Introduction

It would obviously be a paradox to find a humorist in Spenser.
Louis Cazamian, *The Development of English Humor*[1]

Spenser's conspicuous ambition and seriousness of purpose in *The Faerie Queene* inhibited recognition of the poem's comic dimension for centuries – from its first publication in 1590 until at least the 1960s. Milton's famous compliment to the 'sage and serious Poet *Spencer*' captures the powerful equation of morality and sobriety that once dominated the critical landscape.[2] Of today, it may be said that irony has largely displaced sobriety as the hallmark of the moralist. In a poem once associated with Protestant and nationalistic 'single-mindedness', we are increasingly appreciative of Spenser's willingness to leave major moral issues in a state of tension.[3] Humour has, as it were, a critical footing. Yet the old view is still deeply influential, shaping our expectations in ways that are often quite unconscious. Spenser's sense of humour remains underexplored and, at

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1 Louis Cazamian acknowledges comic elements in the minor poems, but finds in the poet of *The Faerie Queene* 'a fervent votary of single-mindedness'; *The Development of English Humor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1952), pp. 358–62 (p. 358).

2 Milton speaks of 'our sage and serious Poet *Spencer*, whom I dare be known to think a better teacher then *Scotus* or *Aquinas*'; *Areopagitica*, in John Milton, *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don Marion Wolfe, 8 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–82), Vol. II: *1643–1648*, ed. Ernest Sirluck (1959), p. 516. There is evidence that Milton appreciated that seriousness in a Christian context does not prohibit humour (see pp. 98–9 below); nevertheless, the dominant sense of his compliment to Spenser has been influential.

3 In contrast to Cazamian (see n. 1 above), Colin Burrow calls the chief delight of *The Faerie Queene* 'elusiveness'; *Edmund Spenser* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1996), p. 27 n. 1.

crucial moments, missed altogether. Fundamentally, it is undervalued. This book does more than bring a comic perspective to new areas of the poem; it argues that we cannot talk seriously about Christian morality in *The Faerie Queene* without also appreciating the poem's humour.

There are many kinds of humour in the Spenserian corpus: wordplay and puns, caricature and grotesquerie, ascerbic satire, naïve and melodramatic narrators, fabliau and mock-epic. And Spenser was magnetically drawn to Ovid, Chaucer, and Ariosto – poets who are celebrated as well as notorious for their humour. In the first half of the twentieth century, a small number of critics turned their attention to these factors, and to the neglected comedic dimension of *The Faerie Queene* in particular. Often approaching this dimension as 'comic relief' requiring emphasis rather than interpretation as such, the tendency of these critics was to survey humorous lines and passages in the poem as an end in themselves.[4] Written in the light of intervening decades, my own study proceeds on the assumption that, as Lauren Silberman has remarked, it is not enough just to notice Spenserian humour; we must 'act critically' on it.[5]

Critical thinking has, to an extent, evolved in this direction. In the wake of Harry Berger's groundbreaking work on Spenserian artifice, self-reflexiveness, and pastiche, a handful of articles in the 1960s and 1970s focused on the contrivances of Spenser's language and on the systemic ironies of his narrative and allegorical techniques.[6] This trend in the direction of sceptical reassessment is still developing, to

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4 An early acknowledgement of Spenser's use of burlesque and situational comedy may be found in R. W. Church, *Spenser*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1888), pp. 165, 177, 183–8. Two notes by Charles B. Burke followed five decades later: 'Humour in Spenser', *NQ*, 166 (1934), 113–15; and 'The "Sage and Serious" Spenser', *NQ*, 175 (1938), 457–8. Allan H. Gilbert, Burke's colleague, took up the theme in 'Spenserian Comedy', *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, 2 (1957), 95–104. In an appendix entitled 'Spenser's High Comedy', W. B. C. Watkins argues that Spenser's humour competes with that of the best Elizabethan dramatists: *Shakespeare and Spenser* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), pp. 293–304. Robert O. Evans, 'Spenserian Humor: *Faerie Queene* III and IV', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 60 (1959), 288–99 may also be considered as part of this first wave of humour criticism. Evans finds humour in the central books but takes it for granted that the theological and ethical concerns of Books I and II prohibit comic treatment.

5 Lauren Silberman, 'Spenser and Ariosto: Funny Peril and Comic Chaos', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 25 (1988), 23–34 (p. 24).

