Spenser as Daedalus and Icarus: 
Art, Nature, and Moderation in the *Faerie Queene*

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**Introduction**

Classical influences dominated early English literature. In fact, some of these pioneering English writers were so thrilled with the Classical world that they would actually write in Latin verse (like Milton’s *Elegia Prima*, or Campion’s *Poematum Libellus*, for example). Along with this influence came a continued conversation with ancient authors. The most daring of these poets took on the highest style, using Classical conventions to compose epics in English. Around two centuries before Milton or Campion, during the early development of our language, Edmund Spenser published his magnum opus, *The Faerie Queene*. The poet recreated many Classical and epic tropes in this work – most notably his newly minted “Spenserian Stanza” – but he also relied on my epic themes. For instance, the plotline follows extraordinary heroes who fend off superhuman foes amidst divine intervention, offering a commentary on the poet’s contemporary government all the while. Although Spenser intended to include twelve books in *The Faerie Queene* (in truly epic fashion), his sprawling poem only amounted to six. In this essay, I will focus on the end of Book 2 from a strictly classical perspective. Book 2 centers around the endeavors of Sir Guyon, a hero on a mission to destroy the “Bower of Blisse,” where evil Acrasia dwells. The trip is no joke; along the way, Guyon and his companions face foes and natural tests that recall the epic feats of old. In particular, Spenser alludes to Ovid in ways that illuminate his characters, and his own role as an author.

Canto 12 in Book 2 of *The Faerie Queene* cautions for restraint and moderation like we see in Ovid, facilitated by a discussion of art and nature. Although this canto shares similarities with much of the *Metamorphoses*, it pertains specifically to two stories: Daedalus and Icarus, and Arachne and Minerva. As Guyon’s ferry sails to the Bower of Blisse, Spenser describes moral vices with spatial distinctions, just as Ovid did. On the ferry, the character’s surroundings provide a warning for moderation, like we see in Daedalus’ speech to his son. Then, once the ferry reaches land, depictions of art and nature mirror
the contest between Arachne and Minerva in Book 6 of the *Metamorphoses*. The same warning for moderation exists in Arachne’s downfall; the girl attempts to surpass natural boundaries with her art, and the gods ruin her for it. Unlike the *Metamorphoses*, the artists of Spenser’s Bower of Blisse never warrant a mention – that is, until Spenser mentions his own role in the artistry. Intriguingly, the artwork in Spenser’s Bower of Blisse would warrant a punishment in Ovid’s universe. Just like Icarus, who flew too high, and Arachne, with her heavenly crime, Spenser surpasses his natural boundaries and “makes new the nature (naturam novat)” (Ovid, *Met.* 8.189) of his art. In Canto 12 of Book 2, Spenser advocates for moderation by alluding to the natural boundaries evident in Icarus and Arachne’s stories; in the second half of the canto, he defies these very boundaries with his own artwork, and equates himself to Ovid in the process.

