... but also Understanding... [and] Understanding... was very like Wisdom... but they were not identical. (*Rabbinical Readings* 111)

The association of Wisdom and Prudence (or Understanding) was thus an established feature of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Milton's adoption of the Greek name Urania, of course, necessarily differentiates his figure in some way from the Hebrew Understanding. Nevertheless, in placing his Urania in the role of the Hebrew Understanding or Prudence Milton makes clear the nature of his sisters' relation. Taken apart, the two sisters represent different functions with respect to the instruction of the poet in terms of divine knowledge and divine eloquence. Taken together, the two near identical sisters are co-participating aspects of the simple unity and plenitude of the divine mind.

Distinct from the will, yet functioning to direct, and guide, and measure moral behaviour,<sup>369</sup> the Hebrew Prudence is akin not only to Urania but also to the Miltonic Father's gift to human beings, "place[d] within them as a guide / [His] Umpire Conscience, whom if they will hear, / Light after light well us'd they shall attain, / And to the end persisting, safe arrive" (PL .192-5). The single most important feature distinguishing prudence and wisdom, as far as Milton's invocatory proems are concerned, is her practical or applied character. (*Milton Encyclopedia* 173) Like the Father's "Conscience" prudence does not effect right choice but rather provides the information and guidance adequate to the making of such choice.

Considered as a primary source for Urania, Prudence not only accounts for the relation of Wisdom and Urania as sisters but also—as Prudence and Wisdom together represent the full

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<sup>369</sup> The *Milton Encyclopedia* refers to Thomas Aquinas' defining of Prudence as "an intellectual virtue in its essence... but a moral virtue with regard to its subject matter" (173).

understanding—for the manner in which Wisdom and Urania and their analogue figures (Spirit/Heav’nly Muse ; holy Light/heavenly Muse) seem to alternate between full differentiation and conflated identity. Somewhat paradoxically, the employment of Prudence as one of the central sources for Wisdom’s sister also provides a reason for Milton’s choosing to invoke the name “Urania.” If Prudence is that power of understanding by which one recognizes the right use of things, then she is precisely the power that has led Milton to pursue the ancient office of poet from whence to sing “[t]hings unattempted yet in prose or rhyme” (PL 1.16).

With Urania as doublet, Milton has offered what could be interpreted as his own reverent acknowledgement of the unsounded significance of the Hebrew Wisdom’s grammatical articulations. To the extent that Urania’s person bears witness to willfully overlooked signs in Scripture and to the extent that her qualities are drawn from the scriptural accounts of Wisdom herself, Milton could paradoxically claim to have remained within and to have added nothing to Scripture—nothing save a foreign (Greek) name bearing testimony to a foreign (Hebrew) sign still stranger to local (English Protestant) custom. This is not to say that Milton hasn’t really added anything to Scripture or to imagine that Urania is not to some extent a poet’s Trojan horse. As Fish writes of the *Apology*, “Milton is continually alert to the danger of reifying some external form into the repository of truth and value” (*How Milton Works* 192).<sup>370</sup> If the primary threat is for scriptural understanding to “sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition”

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<sup>370</sup> Curiously, Fish appears to reify the feminine form as the site of Milton’s fear. Thus, Fish writes, “Urania is at first recognized without hesitation, but her identity is then blurred in a gesture of apparent scrupulousity (“The meaning, not the Name I call”...) that allows the issue of her gender, and with it the threat of female aggression, to remain unfronted” (*How Milton Works* 290). I find it difficult to see how Milton’s figure of Urania allows female aggression to remain unfronted. I also find it difficult to see the aspect of female aggression in Urania’s representation. By naming his heavenly muse “Urania,” Milton both confronts and forces his reader to confront the question of gender and its relation to Milton’s unorthodox, yet scripturally sound representation of the Christian godhead.

(CPW 2.543), then Milton's insertion of Urania into the biblical narrative may be seen as cautionary and remedial rather than either extravagant or irreverent. To figure a preexistent Urania as sister to the Hebrew Wisdom is to force upon his readers a vigilance, with respect to the risk of reification and sickening of sense, properly practiced at all times. By insisting that it is "the meaning, not the name" that he calls through Urania, Milton urges the recognition in his readers that it is always "the meaning, [and] not the name," and always the new meaning that will present itself, which one calls when one calls upon the truth of Scripture.