6 See Martha Craig, 'The Secret Wit of Spenser's Language', in *Elizabethan Poetry: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Paul J. Alpers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 447–72; Judith Petterson Clark, 'His Earnest unto Game: Spenser's Humor in *The Faerie Queene*', *Emporia State Research Studies*, 15 (1967), 13–24, 26–7; J. Dennis Huston, 'The Function of the Mock Hero in Spenser's "Faerie Queene"', *MP*, 66 (1969), 212–17; Lewis

the point that irony and humour have been implicated in some of the most fundamental and productive questions in Spenser criticism. How trustworthy are Spenser's narrators, and how postured are his paratexts? Is chivalric romance idealising or provocatively low-brow? When is imitation parodic? What is Spenser's attitude toward sexuality and the body? How sincere is his homage to Elizabeth and her court? These questions have been at the root of a number of ironic interpretations of *The Faerie Queene* in the past two decades. Indicative of this critical trend at its most overt is the volley of articles that appeared between 2002 and 2005 on the subject of Spenserian parody, sparked by Donald Cheney's brief but provocative article on the subject, and continuing most recently in Judith H. Anderson's *Spenser's Narrative Figuration of Women in 'The Faerie Queene'*.[7]

And yet, for all the advances in recent decades, Silberman's gauntlet has not yet been seized as such. Existing work on Spenserian humour is scattered across a broad territory, and is usually ancillary to a distinct

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H. Miller, Jr, 'The Ironic Mode in Books 1 and 2 of *The Faerie Queene*', *PLL*, 7 (1971), 133–49; Linwood E. Orange, '"All Bent to Mirth": Spenser's Humorous Wordplay', *SAQ*, 71 (1972), 539–47; and William Nelson, *Fact or Fiction: The Dilemma of the Renaissance Storyteller* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), Chapter 4. For Berger, see Harry Berger, Jr, *Revisionary Play: Studies in the Spenserian Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

7 Reassessing Spenser's relation to Ariosto, Cheney coins the phrase 'sympathetic parody' to describe Spenser's nuanced imitation of his Italian forebear, and to challenge the assumption that his appropriations of *Orlando furioso* always take the moral high ground; Donald Cheney, 'Spenser's Parody', *Connotations*, 12 (2002), 1–13. In reply, Anthony M. Esolen, 'Highways and Byways: A Response to Donald Cheney', *Connotations*, 13 (2003), 1–4, relates Spenser's playfulness, capacity for chivalric pastiche, and habit of echoing and revising himself to the poet's Christian faith. Richard McCabe's longer essay, 'Parody, Sympathy and Self: A Response to Donald Cheney', *Connotations*, 13 (2003), 5–22, one of the fullest contributions to the subject of Spenser and humour to date, offers a systematic analysis of the proximity of epic and mock-epic, and the many forms of parody (and, more generally, irony) operating in *The Faerie Queene*. In a brief final instalment to the exchange, Lawrence Rhu (who has historically emphasised Spenser's earnest reformation of Ariosto) acknowledges the value of Cheney's amused scepticism, especially as it applies to Arthur's 'altruistic' pursuit of the distressed Florimell; 'On Cheney on Spenser's Ariosto', *Connotations*, 15 (2005), 91–6. Judith H. Anderson's monograph offers a far more in-depth treatment of Spenserian parody, both intertextual and self-reflexive. Having benefited from Anderson's career-long interest in Spenser's playful and parodic side, I regret that my discovery of her study came too late for its findings fully to be taken account of in the present work. Notwithstanding our divergent approaches, Anderson's exploration of Spenser's playful strategies of self-revision and echo, and her general appreciation of the humanising impulse of his sense of humour, at several points speak directly to the findings of this study; Judith H. Anderson, *Spenser's Narrative Figuration of Women in 'The Faerie Queene'* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2017).

critical focus, or limited to articles. Moreover, Milton's famous 'sage and serious' remark may be invoked with detachment, but for many it still resonates. Indeed, it is arguably Milton's intended compliment, not the description itself, that has lost most currency. In 2008, Andrew Hadfield was able to declare that *The Faerie Queene* is generally reputed 'worthy and humorless, esoteric and at odds with enjoyment'.[8] While few if any Spenserians would positively lay claim to the latter view, most would acknowledge that the notion of a humourless Spenser is familiar. This study contends that we need to be aware of the insidious effects of this familiarity, and of the extent to which our apprehension of a serious and ambitiously conceived moral vision in *The Faerie Queene* conjures expectations of humourlessness.

The assumption that seriousness and an absence of humour go hand-in-hand is, of course, understandable. Profitability, gravity, and formality are closely entwined concepts in early modern discourse, literary and religious.[9] But the same assumption thrives in our own era. So often we automatically privilege non-comic perspectives as more innately truthful, meaningful, and worthy than comic ones.[10] I shall argue, however, that Spenser's sense of humour is absolutely consistent with his moral and doctrinal preoccupations, and that its operations in *The Faerie Queene* are both central and profound.[11]

As the title of this book indicates, my subject is *The Faerie Queene*. A number of Spenser's shorter poems are notable, and have been noted, for their humour: the shepherds of *The Shepheardes Calender* are engagingly naïve (in comic contrast to the learned pedantry of E. K.'s commentary); *Virgils Gnat* and *Muiopotmos* testify to Spenser's career-long interest in mock-epic; *Mother Hubberds Tale* is a caustic and irreverent satire; and the *Amoretti*, at times bordering on Petrarchan pastiche, provide amusing insights into the lover's psyche. However, while I reinforce these observations in forthcoming chapters, the primary focus of this study is

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8 Andrew Hadfield, 'