Spenser at Play

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Playful Moments

READING *THE FAERIE QUEENE* IS LIKE PLAYING. THOSE WHO ARE ALready pleasurably entangled in the coils of Edmund Spenser's poem will approve of this claim, which will likely be met with incredulity by those who find Spenser tedious, arcane, or hectoring, or a vile apologist for imperialist atrocities, and who read him reluctantly or not at all. In claiming that reading one's way through Faerieland is a playful experience, I am not simply throwing my lot in with the former group. I happen to find reading Spenser's poem, and thinking and talking about it, to be a delight, but my pleasure is informed, even heightened, by the awareness that trying to read or know *The Faerie Queene* can also be an exhausting struggle, a recurring encounter with the poem's own violence and limitations. In presenting play—and especially the play of children—as an indispensable horizon within which to experience and interpret Spenser's work, I aim not to simplify or idealize the relationships that readers (myself included) might have with it but to explore the unfolding complexity of these relationships.

There have been many attempts to align the reading of poetry with the experience of play, both during and long before Spenser's lifetime, as well as in modern aesthetics.[1] Rather than venture a general definition of *play*, which Maurizio Bettini justly calls "that impossibly difficult word" (216),[2] I will focus on three of its salient characteristics and look at the way they relate to the experience of reading *The Faerie Queene*. First, play does not establish a stable relation with its object; instead, the relation between player and plaything changes, unpredictably, through time. Second, this affective, temporally uneven mode of interaction leads the plaything not only

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to gain significance but also to verge on animation and agency. Third—in part because it combines animating intensity and unpredictability—play tends to be opaque, its precise meaning ungraspable by those who are not involved in it (and perhaps by those who are).

Where should we begin looking for these characteristics in Spenser's poem, in order to understand the playful experience of reading *The Faerie Queene*? Most readers would think instinctively of the moments in the middle books in which Spenser's imagination seems to relax and expand, set pieces like the Garden of Adonis where a metaphysics of playful flux is developed (3.6.46–49).[3] Or one might look to the innocent pastoral stretches of the sixth book, in which the courteous Calidore has time "[t]o practise games, and maisteries to try" (6.9.43.2). Alternatively, book 2 might be read as framed by forms of playfulness: from the "louely babe" Ruddymane, who inadvertently "did play / His cruell sport" in the blood of his dying mother (2.1.40.5–6), to the alluringly playful creatures, wittily dubbed "boy toys" by Joseph Campana (134–37), who populate the Bower of Bliss (2.12.42–87).

To focus solely on these moments, however, would reinforce accounts of *The Faerie Queene* that, when they acknowledge Spenser's playfulness, explain it away as Ovidian, Ariostan, or Theocritan. Thus, James Nohrnberg writes, "An element of play in Spenser's poem is hardly to be missed; like Ariosto, Spenser shows an appreciation for romance as an enlightening form of recreation, or imaginative exercise" (286), while Harry Berger, Jr., argues that "[i]n Spenser's mixed mode of Romance, with its serious play, Theology provides the high seriousness and Faerie the pure play" (88). Berger's phrase "serious play" knowingly deploys the adjective that has adhered to the author of *The Faerie Queene* ever since John Milton described him as "[o]ur sage and serious poet Spenser" (2: 516).[4] Berger is willing to acknowledge that this seriousness is leavened by play, but we can, he maintains, distinguish between the two, and seriousness weighs down play and keeps it in check.[5]

This clear division between the playful and the serious can help to explain the uniquely mixed history of Spenser's reception: he has been attacked both for being too inane, trivial, and childish and for being excessively dour and moralizing.[6] To claim that Spenser's play is serious is to align him with dominant early modern accounts of child's play, which was permissible as long as it was regulated and teleologically directed, "in an attempt to prepare [children] early for the world they would enter as adolescents and adults" (Ozment 70). If this does indeed account for Spenser's blend of childish triviality and telic normativity, it would seem easy to fold the playfulness present in *The Faerie Queene* into his famously stated aim "to fashion a gentleman or noble person" ("Letter" 714). Stephen Greenblatt, who inspired much focus on this phrase, does not explicitly discuss play in Spenser, but his work usefully illuminates the boundaries within which the relatively scarce discussions of play in the early modern period have tended to function. On the one hand, play is viewed as a way of subverting but ultimately reasserting cultural norms, in a manner congruent with play as the child's teleological development; this fits Greenblatt's account of self-fashioning as a normative process and resonates with the various readings of carnivalesque play informed by Mikhail Bakhtin.[7] On the other hand, in his readings of Christopher Marlowe, Greenblatt develops a very different account of a "will to play," which "flaunts society's cherished orthodoxies" and "courts self-destruction in the interest of the anarchic discharge of its energy. This is play on the brink of an abyss, *absolute* play" (220).[8] Marlovian play is not self-fashioning but self-consuming, somewhere between a howl of despair and a gleeful cackle, and it is finally impotent: "the attempts to challenge this system" are "exposed as unwitting tributes to

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that social construction of identity against which they struggle" (209).