The Urania that Milton has fashioned in his invocatory proem to Book VII is a symbol for Milton's recognition of divine poetic calling.<sup>371</sup> What makes this ostensibly pagan muse a particularly appropriate symbol for Milton's prophetic poetic method, however, is her radical conversion as a figure of divine scriptural praise. In the person of Urania, Milton has paradoxically exegeted and faithfully imitated sisterly, manifold, and contradictory aspects of Wisdom signaled by the grammatical discrepancy of Wisdom's plural form and by the glossed over intricacies of narrative detail resistant to the doctrinal narrowing of God's copious revelation. Urania, whose name Milton immediately declares superceded by the very meaning it conceals ("the meaning, not the name I call"), stands as the outward sign of this heroic work of renewal. The prophetic power by which Milton effects this renewal of the sources of Scripture

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<sup>371</sup> While I am aware of the idea, argued by Stanley Fish, that Milton's qualification of "the meaning, not the name" could be interpreted as withdrawing the gendered identity of Milton's Muse (thereby avoiding "a heresy, identifying the source of his inspiration as female" (*How Milton Works* 288) I remain unconvinced. I see no reason why Milton would have imagined it heretical to receive inspiration from the Hebrew Wisdom... there is clearly abundant scriptural precedent. Nor am I convinced either that in challenging the name of Urania it is the particularity of gender that is being challenged or that gender is somehow especially contrary to the spirit of a "God-centred universe," or that the narrator invoking Urania displays "a fear of the female that is unmistakably a form of castration anxiety" (*How Milton Works* 288), or that Milton represents Urania as "a figure who must be at once pushed away and mastered" (*How Milton Works* 298). A similar argument for Milton's ambivalent view of Urania in light of his "apparent anxiety concerning female sexuality" is also advanced by Jeffrey S. Shoulson in *Milton and the Rabbis: Hebraism, Hellenism, & Christianity*, p. 158.

has its laborious roots in a humanist education. For Milton, after Erasmus, the cultivation of virtue (both moral and intellectual) through the imitation of exemplary models within *bonae litterae* prepared, enriched and perfected the understanding to such a degree that it might be worthy of pursuing a like course in scriptural imitation. Urania, as the pagan goddess of Christian poets, stands as the outward sign of this heroic method of ordinary-extraordinary prophetic instruction in which the living, flowing truth of Scripture is faithfully fulfilled through eloquent *copia*. From Genesis, to Job, to Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon, source-texts flow into the invocatory proems. An exemplary display of humanist imitation, the scriptural Creation narrative and Milton's manifold sources remain recognizable within apostrophe and invocation even while each and every detail has been touched and transmuted and the whole, from heavenly flowers to honey divine, wholly transformed.

In the coordinated construction of Urania as Milton's own heavenly muse, and of Moses as this same heavenly muse's first poet-shepherd pupil, Milton aligns himself with the tradition of biblical prophets. At the same time, Milton requests his muse's assistance not merely in following Moses but in soaring above the Aonian mount of Grecian inspiration while pursuing things unattempted by all. The idea of soaring far above the sacred mountain-tops representing the previous accomplishments of one's greatest antecedents has an interesting precedent in Erasmus's description of Christ as antitype to the great leaping, lyre-playing, prophetic teacher Idythun:

Between the angels, the seraphim and cherubim, the mountains are high, but even these did not stop that wonderful Idythun; even over these did the Son of God leap. Before the Law there existed mountains of exceptional prominence, such as Job, Melchizedek, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Moses, too, was an outstanding mountain and so were the other prophets, but on none of them did the Lord rest.... bounding over all the wise men of this world as if they were little hills.  
(*Exposition of Psalm 38* 17)

In establishing continuity between his own poetic production and the tradition of biblical prophets Milton represents his intent to overleap the feats of the classical tradition. As Steadman writes, “[b]y linking his Muse with the divine Wisdom of the Old Testament, who had been “brought forth” before the fountains and the hills (Proverbs viii. 22-31), Milton accentuate[s] her superiority to the Olympian muses both in antiquity [*antiquitas*] and in nobility of origin [*dignitas*]”(*Milton’s Biblical and Classical Imagery* 84). At the same time, Milton also seizes upon and impressively deploys a postulate central to the Erasmian ideal of lettered Christianity. By identifying Moses as an inspired poet-shepherd and binding the latter’s prophetic teaching to the artistry of the heavenly muse they share, Milton proposes the most authoritative illustration conceivable for the poet’s prophetic office that *Paradise Lost* fulfills, a scriptural illustration drawn from those “ancient times [when] poets and theologians were held to be the same people” (*Ratio* 74).