Many of Ovid’s tales in the *Metamorphoses* deal with humans who strive to do too much, and meet a miserable end because of their audacity. No characters exemplify this better than Daedalus and Icarus in Book 8. Just like in Arachne’s contest, the story’s sad ending depends on the characters’ reckless imitation of Nature. Although Icarus takes on the avarian role, and “goes the higher way, dragged by a lust for the sky (caelique capidine tractus, altius egit iter)” (Ovid, 8.224-225), Daedalus and his artwork are also responsible for the great fall. Ovid states that Daedalus’ artwork is unprecedented, suggesting its danger, “he set his mind upon unknown arts, and recreated nature (ignotas animum dimittit in artes naturamque novat)” (Ovid, 8.188-189). Later, once Daedalus sees his son’s wings floating in the ocean, he doesn’t curse the boy’s reckless behavior, but his own artwork (“devovitque suas artes,” 8.234). Ironically, Daedalus prefaces the flight with a caution: “I warn you to fly in the middle route, for, if you should go lower, the sea will weigh down your wings, and if you go higher, the sun will burn them (medio ut limite curras, Icare, moneo, ne, si demissior ibis, unda gravet pennas, si celsior, ignis adurat)” (Ovid, 8.204-206). Icarus symbolically and literally flies too high with his audacious wings (“audaci…volati” 8.223) and dies because of it. But the fact is that neither Daedalus nor Icarus takes the middle route; both father and son reach too high by testing the boundaries of the natural world, Icarus as a bird, and Daedalus as its creator. Strikingly similar warnings for moderation appear in Canto 12, in Book 2 of the Faerie Queene, where Spenser represents the flight with a boat ride.
Just like in Daedalus’ warning, spatial distinctions represent moral vicissitudes in Stanzas 6, 7 and 8 of Canto 12. As is typical in the Faerie Queene, Spenser takes his analogy a step further than Ovid did, by assigning vices to two improper paths: the Gulfe of Greedinesse and Rocke of Reproach. Although editors traditionally equate these two obstacles to Scylla and Charybdis, I posit that the language in these stanzas, and Spenser’s Ovidian allusions later on, suggest that Guyon’s ferry is more representative of Icarus than an Odyssean ship. The Gulfe of Greedinesse parallels Ovid’s ocean that swallowed Icarus: the only rhyming word that Spenser repeats in stanza six is “deepe,” metonymically describing the water. After “deepe’s” second mention, the remaining two lines conclude with “descent” and “drent.” Not only do repetition and rhyme scheme emphasize the Gulfe’s association with the ocean, but the stanza’s end reflects Icarus’ watery death, with the words “falles,” “descent,” and “drent.” In sharp contrast to the Gulfe’s low and deep position, the Rocke of Reproach occupies a loftier local, described in stanza eight as “this hight,” that attracts “Meawes,” “Seagulles,” “Cormoyrants” and “birds of ravenous race.” The Rocke’s winged victims act “in wanton joys, and lustes intemperate” (stanza seven); Icarus, who wore wings, also experiences joy and lust on lines 223 (“gaudere”) and 224 (“cupidine”). The only way to get past the Rocke and the Gulfe is right down the center, as Daedalus called the “medio limite” (Ovid 8.204), but what Spenser calls “an even course” (2.12.3). This comparison shows just one of the ways Spenser mimics Ovid’s natural boundaries, though with little mention of the ways humans surpass those limitations, which he discusses in the second half of the canto.

The Rocke and the Gulfe aren’t the only metaphors in Canto 12 that recall Ovidian-style moderation. For example, Guyon faces impulsiveness in Stanza 14 with the false islands, “unthriftyhed” in Stanza 18 with its quicksand, and covetousness of the singing girl in Stanza 33. In each instance, Guyon has to practice his restraint to succeed, opting for moderation instead of indulgence. This theme of moderation, though most famously exemplified with Ovid’s Daedalus and Icarus, actually recurs throughout the Metamorphoses too. Humans pay the price for reckless audacity in Book 5 (with the daughters of Pieros), Book 6 (Apollo and Marsyas), Book 11 (Pan and Midas), and more. In short, both Spenser and Ovid use metaphorical stories to advocate for the middle path (“medio limite” Ovid 8.204). Just about halfway through the canto, at stanza 42, Spenser combines
these cautionary metaphors with a discussion of art and nature that persists throughout the rest of Book 2. In his depiction of visual art, Spenser uses language reminiscent of the Arachne and Minerva story, and continues his conversation with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In addition to the thematic parallels in Icarus and Arachne’s failures, both stories share salient textual similarities, which Spenser recreates in turn.

Ovid’s Arachne is a lowly country girl, who displays art’s connection to nature when she enters into a tapestry-making contest with Minerva, the goddess of weaving. Despite her obvious disadvantage, Arachne agrees to the challenge and does surprisingly well. When she examines the tapestries, Minerva finds no fault in the girl’s, “neither Minerva nor even Envy (personified) could slander her work (*non ille Pallas, non illud carpere Livor possit opus*)” (Ovid 6.129-130). But before we learn the verdict, Arachne tries to hang herself out of fear of Minerva’s wrath, when the goddess graciously transforms her into a spider. During the contest, Ovid describes the benchmark of artistic success as a close representation of the natural world, like we saw in the perfectly natural wings that Daedalus constructed (“for he arranged the feathers in order…so you might think they grew on a slope (*nam ponit in ordine pennas…ut clivo crevisse putas*)” Ovid 11.189). Similarly, Arachne weaves a scene, “so that that you might think it was a true bull and true waves (*verum taurum, freta vera putares*)” (Ovid 6.104). In a rare direct address, Ovid uses the second person subjunctive form of *puto* to equate good artistry to the natural world in both these passages; Arachne and Daedalus’ creations are beautiful because they resemble what we might see in nature. As Arachne toils away, Ovid says that “she returned the very likeness of the scenes (*suam faciemque locorum reddidit*)” (Ovid 6.121-122). The word *reddidit* stands out here because of its contrast with the verbs that Ovid usually uses in the story. Lewis and Short cite this exact line, saying that “*reddo*,” in this instance, means, “to give back a thing according to its *nature*.” The word, then, implies that Arachne wove scenes according to their natural appearance, and that there is little distinction between *ars* and *natura* in her work.