While new historicism valuably complicated the question of what might count as work or play in a given cultural moment,[9] the forms of playfulness in Spenser cannot be folded into a narrative of teleological self-fashioning; nor are they a desperate Marlovian playing on the brink of the abyss, a playing that tries and fails to destabilize everything. I want instead to approach *The Faerie Queene* with a ludic hermeneutic that arises from the rhythmic experience of reading it, a means of understanding the poem in terms of the three characteristics of play that I outlined above: unpredictability, affective investment, and opacity. The way the poem both plays with and becomes a plaything for its reader arises in part from the difficulty of knowing how adequately to assail its vast and unfinished bulk. What exactly is this huge thing? What am I supposed to do with it? Its enormous length seems to demand that I plow speedily onward if I am ever to reach the end; but as soon as I notice a telling detail that slows me down, leads me to stop and ponder, to tease out alternative possibilities, I encounter moments of inextricable delight and panic. I delight not only at a particular moment but at the possibility that any moment, if I choose to slow down and give it sufficient time, might reveal startling depths; my delight is shadowed by the anxious realization that I could never read the poem in this way, that to treat each of its moments with the care they seem to demand would take more than a lifetime's reading. I would only ever read this book and never finally have read it: so Jonathan Goldberg suggests when he writes that *The Faerie Queene* "demands the 'endlesse worke' of play" (*Endlesse Worke* 11).

To explain why these fundamental aspects of the poem lead the reader toward a playful hermeneutic, it is useful to identify and contest the role fleetingly played by Spenser in Stanley Fish's influential account of *Paradise Lost*, in which Fish argues that readers of Milton's poem are chastened by the narrator and brought up against the fact of their own recurrent sinfulness, in a cumulatively educative process. Near the outset, describing the account of Despaire in *The Faerie Queene*, Fish claims that "Spenser's test of his reader is less stringent than Milton's; he makes his warning the experience of this description rather than an abstract statement of disapproval" (20). I would argue, contra Fish, that readers of *The Faerie Queene* are no less compelled than readers of *Paradise Lost* to wonder about and at the experience of their own reading but that the absence of "an abstract statement of disapproval" makes this experience potentially playful rather than consistently chastening. This is particularly the case when figures in the poem whom we might be inclined to interpret in clear moral and allegorical terms—figures about whom we apparently know how we are supposed to think—behave in ways that tempt us to accord them a depth, a complexity, an attitude toward their own place in the poem: something approaching a character's internal life. What makes these moments particularly playful for the reader is the sequence of questions that they provoke: First, could this figure, this agglomeration of conventions, really have something akin to thoughts and feelings, a personalized past and future? Second, how can it be that I have found myself in a position where I am tempted to read in this way? What does this say about the poem and about me as a reader? And then follows a cascade of subsidiary questions: Am I overreading, perhaps just wildly speculating? Or could it truly be that *The Faerie Queene* asks us to consider each of its myriad figures in this way, to wonder about their stories and their selves? The experience of reading the poem consists in part of bouncing pleasurably between questions of this kind—a rhythm of investment in the poem and of stepping back to consider, probe, and enjoy the unexpected nature of our investment. This is the rhythm of Spenserian play itself, neither sleekly linear

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and comfortably normative nor of the absolute and self-defeating Marlovian sort. Readers take pleasure in startlingly expanded possibilities of thought and imagination for which they have no preexisting category; they are led to think not just new thoughts but new kinds of thought about these fictional creatures.[10] Spenser's play intimates the possibility that genuinely novel and unanticipated possibilities erupt where his poem seems the most poetically or ideologically determined: for him, as for Theodor W. Adorno, "[t]he unreality of games gives notice that reality is not yet real," not yet fixed and final (228).

While I have focused on the reader's unfolding response, however, mine is not simply an unhistorical or presentist account. If we want to understand the playfulness of *The Faerie Queene*, and perhaps of early modern literature more broadly, we need to develop a finer appreciation of the complex ludic forms that emerged in England during this period and that illuminate Spenser's peculiar playfulness.[11] In the first section of this essay, I explore a striking and overlooked activity that exemplifies the way a plaything can, like Spenser's figures, be suspended between meaningfulness and inertia and remain open to a rhythm of alternating responses. I then hold this example up as a lens through which to view one of the apparently less playful passages of *The Faerie Queene*, the defeat of the dragon at the end of book 1, whose title is the "Legend of Holiness." My reading will focus on this small section of the poem because, as I have suggested, it is in the flickers of possibility that emerge in such fleeting moments that *The Faerie Queene* engages its readers most playfully, but I also indicate a wider range of ways in which the poem plays with us and we with it.

"I Haue Here Myne Ydoll": Iconoclasm and Child's Play

"In the 'Legend of Holiness,'" writes James Kearney, "Spenser not only depicts a range of idolatrous texts and books but also elaborates an iconoclastic hermeneutics that distinguishes between a properly transcendent reading and an idolatrous tarrying with letters and things" (113). Kearney's claim joins a series of readings that have recognized the centrality of iconoclasm—the breaking of images and holy things—to *The Faerie Queene*, especially to its first book (Gilman; Gross, *Spenserian Poetics*; Gregerson). As these accounts acknowledge, however, Spenser's attitude toward iconoclasm is notably ambivalent: the satyrs who worship Una are the most obviously idolatrous figures in the "Legend," yet they are not monstrous or depraved but, as William A. Oram has recently noted, "a cheerful tribe of fauns . . . sweet, charming, and a bit dim," described by Spenser in a tone that is "obviously comic and friendly" (41, 54n16). The only literal iconoclast to appear in book 1, Kirkrapine, clearly numbers among the poem's villains and is "quite dismembered" by the "cruell clawes" of Una's lion (1.3.20.4, 19.8). If Kearney can nonetheless describe Spenser's advancing of an "iconoclastic hermeneutics," this is in part because iconoclasm itself has increasingly been interpreted as an activity fraught with ambivalence, riven with internal tensions and contradictions.[12] Among these, two stand out: first, iconoclasts, through the fury with which they take aim at their loathed object, risk conferring on it a version of the power and significance that they angrily claim to deny—an object that is so dangerous, so in need of destruction, palpably *matters*; second, iconoclasts are torn between the total obliteration of the object, which risks creating a void into which new errors can flood, and its partial retention—theoretically as a reminder of error overcome but actually carrying the risk that it might become an object of new, covert devotions. In this way iconoclasm often seems to oscillate between overt skepticism and a strange kind of negative faith, and between the imperatives to remember and to forget.[13]