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion

As a result of the University of Toronto's edition of the *Complete Works of Erasmus* (in English translation) the great Dutch Humanist has become far more readily accessible to English literary scholars. Strangely, given the pan-cultural influence of Erasmus (from grammar schools, through universities, to parish church lecterns and sermons) and the ubiquitous presence of Erasmian works in sixteenth century England, the study of Erasmian influence upon early-modern English poetry is largely uncharted territory. I believe that this dissertation has substantiated Gregory Dodds' appraisal that Erasmian works ushered in "a new era of ... literary production" (5). I also believe, however, that it has only begun to scratch the surface of Erasmian literary influence in the early-modern period.

What Erasmian Christian Humanism did so powerfully was to take the late-medieval emphasis upon the affective and transformative nature of scriptural language and scriptural truth and to tie it to an ideal and an educational model of understanding and eloquence. The humanists celebrated and imitated divine eloquence, as it appeared both in Scripture and in the providential dispensation of pagan *bonae litterae*, for it was in the participatory understanding and expression of His revelatory presence in language that one most closely approached and resembled God as Logos.

In *The Antibarbarians*, Erasmus effectively proposed the assimilation of pagan learning as a requirement of Christian historical consciousness. His New Testament, *Annotations*, and *Paraphrases* transformed the practice of theology. But Erasmus's theological method threatened the dogmatic authority of all save the grammarian's clan of school-masters and poets.

Admittedly, Erasmus stopped short of offering a brief for the right use of poetry. Nevertheless, by adapting the poet's art to theological teaching, he established a powerfully influential precedent for the theological poetics of Edmund Spenser and John Milton.

## **Spenser**

Spenser followed Christian Humanist example in harvesting eloquent learning from the great stores of pagan, yet providentially supplied, *bonae litterae*. The topical priorities of the New Poet, however, were as different from those of Erasmus as were the foci of their personal lives. Papal dispensations freed Erasmus from the monastic obligations he found so loathsome, but he nevertheless remained a member of the Canons Regular of St. Augustine (having joined their house at Steyn in 1488), and cultivated his own peculiar brand of scholarly monastic discipline in the wider context of a cosmopolitan life in letters. No Church structure carried forward an institutional version of Erasmus's particular vision of Christianity and yet, as one of the most ubiquitous and influential authorities within English Reformation culture, his classical, scriptural, and patristic works supplied English scholarship far beyond his own lifetime. Spenser, for his part, was twice married, father to half a dozen children, and celebrated a sanctified Eros while consistently exalting the institution of marriage in his works. For Spenser, whose life was anchored in familial domesticity, Christian virtue required fleshing out through the trials of worldly experience. Appropriating both the traditional auctore's and the then-contemporary humanist grammarian's role as teacher of moral philosophy, he consistently emphasized the ethico-didactic prerogative of poetry. The "sage and serious Spenser" anticipated Milton's

ambition to author poetry “doctrinal to a nation” by framing fictions designed to instruct queen, court, and country.

Uppermost on Spenser’s agenda, however, was exalting the office of English poetry. Consistent with the Christian Humanist conception of pagan *bonae litterae* as dispensation of divine providence, Spenser’s synthetic works enfolded the metaphorical inspiration of pagan auctores within the literal, participatory inspiration of the Logos. In *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion* a divine Eros, placed in service of the Reformation ideal of marriage, transports the poet heavenward. In the spectacular pagan/Christian synthesis of *The Fowre Hymnes* the archetypal union of Christ and Sapience within the transcendent bosom of the Father not only mirrors the union of Cupid and Venus and the sanctified ideal of Reformation marriage but, in the act of divine praise, provides the ultimate justification for the poet’s vocation of amatory verse.