Nature determines the epitome of perfection for Arachne’s tapestry and for the Bower of Blisse. When Ovid talks about Arachne and Minerva’s skill, he describes transitioning colors in the tapestries, deeming the transition good if it resembles a rainbow: “She wove…like when an arc is wont to stain the vast sky after rainfall, when the sun refracts into a wide curve
(textur...qualis ab imbre solent percussis solibus arcus, inficere ingenti longum curvamine caelum)” (Ovid 6.63-67). With this simile, Ovid designates the natural world as the model of perfection, which the women will strive to recreate. In the Faerie Queene, Nature becomes the measure of successful art as well. Describing the Bower of Blisse in stanza 42, Spenser writes, “A place...that Natures worke by art can imitate.” As the art at the Bower of Blisse becomes more alluring, it enters into a contest with the natural world, and settles with equality: “One would have thought/...that nature had for wantonesse ensued/ Art, and that Art at nature did repine;/ So striving each th’ other to undermine...so diff’ring both in willes, agreed in fine” (Spenser 2.59). Like the Bower, Arachne strives to exceed a mere imitation of nature with her art, and tests the limits of artistic ability with her “reckless audacity (furialibus ausis)” (Ovid 6.84). Spenser never attributes a reckless artist to his ekphrastic artwork, but scenes on the Bower of Blisse exhibit the same superhuman capabilities as Arachne’s tapestry.

Ovid describes Minerva’s tapestry first, so that we have something to compare Arachne’s to; Minerva’s scene sets a divine standard that Arachne could strive to emulate, but would be foolish to equal or surpass. The goddess’ tapestry is planned and orderly, with all the Olympians in the middle, four scenes in the corners, and a decorative olive-vine border around the edge. In a word, we can clearly picture the artwork in our heads. Then, Arachne foolishly tries to outdo the goddess by testing the limits of possibility. Within her tapestry, she depicts motion, emotion, and metamorphoses. See her representation of Europa, for example: “She seemed to look back at the abandoned land, and to call her companions, to lift up her foot, and to fear the dashing water’s touch (Ipsa videbatur terras spectare relictas et comit...ta Centauros et amores amata

In a similar ekphrasis, extending across two stanzas, Spenser describes impossible visual art in a similar way: “And therein all the famous history/ of Jason and Medea was ywrit/ her mighty charms, her furious loving fit/...his falséd faith, and love too lightly flit” (Spenser 2.44). In Ovid and in Spenser, perfectly constructed visual art can be impossible to imagine, with elements like fits of passion, false faith, and fear. The artists of both scenes seem to possess otherworldly talent, so as to create unimaginable artwork. In the Metamorphoses, at least, this excessive behavior spells trouble for Arachne." As the Canto
progresses, Spenser’s intentions to mimic Ovid – or rather, to imitate Arachne – become only clearer.

Linguistic and thematic similarities aside, nothing says Metamorphoses like metamorphosis itself. At the end of Book 2, the Palmer performs a transformation à la Ovid, where he turns beasts into men. Like the Metamorphoses, a deity had transformed them into animals that suited their temperaments, “now turned into figures hideous/ according to their mindes like monstruous” (Spenser 2.12.85). The transformations underpin a recurring lesson in the canto, that humans are destined to err, and we have to take cautions to avoid our vices. The one metamorphosed man who wants to remain a beast, named Grill, plays the role of a human who gives into temptation; he eschews the middle path, like Icarus who flies too high, and Arachne who exceeds her boundaries. However, Spenser takes this last opportunity to advocate for restraint one more time. Grill complains “that had from hoggish forme him brought to naturall” (Spenser 2.12.86). At this point in the canto, it is safe to regard nature as the epitome of perfection, suitable to strive for but not to surpass. But though Spenser calls for moderation in his metamorphoses scene, he depicted a heedless excess of natural boundaries just earlier. In stanza 77, Spenser describes a “wanton Ladie, with her lover lose,” whose beauty entices the men. In reference to the woman’s good looks, Spenser says, “more subtle web Arachne cannot spin” (2.77). Given Arachne’s punishment for her nearly immaculate tapestry, one might wonder who created this attractive facade, which surpasses the boundaries that Ovid laid out. According to Ovid, Spenser’s rules for moderation should collapse as soon as art begins to compete with nature in Stanza 52.