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While these accounts have enriched our understanding of iconoclasm, they largely agree on what iconoclasm involved and what iconoclasts typically did: burn and break objects, humiliate them, or adapt them for ostentatiously humdrum use. Such actions were not, however, the iconoclasts' entire repertoire. This becomes clear from a sermon delivered near Bristol in the 1530s, at the height of the first cycle of English reformed iconoclasm, by the theologically conservative preacher Roger Edgeworth, who insisted that emerging forms of reformed religion had produced not heightened piety but a widespread irreverence and ribaldry among ordinary Christians.[14] In his sermon "treatying of the fift gift of the holy gost, called the spirite of Science," Edgeworth claimed that

> at the dissolution of Monasteries and of Freers houses many Images haue bene caryed abrod, and gyuen to children to playe wyth all. And when the children haue theym in theyr handes, dauncynge them after their childyshe maner, commeth the father or the mother and saythe: What nasse, what haste thou there? the childe aunsweareth (as she is taught) I haue here myne ydoll, the father laugheth and maketh a gaye game at it. So saithe the mother to an other, Iugge, or Thommye, where haddest thou that pretye Idoll? Iohn our parishe clarke gaue it me, saythe the childe, and for that the clarke muste haue thankes, and you shall lacke no good chere. (143)

The practice that Edgeworth describes was apparently common enough that he expected his audience to be familiar with it and—he hoped—to be appalled by its irreverence. In this time and place, it seems, iconoclasm and child's play could be one and the same. Instead of being burned, broken, or debased, some formerly holy objects were placed in the hands of children, who were not only expected but practically compelled to play with them: to treat them as toys.[15] There is scattered but definitive evidence that iconoclasm took the form of child's play with some frequency in the sixteenth century, in locations as varied as Lincolnshire, where liturgical items such as pyxes became playthings (Peacock 55, 108); Cologne, where in 1536 a man was reported to have pulled the arms from a crucifix and given it to his children as a toy (Scribner 114); and Southeast Asia, where, as Tara Alberts observes, "the Dutch would demonstrate their disdain for popish images by confiscating pictures and ornaments . . . with those of less value given to children, 'to play with them like Dolls'" (148).

Historians have taken note of Edgeworth's description, but they have interpreted it as the actualization of a pervasive strand in reformed polemic that dismissed traditional religion as the inane playing of children.[16] Spenser was well aware of this strategy: in the "Maye" eclogue of *The Shepheardes Calendar* (1579), the "false Foxe" disguises himself "as a poore peddler . . . / Bearing a trusse of tryfles at hys backe, / As bells, and babes, and glasses in hys packe" (lines 236, 238–40), and E. K.'s gloss explains that "by such trifles are noted, the reliques and ragges of popish superstition, which put no smal religion in Belles: and Babies & Idoles: and glasses & Paxes, and such lyke trumperies" (*Shorter Poems* 85).[17] The broad currency of this polemic doubtless helped make iconoclastic child's play comprehensible: nonetheless, there is an enormous difference between merely dismissing a traditional religious object as a trifling plaything and actually converting it into an object for child's play.

Even in Edgeworth's brief and critical sketch, we glimpse something of the mixture of thrilling, daring delight and vexed uncertainty that iconoclastic child's play prompted. To interpret the scene, I propose a return to the three characteristics of play outlined above. The first, temporal flux and instability, has been recognized and misrecognized by influential modern theories of play. Bruno Bettelheim recognizes its value for the child

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as a way of navigating temporal change: "Play is anchored in the present, but it also takes up and tries to solve problems of the past, and is often future directed, as well" (40). This temporal dimension is exemplified in the most theorized of all childish play scenes, the "Fort-Da" game played by "Little Ernst" and described by Sigmund Freud, in which the unfolding rhythm of a disappearing and reappearing wooden reel allows the child to cope with the similarly fluctuating presence of his mother ("Pleasure Principle" 140–43).[18] Yet Freud's account also reveals the temptation for the watching adult to reduce the child's playing to a single and self-contained function even as it occurs—Little Hans is "pressured into creating meaning," as Jonathan Lear puts it (96). What we need to resist is not the claim that such play has meaning but the assumption that it is stable and continuous: Kenneth Gross is more perceptive in this regard when he asks, of toys, "what it means for the child to enter into always changing relation to such objects (things often made and given to children by adults)" (Introduction xi–xii).[19]

The possibility of play as an "always changing relation" to an object both animates and unsettles Edgeworth's scene. The polemical charge of putting a formerly holy thing into a playing child's hand relies on the capacity for change—from the loftiest to the lowest, the most elevated to the most trivial. Yet, theoretically at least, this iconoclastic transformation is supposed to be decisive: the object has been demeaned once and for all, unmasked as the trifling bauble that it always was. If play constantly shifts in relation to its object, it is harder to be certain that such irreversible disenchantment has taken place. This helps explain the ambivalent behavior of the parents whom Edgeworth describes. The children who have been given the images cannot simply be left to their own devices, presumably unaware of the symbolic and deflationary significance of their recreation. The children are already "dauncynge" the images "after their childyshe maner" when their parents arrive, but the play that has begun unprompted cannot be allowed to run its own course; it must be supervised and carefully shaped. The parents' entry into the scene of play appears to express two intertwined but incompatible motives: they seem drawn there by the thrill of transgression, delighted to see the objects that they have removed from "Monasteries and . . . Freers houses" scandalously mishandled, and in this sense they seek a pleasure in play that parallels the children's own. At the same time, however, they cannot resist intervening, thereby tacitly acknowledging that the children's play does not possess a single, stable meaning. The adult interposes a question, but the question has a single correct answer, which the child knows to recite: "I haue here myne ydoll." The approving mirth of the adult who hears this anticipated answer and "laugheth and maketh a gaye game at it" confirms that the children are successfully following the catechistic script that they have carefully been taught.[20] The adults seem both to desire the wild, transformative unpredictability of play that makes the children's actions iconoclastic and to need reassurance that the play possesses a single, approved meaning. They are torn, like play itself, between disorder and order.