Spenser was proficient at using the Christian Humanists’ grammatical hermeneutics to engage scriptural texts and topoi in order to achieve the ambitious ends of his divine poetry. The assimilative contestation of the pagan Eros tradition within *The Fowre Hymnes* expands both the popular conception of Christian godhead and the language proper to its celebratory description. Consistent with the Christian Humanist idea that “[e]verything in the pagan world that was valiantly done, brilliantly said, ingeniously thought, diligently transmitted, had been prepared by Christ for his society,” Spenser “give[s] right honour to the heavenly Maker of [those] maker[s]” who were made the providential sowers and cultivators of His cornucopian harvest (*Antibarbarians* 60; *Defence* 86).

Spenser fashioned Sapience under the adiaphoric sign of *Sermo*, which is to say within the cultural accommodation created by the Erasmian Humanist conception of God as copious discourse. The Christian Humanist idea of a God who chooses to be revealed not only in

Scripture and the works of Nature but in the colloquy of eloquent interpretation serves to authorize Spenser's (and later Milton's) poetic exploitation of inter-Testamental grammatical ambivalence.

The vision of Sapience in the "Hymn to Heavenly Beauty" constitutes an exegetical conceit involving the feminine Hebrew Wisdom's explication (or unfolding) from within the Greek Scripture's preexistent Christ-Logos narrative.<sup>372</sup> Spenser's descriptions of Sapience's role in Creation fell safely within the parameters of adiaphoric flexibility while revealing the Greek Scripture's assimilation of Wisdom's agency for the (Pauline and Johannine) rhetorical sleight of hand that it was.<sup>373</sup> If Paul and John's exegeses had folded Wisdom into their depictions of the pre-existent Son, Spenser's exegetical conceit unfolded these de-eroticized figures, bringing Wisdom back out upon the scriptural stage and re-assigning to her the essential part she was given to play within the Hebrew Bible.

The prophetic poetic persona Spenser adopted in *The Fowre Hymnes* was analogous to that of the Erasmian spiritual bishop and *theodidaktos* whose heart has been prepared through the diligent assimilation of sacred letters, whose "eye of faith... perceive[s] nothing but the things of heaven," and whom the Spirit has graced with the gift of prophetic utterance (*Ratio* 76). For Erasmus's critics, his theological method threatened to provide "scriptural ground for [the] radical reformation of Christological and trinitarian theology" (Coogan 113).<sup>374</sup> Erasmus's *Sermo* highlighted the significance that points of grammar could have with respect to biblical

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<sup>372</sup> The most striking example of the assimilation or enfolding of the Hebrew Wisdom within the Christ-Logos occurs in the Johannine prologue.

<sup>373</sup> I am not suggesting that the recognition of scriptural *implicatio* was registered as an error or trespass on the part of the apostolic authors of the Greek Scripture. On the contrary, it was recognized as a site of hidden significance, a secret that was not only infolded but a secret that was meant for unfolding.

<sup>374</sup> Robert Coogan's *Erasmus, Lee and the Correction of the Vulgate* provides an instructive overview of how Erasmus's critics conceived of his method and the threat to religious orthodoxy they imagined it posed.

interpretation and the power this gave Humanist theologians to challenge exegetical tradition. As Erasmus had done in translating *Logos* by *Sermo*, Spenser used the polysemous potential within scriptural language to overturn traditional, dogmatic understandings of biblical narrative. Spenser's insistence upon the significance of Wisdom's gender within the Hebrew Bible challenges traditional confections of Christ and Wisdom as well as traditional interpretations of the Johannine prologue. Unlike Erasmus, however, Spenser's biblical reading occurred, not within the scholarly theological domain, but within the more nearly autonomous domain of English letters.

The Dutch theologian Maarten van Dorp had accused Erasmus of advancing the interests and authority of poets at the expense of proper theologians.<sup>375</sup> With *The Fowre Hymnes*, Dorp's fears were realized. *The Fowre Hymnes* comprised an exemplary Christian Humanist argument for the theological authority and purview of a contemporary Davidic poet. In stressing Wisdom's agency within the godhead, Spenser's figure of Sapience simultaneously insisted upon the poet's prophetic role as visionary scriptural interpreter. The poetic application of strategies ultimately derived from Erasmian theological method served, in *The Fowre Hymnes*, to undermine traditional theological authority by authorizing an exegesis advanced through the mediating power of the Muses.

