

“The Intellectual and the Physical in *The Faerie Queene*”

Karen Jin

Excerpt

However, there is tension between these Protestant teachings and *The Faerie Queene*, which is rife with conflict between the intellectual and the physical instead of always favoring the intellectual. Three passages demonstrating such conflict can be found in the stories of the satyrs in Canto 6, Duessa in Canto 7, and Despaire in Canto 9. In an unexpected departure from Protestantism, in these three examples respectively, the intellectual way does not always conquer the physical, the world of language and contemplation is more dangerous than but closely connected to the physical world, and language (including Scripture) and contemplation can be used for devious means even while action is still important and valuable.

[...]

In addition to Duessa, Despaire is another one of Redcrosse’s foes who informs the conflict and relationship between the intellectual and the physical. In Canto 9, Redcrosse, Una, and Sir Trevisan go to Despaire’s lair, where Despaire tries to trick Redcrosse into killing himself. At first, their encounter is entirely in intellectual terms; Despaire seduces Redcrosse with his beguiling language in a lengthy speech and then shows him a painting of tortured ghosts. It is only when Despaire is sure of Redcrosse’s utter weakness as a result of this intellectual approach that he introduces the physical means, the weapons. Despaire’s methods and their effects necessarily bring the intellectual and the physical into contrast with each other, but Despaire also relies on these two modes working together to bring about Redcrosse’s downfall.

Before the characters go to see Despaire, Trevisan warns Redcrosse of Despaire’s “charmèd speeches,” which Redcrosse dismisses as nothing more than “idle speach” (1.9.30-31). Redcrosse does not see how language can “spoyle the Castle of [a man’s] health” (1.9.31). In

other words, he believes in the triumph of the physical over the intellectual. Nevertheless, Trevisan warns him again of how Despaire's "subtill tongue, like dropping honny, mealt' th / Into the hart, and searcheth every vaine, / That ere one be aware, by secret stealth / His powre is reft, and weaknesse doth remaine" (1.9.31). Here Trevisan blurs the line between the physical and the intellectual; language can be so powerful that it seems to enter the physical body and show its effects there. Redcrosse's disparagement of the power of language, even though he has already been beguiled by Duessa's deceitful words, later leads to his near-downfall.

When Redcrosse arrives at Despaire's lair, at first he displays his characteristic daring and berates "the villein": "With firie zeale he burnt in courage bold, / Him [Sir Terwin] to avenge" (1.9.37). After Redcrosse condemns Despaire to die for causing Sir Terwin's death, Despaire defends himself at length, speaking for ten stanzas and essentially seducing Redcrosse with his language. Despaire is particularly effective because of his references to Scripture, since according to Protestantism, faith comes from Scripture rather than traditions or images. However, Despaire uses Scripture deceptively, for instance referencing only the part of Romans 6.23 that states that sinners must die and leaving out the more positive, forgiving part (1.9.47).

After ten stanzas of listening to Despaire speak, Redcrosse, despite his earlier statements, is beguiled by his words: "The knight was much enmovèd with his speech, / That as a swords point through his hart did perse, / And in his conscience made a secret breach" (1.9.48). It is interesting that Despaire's speech is here described in physical terms—"swords point" and "breach," meaning 'wound'—even though all of their interaction thus far has been verbal. This emphasizes both the difference and the similarity between an intellectual approach to destroying Redcrosse and a physical one. The former takes longer and is subtler—the wound in his conscience is "secret"—although the end effect is much the same, as a secret breach is still a breach. Although Despaire has not handed Redcrosse a physical weapon yet, the true harm has already been done; Despaire has damaged Redcrosse's heart and conscience—his confidence and will to live.

Despaire continues to operate by his chosen method of contemplation and seeing (as opposed to action and touching) by showing Redcrosse a painting of “damnèd ghosts, that doe in torments waile, / And thousand feends that doe them endless paine / With fire and brimstone, which for ever shall remaine” (1.9.49). This painting has an incredible effect on Redcrosse: “The sight whereof so throughly him dismaid, / That nought but death before his eyes he saw” (1.9.50). Again, the effect of Despaire on Redcrosse is intellectual rather than physical; here the focus is on seeing death and contemplating it instead of acting to bring it about.

Author Commentary

Karen Jin

The assignment for this paper was to analyze the differences between contemplation and action, or in other words the intellectual life and the physical, by examining three passages in a text. I chose to write on Edmund Spenser’s epic poem *The Faerie Queene* (1590) because while reading, I noticed many interesting instances of both contemplation and action, as well as the tensions between them. The key to writing a compelling English paper is finding evidence and using it to make your case. Thus, I began the process of writing this paper by rereading the text and my notes and eventually selecting three passages from the text that exemplify the tension between the intellectual and the physical. These are passages where, for instance, characters struggle to reconcile their intellectual and physical needs, or intellectual and physical forces compete for dominance. Then, I did close readings of each passage, from which larger themes and tendencies across the text emerged. Close reading entails examining the language and meaning of the passage, on the level of the individual words as well as syntax and the order in which ideas are presented. In the excerpt, I pay close attention to an entire scene from beginning to end, and I relate the progression of the scene to its implications for the intellectual-physical conflict.

When writing an English paper, I find that the conversation between evidence and thesis is ongoing. Since this paper had an assigned rather than freely chosen topic, I knew from the beginning what kind of evidence to look for, and in general terms what my argument was going to be about (the tension between the intellectual and the physical). In this sense, a rough idea of the thesis drove my selection and analysis of evidence, which in turn informed a more specific, original, and developed thesis—the one that appears in my final draft.

Fellow Commentary

Emily de La Bruyere

Karen Jin’s essay on *The Faerie Queene* focuses on the text’s remarkably un-Protestant characterization of the “intellectual” and the “physical.” Specifically, she focuses on three particular examples in which, as Karen puts it, “the intellectual way does not always conquer the physical, the world of language and contemplation is more dangerous than...the physical world, and language...can be used for devious means even while action is still important and valuable.”

Karen’s paper is a classic close reading. It is also a masterful one—particularly in the presentation of evidence. In a close reading, the author must not only dig deep into the text to find evidence but also then present complex reasoning about that evidence in comprehensible (and succinct!) terms.

And that is precisely what Karen does. In the above excerpt about Canto 9 of *The Faerie Queen*, she builds an argument about the terrible powers of language (and even religious language) out of textual examples—and the careful explanation of those textual examples. In the first paragraph of the excerpt, she quotes Redcrosse (he “does not see how language can ‘spoyle the Castle of [a man’s] health.’”) and then lays out what that quotation means (“In other words, he believes in the triumph of the physical over the intellectual.”). The quotation grounds her argument in fact; the explanation positions the quotation in her argument.