The interplay of delight and nervousness on the part of the watching adults can be understood in relation to the second feature of play, its tendency to animate its object—or, we might rather say, in the light of its unpredictable rhythms, to oscillate between moments of animation and moments of inertia.[21] The unfolding rhythm of play constantly traverses such divides, leading the plaything, as Bettini aptly writes, to exist "on the margins of a world of movement" (219). The unfolding rhythm of play must not, however, be sentimentalized as a pattern of love and affection lavished on its object. Just as the plaything's degree of animation and significance shifts for the child, play itself alternates between

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moments of care and moments of violence. The child's plaything can be dead and broken at one moment but startlingly reanimated the next. This creates an obvious tension for the notion of iconoclastic child's play: if a child breaks or rends a toy, this can signal not its intrinsic triviality but its deep and enduring significance to the child. This is well understood by the most resonant modern accounts of the child-toy relation: Charles Baudelaire claims, "The overriding desire of most little brats . . . is to get at and *see the soul* of their toys" by ripping them open (20). Here the toy is broken not because it no longer matters but because it matters deeply; not because it is inert but because it seems troublingly animate. Similarly, for Rainer Maria Rilke it was the "terrible, thick forgetfulness" of the doll that provoked his "hatred," aimed at "that gruesome alien body for which we have wasted our purest warmth" (qtd. in Simms 670). Thrilling, unsettling life and horrifying deadness seem to alternate in the child's encounter with the toy. The iconoclastic parents want their children to establish an unchanging relation with the formerly holy objects, one that decisively demeans those objects: but play, as Christopher Bollas puts it, involves "an emerging rhythm of mindfulness, mindlessness, and mind objectified as an object of thought" (69).

Yet even these descriptions may be too definitive, as we are reminded by the third characteristic of play, its opacity, or what Gross helpfully calls "the *mysterious* roots of the child's relation to its toys" (Introduction xi; my emphasis). Psychoanalysts including Donald Winnicott and Bettelheim have stressed the overwhelming temptation for adults to intervene and shape the meaning of play for the child engaged in it, as well as the importance of abstaining from impositions of this sort. The history of childhood, especially of child's play, cannot avoid becoming a version of this intrusive attempt to understand: "the adult's imagination of the child's imagination," as Michael Taussig calls it (136, 204, 259). Children at play in the past left no record of their beliefs and intentions; the history of child's play is inescapably the history of adults' attitudes toward such play—their attempts, whether delighted or desperate, to shape it and reassure themselves of its propriety.[22]

Medieval and Renaissance accounts of child's play also hint at its unpredictable, inconstant, ambiguously animating potential. The received wisdom contained in the encyclopedic *De proprietatibus rerum* (c.1240), by Bartholomaeus Anglicus (c.1203–72), newly translated into English in 1578, noted that children

> desire things that be to them contrary and grievous, and set more of the image of a child, than the image of a man, and make more sorrow and woe, and weepe more for the losse of an apple, than for the losse of their heritage, and the goodnesse that is done for them, they let it passe out of minde. They desire all thinges that they see, and praye and aske with voyce and with hande. . . . Sodainly they laugh, and sodainly they weepe. Alway they crye, iangle, scorne, & disdaine, that unneth [unless] they be still while they sleep. (folio 73r)[23]

This is, I would argue, not the disdainful account that it seems but a defensive and anxious attempt to make sense of the changeability and opacity of children's behavior and their playing, the sudden lurches in significance of their actions and of the objects to which they are attached. This sense of the child's desires and emotions as both rampant and shifting underpins the idea of iconoclastic child's play and ensures that it cannot once and for all fulfill the iconoclasts' desire to diminish the status of the object.

Sadly, Edgeworth does not specify the objects with which the children are led to play, but, unlike the large-scale and grandly visible paraphernalia destroyed in churches and town squares, they must have comfortably fit a child's hand.[24] The dense and conflicting

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forms of significance encapsulated in these diminutive objects are captured in the word the children know to use for their playthings: "ydoll" or "Idoll." Reformers, Spenser included, endlessly delighted in puns on "idol" and "idle," part of the larger polemical alignment of popery and childish indolence.[25] Its use by Edgeworth, however, suggests the volatility of this punning alignment when it is put into practice, as holy things actually became playthings: modern eyes cannot help but see the word *doll* lodged in the sixteenth-century orthography. The *Oxford English Dictionary* explains this term as a contraction of the name "Dorothy" and cites no example that clearly means "an image of a human being . . . used as a plaything" before the end of the seventeenth century ("Doll," defs. 1, 2.a). Yet I am drawn to this anachronistic, speculative etymology, as emblematic of the temporal and imaginative disjunctions to which this "Idoll," this unholy toy, could give rise. "Idoll" is an apt name for this composite, ambiguous figure, which could alternately be loved and hated, revered and tormented. It lives a strange afterlife in its new domestic setting, a troubling reminder to the would-be iconoclast that, if one wants to rid an object of all meaning and power, the last place to put it is in the hand of a playing child.