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<sup>375</sup> Dorp's exchange with Erasmus is related at greater length in "The Erasmian Legacy" within Chapter 1, "Participatory Poetics and the Grammar of Christ: From Erasmus through Sidney."

## Milton

Within the rhetorical theologian's idealistic system of Christian humanist education, the cultivation of authentic eloquence was a cultivation of godliness in the form of divine *copia*. Milton's apparently unshakeable faith in this model of education (as a model of mimetic religious practice) circumvented the Calvinist insistence on the total depravity of the will and the human inability to be good. The essential was to *imitate* the good, to fill oneself with all that was "best and honourablest"—for that which was very best in man (as *imago Dei*) was the divinely intended expression of divinity. Milton believed he could compose himself in this way, for he had embraced the Christian Humanist conception of the self's mirroring capacity for understanding and participatory imitation.

Milton's confidence in his blameless virtue in the anti-prelatical tracts, together with his belief that one could become the perfect pattern of a true poem, were enabled by the commonplace idea of the seductiveness of persuasive language in the face of humanity's affective vulnerability. In the Erasmian-Sidneian-Spenserian model of poetic teaching, it is because the human being is vulnerable to the piercing assaults of poetry that one may come to resemble divinity. Believing that human beings may be seduced, through beautified images of virtue, into participatory imitation of those same "perfect picture[s]," the Christian humanist placed an imperative emphasis upon the cultivation of Christian eloquence.

The virtuous education that Milton imaginatively portrays in the *Apology against a Pamphlet* was remarkable for its earnest and total embrace of Christian humanist pedagogical idealism. By a carefully structured and guided exposure—Guyon guided by his Palmer, Milton

by Spenser<sup>376</sup>—to that which is most seductively beautiful and good within the providential store of classical eloquence, the Christian wayfarer (an Everyman as reader) was familiarized with and gained discernment of superlative virtue. The aim of this rhetorical model of Christian (re)formation was to make of the reader “such a proficient” (CPW 1.890) that he progressively eschewed lesser virtues in his desire for the greater delight of pictures ever more perfect. It was an arbitrary *a priori* of this system that, like Miranda outstripping all praise, the “perfect pictures” of Scripture are the most perfect of all. It was another *a priori* of this system that the wayfaring reader chasing breathlessly after beauty (CPW 1.326) will come naturally—naturally, that is, through the careful tutelage, firstly, of a constant Palmer (exemplary tutors) and then of a conscience formed in all prudence—to discern and pursue the exceeding excellence of Scripture’s “perfect picture[s].”

In Milton’s earnestly imagined rhetorical model of Christian education, conscience participated in the understanding something like a faculty of taste. The truly conscientious understanding was a full and prudential understanding, a wisdom as *sapientia*, bearing the dual etymological sense of knowing and tasting. Conscientious cultivation that is diligent in its imitation of both moral and intellectual perfections prepared the Christian wayfarer for the proper appreciation of the banquet of Scripture. The properly formed reader that Milton strove to become was a truly exemplary disciple of humanist rhetorical theology. He was one who came to the banquet of Scripture with a laboriously refined palette capable of the true discernment and enjoyment of the superlative beauty of scriptural *copia*.

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<sup>376</sup>I employ Spenser here metaphorically, as I imagine Milton interpreted the Palmer, as a poetical personification representing eloquent Christian instruction. The reference, though anchored in *Areopagitica*, is to Milton’s point in the *Apology*.

Unlike Erasmus, who imagined that ecclesial office might be reformed in-house, Milton felt that what was needed was an entirely new structure, a ministerial office predicated upon God-like learning and eloquence.<sup>377</sup> There was a peculiar zeal—in mixed measures admirable and unsettling—to Milton’s pursuit of perfect Christian eloquence. The poetic office that Milton professed in *Paradise Lost* was an elitist and exceptionalist ministerial institution that excluded *a priori* the inadequately lettered barbarian. The barbarity so offensive to Milton (as it was to Erasmus) was that of ministers who—though pretending to the adoption of Scripture as their true and native tongue—through insufficient diligence or by natural perversity, were incapable of anything but “speaking indecent things of the gods” (CPW 1:891).