Since Spenser never actually names an artist of his Bower, he leaves no one to take the credit besides himself. In the Metamorphoses, Ovid removes himself from the boundary-breaking art by putting the tools in his characters’ hands. By the end of Book 2, we still have no indication as to where the Bower’s art came from; however, we need not look far to see Spenser pick up the tools himself. In just the third stanza in Book 3, Spenser refers to himself as the artist of his work, defining his role in terms of visual art, “cannot your glorious pourtraict figure plaine/ that I in colourd shows may shadow it” (3.3). He grabs our attention here because he so rarely speaks in the first person, and he assigns himself the role of Book 2’s missing artist. The theme of audacious artists only arises once we pair our reading of Spenser with Ovid, his inspiration. Although
it seems obvious that Spenser should be the artist of his own work, it wouldn’t warrant a comment without a paired reading of the *Metamorphoses*, with Ovid’s help, though, it becomes clear that Spenser takes on the role of an artist like Arachne and Daedalus. Consider the way Daedalus erred: “he set his mind upon unknown arts, and recreated nature (\textit{ignotas animnum dimittit in artes naturamque novat})” (Ovid, 8.188-189).” In the *Faerie Queene*, Spenser adopts Ovid’s art form – namely, epic poetry – and recreates it (“\textit{novat}”) with his own form, the Spenserian stanza. In many ways, Spenser takes on the role of Ovid’s successor. Both authors wrote sprawling epics that rely on familiar tropes – moralizing themes, divine intervention, idealistic heroes – but also transform the genre, by incorporating numerous short stories instead of a single, continuous narrative. Spenser leaves no doubt about his intention to mimic Ovid, especially in Book 2.12. The theme of moderation features heavily in the canto, as Guyon dodges the moral traps that Icarus could not avoid. Besides that, Spenser dictates artistic perfection by means of nature, like Ovid did for Arachne and Daedalus. Not only do the two epics share thematic similarities, but their language is almost identical at times. As if his intentions were not clear enough, Spenser integrates Ovid right into the canto, with retellings of Ovidian tales in canto 52, the mention of Arachne in 77, and even metamorphoses in 86. However, Spenser and Ovid’s epics certainly aren’t identical. In 2.12, Spenser distinguishes himself from Ovid by inserting himself into the poem via the first person; in doing so, he tags himself as the artist even Arachne cannot surpass (2.12.77). Spenser ventures into unknown arts (“\textit{ignotas…artes}” Ovid 188) and reinvents Ovid’s epic form, inserting himself as a character who reaches too high. This time, though, Minerva yields and the clouds recede, making way for the artist whose wings have yet to melt.
Bibliography


Notes

3 Glossed as “drowned” in the NCE.
4 Words for paint, depict, or represent were limited to a concrete list of vocabulary up until this point in the story: pingit, inscribit, facit, dat, addit, and cognates.
5 *A Latin Dictionary* by Lewis and Short
6 Arachne’s excessive behavior and overall boundary breaking manifests itself in her ivy border, which Ovid describes as a “tenui limbo, a thin boundary” (6.127); puzzling, because Minerva’s frame was just any old width. This, again, is why Ovid lets Minerva go first: to give Arachne a leader to follow, whom she ignores anyway, by pushing the “boundary.” Recall another character who didn’t follow his leader? “The boy began to rejoice in his audacious wings, and deserted his leader (puer audaci coepit gaudere volatu deseruitque ducem)” (Ovid 223-224).
7 James Joyce, another pioneer in narrative form, also found inspiration in the Daedalus-Icarus story. In fact, the epigraph to Joyce’s bildungsroman is this same passage, from Ovid 8.188-189. The protagonist – and Joyce’s persona – Stephen Daedalus, breaks down boundaries too, but that’s a discussion for another essay.
8 It’s hard to compare languages of course, but like we saw, the authors’ word choice sometimes overlaps: both use the
imperative to call for the middle path (Spenser 2.12.3; Ovid 8.204), both cite joy and lust as ways to stray from that path (Spenser 2.12.7; Ovid 8.223-224), and both use the second person subjunctive to stress art’s perfection (Spenser 2.12.44; Ovid 6.104 & 11.189). And all these connections come exclusively from Spenser 2.12 and Ovid 6 & 8; there are many more overlaps, I imagine, but one could spend his whole life looking and still miss most of them.