"The Fry of Children Yong": Spenser's Toy Dragon

The eruption of iconoclastic child's play in the midst of Edgeworth's sermon both demands and thwarts interpretation. As Gordon Teskey has argued, Spenser routinely thinks in terms of such charged flashes, which are simultaneously "a *moment* of arrest, an instant within which, so long as it lasts, nothing seems to move or change," and "a destabilizing element in a totality . . . effecting some change in that whole." Instances of play in *The Faerie Queene* exemplify this heady, tense combination of "instability and stasis, movement and arrest" ("Thinking Moments" 114).[26] The fleeting moment on which I will focus occurs at the end of book 1, the titanic battle between the book's hero, the Red Crosse Knight, and the malevolent dragon whose defeat has been the aim of his quest. The dragon seems to be crammed almost with more significance than it can bear: religious and historical allegory sit conspicuously alongside fairytale and myth.[27] Once the dragon is defeated, though, the proliferation of potential meanings with which it seems to quiver fall suddenly away. It is reduced to a hulking carcass, a "huge and horrible . . . masse" of flesh (1.11.55.2). Shorn of its allegorical significance, this creature becomes a mere slab of meat.

In reducing this lively figure of satanic malevolence to lifeless inertia, the Red Crosse Knight behaves like a good iconoclast.[28] Spenser's dragon, though, is not reduced to ashes and powder: like the holy thing allowed to remain in situ in broken form, it lingers on as a material mass subjected to new practices and interpretations. When the "raskall many . . . / Heaped together in rude rabblement" pour from the city to behold the fallen beast, "The sight with ydle feare did them dismay, / Ne durst approach him nigh, to touch, or once assay" (1.12.9.1–2, 8–9). It is not the anxieties of the adult townspeople, however, that most richly embody the propensity of Spenser's allegorical villains to continue accruing meanings even after they have been broken and laid low. The "rude rabblement" (1.12.9.2) who approach the giant carcass are accompanied by "the fry of children yong," who "[t]heir wanton sports and childish mirth [do] play" (7.1–2). If the adults approach the dragon with trepidation, theirs is an anxiety from which these children are blithely liberated, though the adults remain anxious on the children's behalf, alarmed at their gaming:

> One mother, whenas her foolehardy chyld
> Did come too neare, and with his talants play

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Halfe dead through feare, her litle babe reuyld
[scolded],
And to her gossibs gan in counsel say;
How can I tell, but that his talants may
Yet scratch my sonne, or rend his tender hand.
(1.12.11.1–6)

The horrifying dragon is reduced, not only to a lifeless carcass, but to a child's plaything. On one level the emergence of the children makes sense: the titanic clash has had the feel of a fairytale, a rattling yarn emerging from popular culture, and indeed both Saint George and the dragon lived on in sixteenth-century England well after they were proscribed as popish idols.[29] Even this context, however, cannot account for the delicate modulations of Spenser's poem. The children who surround and play with the dragon mark a startling tonal shift from the battle scene's grand spectacle. Despite the dragon's vast size, the newly humdrum nature of its threat draws it into the realm of the domestic and the ordinary. The mother is not afraid because her son is toying with an allegory of satanic malevolence; the dragon's claws are just another sharp surface that endangers the boy's "tender hand," no different from a pair of mishandled scissors. The children are happy to play with the fearsome talons of the fallen monster, cheerfully unaware of the hermeneutic problems posed by its continued presence in the poem, and indeed in Reformation culture, after it has outworn its allegorical usefulness.

Like Edgeworth's scene, this moment can fruitfully be considered in terms of the three characteristics of play, and the playfully self-reflexive hermeneutic adopted by the reader of the poem, outlined above. The narrator's adjectives—"wanton" and "childish"—seem to protest too much, and the force of this narrative dismissal and the mothers' anxiety heighten the focus on this fleetingly mentioned play. A radical change has occurred, a profound shift in our assumptions about the kinds of beings who populate this poem and our potential ways of relating to them, which we only now realize we had been adopting: we would never have thought that an apocalyptic, heavily allegorical dragon might serve as a plaything, and now we cannot help but wonder what it might look and feel like to the children, what sorts of games might be spun around its vast, ungainly bulk. The sense that the status of the fallen dragon changes at this moment, and will continue to shift through the rhythms of the play converging on it (the children's and the reader's), is heightened by the brevity and opacity of the description, the powerful sense that these games—the motives of the children and the changed nature of the dragon as it becomes a plaything—remain opaque to the reader as well as to the narrator and the parents. Finally, the townspeople's terror that the dragon might not be truly dead—"for yet perhaps remaynd / Some lingering life within his hollow brest" (1.12.10.3–4)—is both nullified and realized by the playing children: they calm such anxiety in their blithe inadvertence, even as they confirm its basis by showing that the dragon will continue to verge on the animate, stubbornly refusing to vanish or to die precisely by becoming a plaything.

Its lingering as a giant toy ensures that this creature will not vanish entirely from the landscape of the poem.[30] The playing children embody Spenser's compulsive interrogation of the cognitive and representational commitments of his poem and his equally compulsive need to acknowledge forms of action and life that stand outside the totalized meaningfulness of his allegory.[31] Spenser's dragon, like the images played with by the children whom Edgeworth describes, is not reduced to mere triviality when it becomes a toy. Instead, it becomes a new sort of being. It is impossible to specify just what it becomes, because to do so, to assign it a new determinate meaning, would be to fold it back into the logic of the allegory. The dragon here becomes an "Idoll": not an object definitively shorn of meaning but one for which play opens up the possibility of newly emerging

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and oscillating attitudes, potentially both caring and violent, that cannot be delimited or anticipated. The reader must ask at this point what it means for the techniques and commitments of Spenser's poem if even the most threatening allegorical being can become a toy—and if this change can occasion an opaque delight, for the children and for the reader of the poem, that seems entirely separate from the violently iconoclastic energies responsible for the dragon's destruction.

If the dragon's transformation into an everyday plaything gives a thrill of playful pleasure through the unanticipated possibility that an allegorical hulk might become a toy, it is also, in Teskey's terms, "a destabilizing element in a totality," prompting readers both to respond to the poem and to respond wonderingly to their own response, in the manner discussed above: this shifting rhythm of response is, I have suggested, a form of play, radically discontinuous, its terms and logic shifting as we progress, like the unfolding rhythms of a child with a toy. Prominent among the thrilling and terrifying challenges with which Spenser's poem confronts its readers is the challenge of retrospection created by such moments. To interpret the poem, it is not enough to forge onward with the single-mindedness of a questing knight: rather, it can sometimes feel, impossibly, as if the reader needs constantly to start again, to reread the entire poem up to that point in the light of a new revelation about the ways in which it proves able to operate.

Although it arrives in the poem crammed with symbolic malevolence, a terrifying panoply of fangs, fire, and flaggy wings, once reread through the lens of its eventual transformation into a child's plaything the dragon's behavior on its first appearance seems hardly in keeping with its demonic status. When Redcrosse and Una first spot the dragon it is engaged in noticeably unthreatening behavior: "stretcht he lay vpon the sunny side, / Of a great hill, himselfe like a great hill" (1.11.4.5–6). The dragon is lolling beneath the sun's warm rays, not aggressively poised to strike. Several stanzas are devoted to the dragon's terrifying visage and bulk, but, as it approaches the knight, the tone of the poem shifts again, producing a markedly different effect:

> So dreadfully he towardes him did pas,
> Forelifting vp a loft his speckled brest,
> And often bounding on the brused gras,
> As for great ioyaunce of his newcome guest.
> (1.11.15.1–4)

The reader has been led since the third stanza of the poem to anticipate the knight's eventual conflict with "a Dragon horrible and stearne" (1.1.3.9), but this is hardly what we encounter when the long anticipated, titanic struggle finally arrives. The dragon's behavior when it first appears is remarkably playful, making comparisons to domestic animals irresistible. It is first apprehended stretched out like a cat in the sun, and, once it catches sight of the Red Cross Knight, it behaves less like a malevolent foe than like a dog bouncing with excitement and anticipation at the sight of its returning owner. The adverb "dreadfully" is undercut by the ensuing lines, in which the dragon appears engaging and exuberant. It does not approach with implacable malice but with joyous hospitality.

Even this joy could bring its own horrors: it might be nothing but the grisly relish of a predator, who plans to play with the knight like a cat with a mouse.[32] After all, the description of bouncing delight quickly evaporates, and the reader is subjected to a series of stanzas in which the dragon's threatening characteristics are exhaustively and exhaustingly enumerated. But the ebullient mood that returns when the children emerge and play with the dragon's corpse retrospectively clarifies and amplifies the dragon's initial happiness. Spenser frames this threatening allegorical figure within a surplus of playful energy, and when his dragon enters it is glimpsed as a playful individual in its own

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right, almost a character. The dragon delights in its allegorical function. While the reader has been waiting for it to arrive since the poem's third stanza, the dragon, we are startled to find, has apparently been waiting excitedly too, not only for the knight but also for the reader. Here, at the supposed pinnacle of allegorical and typological explicitness, we find an abundance of childish play—not only in the way that the dragon's dead body is treated but in the mood of its arrival—which the overt aims of the poem scarcely require and for which it can hardly account. Spenser accords the dragon pronounced pleasure in its ability to fulfill its allegorical function—"You're here at last, after quite a wait for both of us!," its actions seem to suggest.

In making this claim I seek to step beyond the argument that the literal surface of the poem can be enjoyed for its own sake, which has informed many readings since William Hazlitt's famous claim that if readers of *The Faerie Queene* "do not meddle with the allegory, it will not meddle with them"—a claim that he develops by comparing those terrified of the allegory to "a child [who] looks at a painted dragon, and thinks it will strangle them in its shining folds" (5: 38). What the reader experiences is neither blithe indifference to the allegory nor fear before it—and when Spenser's children, after all, play with the dragon they are conspicuously free of the adults' anxiety. Readers do not rest contented and unthinking at the literal level but both delight in it and wonder at their delight. Once the dragon is revealed to have been waiting for the knight and to rejoice doggishly at his arrival, the reader cannot resist speculating about what kind of creature it is. What are its joys and its pleasures? How does it feel about being a vast, malevolent allegory? How was it passing the time as it waited for Redcrosse on the sunny hillside, before leaping up and practically wagging its vast, terrifying tail? Did it get bored? Did it play its own dragon games? And, following from questions of this sort—which are at once fanciful, extravagant, and inescapable—is a second set of questions: What does it say about me as a reader that I find myself asking such bizarre questions? What does it say about *The Faerie Queene* that it creates pockets of space in which such questions seem to emerge? Am I reading too much into the dragon's behavior? Or, conversely, might it be that I have missed opportunities to ask such questions elsewhere in the poem—passed unwittingly on invitations to play?