Erasmus, had he lived to see Milton’s day, might not have approved the latter’s profession in poetry. Yet he would surely have found arresting the extent to which Milton appeared to have whole-heartedly embraced the educational and prophetic ideals of Christian Humanist rhetorical theology. As with Erasmus’s exemplary figure Idythun, Milton’s educational and vocational ideal of poetic ministry comprised a form of *imitatio Christi*. In scriptural *copia* itself, Milton recognized a symbolic representation of the living perfection of Christ, an image of Truth, “a perfect shape most glorious [both] to look on” and resemble. (CPW II.89) Indeed, for the prophetic poet of *Paradise Lost*, the great miracle of Scripture lay in its *copia*, in its inner abundance, and in the power of its language to bring forth endless bounty. In keeping with this conception of Scripture as an ever-renewing spring, the invocatory proems of *Paradise Lost* invented or dis-covered an iterative series of figures whose metamorphoses celebrated a pair of Wisdoms, derived from the twinned dispensations of Hebrew Scripture and pagan *bonae litterae*

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<sup>377</sup> God-like in the sense of heroically pursuing the imitation of God as He is revealed in scriptural eloquence.

as personifications of the human/divine capacity to know, to love, and to participate in the copious discourse of God.<sup>378</sup>

Fulfilling the Erasmian ideal of prophetic song, the invocatory proems of *Paradise Lost* employed Christian Humanist grammatical hermeneutics to faithfully expound the mystical sense of Scripture and to exalt the poet as biblical interpreter.<sup>379</sup> Like Spenser's vision of Sapience in the "Hymn of Heavenly Beauty," Milton's figure of the two pre-existent sisters Wisdom and Urania may be read as an ambitious exegetical conceit. The Erasmian oeuvre, in its poetic and rhetorical renovation of Christian ministry, prepared the way for the Miltonic office of prophetic poetry, "of power beside the office of a pulpit," in which the fusion of poet and theologian was fully realized. The prior example of Spenser's works, with their fertile appropriation of Christian Humanist concepts and theological method appears to have helped Milton not only in conceiving his own office of prophetic poetry, but in explaining himself to himself in the role he had chosen.

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<sup>378</sup> The *Logos* as *Sermo*.

<sup>379</sup> Christian Humanist grammatical hermeneutics was an essential part of both Spenser and Milton's Reformation era repertoire. The extent to which the effectiveness and import of this grammatical hermeneutics were in fact bound to the Reformation itself is suggested by Brian Cummings' closing remarks upon *Paradise Lost* and "Milton the grammarian" in the epilogue to his magisterial work *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace*: "*Paradise Lost* is an archetypal Reformation artefact. The poet's labour to retain control and mastery over [its] language is like the work of a great theological exegete over the recalcitrant meanings of the Bible.... By 1654, the Preface to Hobbes's treatise *Of libertie and Necessity* was complaining that 'the controversies betwixt Rome and the Reformation, are long since beaten out of the pit'. This querulous note was made in response to the way that scriptural exegetes 'involve their consciences in the bryars of a thousand needless scruples [and] spin out volumes out of half sentences, nay, out of points and accents'. It was a world that was now disappearing" (431). By 1654, in other words, the exploitation of "point and accents" central to Erasmus's revolutionary exegetical method had not only lost its aura of disruptive novelty but had become sufficiently commonplace as to represent a recognizable and recognizably tedious penchant among contemporary exegetes.

This dissertation has endeavored to shed new light on the nature of prophetic utterance in Spenser and Milton's poetry by exploring its continuities with Erasmian rhetorical theology. As a rational grammatical hermeneutics forms the scholarly basis for Erasmus's conception of Logos-participating prophetic utterance, so the appropriation of the Erasmian theological method helps to explain the reasoned, generically artful, and auctorially assertive composition of prophetic poetry by the early-modern poets who followed in Erasmus's textual wake. Rather than running contrary to the true inspiration of prophetic utterance, the poet's art and learning were its necessary preconditions and material supports.

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