Spenser's playful moments provoke his readers both to bizarre speculations and to reflections on their speculations. We cannot know what the dragon is thinking, but even to find ourselves wondering about the inner life of this allegorical beast at all is remarkable. Oram has recently written that *The Faerie Queene* as a whole tends toward the comic, since "[e]vil figures die by the score while, if one excepts Una's lion, no character we care about loses his life" (50). But there are evil figures in the poem about whom we do care and who, precisely because they are not fully fleshed-out characters, possess the thrilling ability to exceed their assigned role in the poem's moral universe. We postulate inner lives for such figures, who at first seemed constructed from the most flimsy and tired of conventions, and enjoy both the extravagance of our own investments and the possibility that they might be wonderfully misplaced.[33] We cannot access the dragon's inner life, but the sense that such a life exists and remains opaque ensures our playful, shifting relation to the poem. Likewise, it cannot be known what sorts of games the children will play with the fallen dragon's claws, but the reader's exclusion from the details of their games opens new possibilities: that the joyous, bouncing dragon will live on in a curious fashion in the children's responsive and mysterious cavorting—much as a holy thing taken from a church and placed in a child's hands might thereby be imbued with unsettling and lingering traces of life.

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Conclusion

None of us making our way through *The Faerie Queene* can fail to wonder what it must have been like to write this vast, sprawling poem, to sit down each day and continue churning out its intricate stanzas. Since we know so little of Spenser's working habits, imagining them can only be another act of extravagance, one that few critics have dared to try. For R. W. Church, writing in 1879, Spenser "wrote what he must have laughed at as he wrote, and meant us to laugh at it" (qtd. in Nelson, "Spenser *Ludens*" 84).[34] Do we want to give in to this enjoyable fantasy of the poem's composition as pure enjoyment, or might it be possible to think of Spenser's own labors, like his reader's, as oscillating between struggle and delight?

This possibility can be illuminated by Michael Fried's seminal account of the powerful hold that certain artworks have on us, focusing on the depiction of figures who "exemplify . . . the state or condition of rapt attention, of being completely occupied or engrossed or (as I prefer to say) absorbed in what he or she is doing, hearing, feeling, thinking" (10). Fried explores in this context the painter Pierre Chardin's "depictions of children and young people playing games or engaged in apparently trivial amusements," especially Chardin's refusal to distinguish "between the pictures of games and amusements on the one hand and ostensibly more serious or morally exemplary scenes on the other." He remarks that, while a painting might seem by definition to capture an instant,

> Chardin's paintings of games and amusements . . . are also remarkable for their uncanny power to suggest the actual duration of the absorptive states and activities they represent. . . . [A] single moment has been isolated in all its plenitude and density from an absorptive continuum. . . . Images such as these are not of time wasted but of time filled. (46, 47, 49, 51)

Fried's account can help us understand why the children absorbed in play in these paintings, like those in Edgeworth's sermons and *The Faerie Queene*, can be captivating—not because we understand their play but because we are radically excluded from its unfolding meaning. The absorbed play of the child in the painting prompts the absorbed play of the viewer before the painting. This does not mean that the two are alike, for Fried's argument hinges on the opacity of the child's play: the child's indifference to our presence, the impossibility of decoding its actions, makes the works compelling. In the same sense, I suggest, we respond playfully to the charged, fully absorbed moments of play in Spenser's poem. To make sense of this dynamic we need—like Spenser, like Chardin, like Fried—to reject altogether the false choice between the playful and the serious. But I would add to Fried's account that we must not conflate play entirely with absorption or delight, lest we misunderstand the moments when play is delightful: these must be seen as *moments* within the unfolding rhythms of play that I have been describing and that can also involve rage, anger, boredom, and frustration. These feelings too can be parts of our emerging response to an artwork. Reading *The Faerie Queene* is like playing not because it provides pure pleasure but because it can prompt a dazzlingly unstable oscillation between moods and modes—all of which we can understand as moments of play, the way a child experiences playing with a toy; the way Spenser might at different moments have laughed and labored as he wrote; the way readers might want at times to tear the book asunder (whether to destroy it or to locate its soul) and at times never to let it go. The inextricability of these impulses flies in the face of what have come to seem like obvious distinctions. As Adorno observes, "Work while you work, play while you play—this is a basic rule of repressive self-discipline"; this absolute distinction, he insists, destroys work

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and play. "Only a cunning intertwining of pleasure and work," he writes, "leaves real experience still open" and resists the bankrupting of both activities that arises from their supposed opposition (130). Spenser's poem confronts us with this intertwining of work and play and still demands it from us.

To say that reading *The Faerie Queene* is like playing, then, alters our sense both of the poem and of play. In a sensitive analysis, Tzachi Zamir has cast doubt not only on the possibility of defining *play* but also on the damage that certain uses of the term can do: play is an "adult category that all too conveniently lumps together any disorganized, indefinable childhood state." For Zamir, the behaviors that we quickly designate as play in fact allow the child "to linger in and enjoy a nonstructured experience," able to be both "the subject that he or she is called to become and the disorganized entity that he or she is, one that is aware of experiencing the world but also of the gaps in such experience, moments of nonexperience" (396–97). We must resist the conflation of play with pleasure, refuse the demand that we (or our children) always conspicuously enjoy play, if we are to hold on to the thrilling instants of pleasure to which playing can give rise. The best response when we suspect that play is happening is not to try to define or understand it but to play along—which does not mean joining the game but playing responsively and in parallel, allowing our own responses and interpretations to shift abruptly, to remain mysterious, to animate, and at times even to damage what we play with. My account of play, of its unpredictable unfolding and its opacity, has attempted to do justice to this rhythm of structure and disorganization, experience and nonexperience, toil and delight. This uneven rhythm, which I still want to call the rhythm of play itself, animates the experience of reading *The Faerie Queene*.

Notes

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1. For *lusus* ("play" or "game") as a term in Roman poetics, see Wagenvoort; for medieval accounts of poetic play, see Olson; Nelson gives an overview of Renaissance discussions of poetry as playful (*Fact* 56–72). Walton has made the most extended modern attempt to understand aesthetic experience through concrete forms of playfulness.

2. Suits ruminates playfully on the problems of defining *play*. Hurka and Tasioulas respond to Suits's thoughts; see also Israel. The vast bibliography of works on play includes Sutton-Smith; Bateson and Martin; Brooker et al.; Hamayon.

3. On the Garden of Adonis as the font of "revisionary play," see Berger 131–53.

4. For a discussion of this famous phrase, see Charles Bell Burke. Helfer shows that Milton's epithet is less straightforward than it seems and that "[h]is Spenser appears to be not only 'sage and serious' but also witty and irreverent" (300).

5. Knapp 84, 86 and Hadfield also use the word *serious* in referring to Spenser's trifling and gamesomeness. For earlier accounts of Spenser's humor, see Watkins 293–304; Nelson, "Spenser *Ludens*."

6. For an account illuminating this history, see Nicholson.

7. Greenblatt's account concludes, "It is art whose status is questioned in Spenser, not ideology" (192). On carnival after Bakhtin, see Barber; Bristol; Laroque; Scribner.

8. On Nietzschean "freeplay," see Derrida 263–64; Hans; Wilson. Goldberg links freeplay to Spenser in *Endlesse Worke* (10–11).

9. On this wider question, see chapter 3 of Brook Thomas's *The New Historicism*, "Literature: Work or Play?" (151–78).

10. For the poem's ability to produce genuinely new social and sexual configurations, see Goldberg, *Seeds*, esp. 71; and Gil 49–75.

11. In making this claim I seek to contest the pervasive and often unspoken assumption that the Reformation was grimly opposed to play. Baudelaire, for example, describes miserable parents who deny their children toys as "reeking of Protestantism" (19). Similar and influential accounts of Puritan or Protestant antipathy to play are offered by Huizinga, esp. 179; and Turner 71. Both draw on the account of disenchantment as the extirpation of

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playfulness developed by Weber, esp. 104, 113, 124. On play and periodicity, see Kendrick.

12. General studies of iconoclasm include Aston, *Broken Idols*, *Laws*, and "Iconoclasm"; Wandel; Koerner; Simpson; Latour; Flood; Noyes.

13. Jarvis provides a subtle account of these tensions (56–83). Taussig enumerates the ways in which desecration can create new and unstable forms of power.

14. For the background to Edgeworth's conservative adherence to traditional Roman Catholicism, especially his dispute with the prominent reformer Hugh Latimer (who was later martyred under Mary I), see Skeeters; Wabuda.

15. The word *toy* gradually assumed the meaning "a material object for children or others to play with" in the course of the sixteenth century: the earliest citations of such uses given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* are from the 1580s and 1590s ("Toy," def. II.6), whereas the dominant meaning current when Edgeworth gave his sermon was "a thing of little or no value or importance, a trifle" (def. II.5). Campana discusses how some early modern commentators viewed poetry itself as a "vaine toye" (134–35).

16. Blench 122; K. Thomas, *Religion* 86; Orme 172; Aston, *Broken Idols* 181–82.

17. Knapp discusses this passage (118–19), and Aston provides an account of this wider polemical strain (*England's Iconoclasts* 403). Extensive glosses by "E.K." accompanied Spenser's poem from its first publication; the identity of E.K., who may have been invented by Spenser, remains a matter of dispute. "Babies" in this context refers to dolls; "Paxes" were wooden boards known as "paxboards" that were passed around a congregation so that each member could apply the "kiss of peace" to them.

18. My use of "rhythm" and "coping" in describing this scene derives from Freer's account of it (551–52).

19. Stillman discusses the changing status of the toy for the child, drawing on the writings of Winnicott (51).

20. For more-standard forms of catechizing the young, see Tudor; Green.

21. On toys, materiality, and thinghood, see Brown; Johnson 163–75; Bennett vii; Gell, esp. 17–18, 97, 129, 133.

22. The account by Ariès remains the touchstone for all later accounts: see 62–99 on games. For a useful overview of the vast field of children's history, see Stearns.

23. Keith Thomas discusses this passage in "Children" (57). On Bartholomaeus's views, see Goodich.

24. Orme suggests that they were "small wax votive offerings . . . left in churches until 1538, when royal injunctions forbade the paying of honours to saints or shrines" (172).

25. Kearney discusses this pun (114–15).

26. Teskey expands on this argument in "Notes."

27. For erudite readings of the dragon's various layers of meaning, see Kaske; Nohrnberg 182–84; Lamb; Gless 163–70; King 129–45; Wofford; Barrett; Perkins.

28. On Saint George as both iconoclast and idol, see Barclay 90; Aston, "Iconoclasm" 272–74 and *Broken Idols* 401–44; Brotton.

29. "Account"; P. Burke 173, 216; Hutton 214–17; Purkiss 23–25; Lamb.

30. Teskey is right to note that "there is something virulently productive about the potential of this dragon." I disagree, though, when he writes, "Spenser does not quite say this, but I have the sense the dragon's body will turn to stone and become a feature of the landscape, a great hill" ("Edmund Spenser"). The partial reanimation of its body in play prevents such petrifaction.

31. These children and their play have received surprisingly little attention in Spenser criticism. Exceptions include Nohrnberg 197; Nelson, "Spenser *Ludens*" 93–94, 99; and Grogan 28–30. For the allegorical drive toward totalized meaning, see Teskey, *Allegory* 30.

32. I am grateful to Mike Schoenfeldt for this comparison.

33. See my analysis of Archimago's functioning in similar terms ("Forgotten Youth" 407–08) and my discussion of oddly intimate moments involving Talus, who, while not an "evil" character, is certainly one about whom we do not expect to care (*Feeling Pleasures* 138–41).

34. By contrast, Dolven envisages the poem composed in a mood of panic (12).

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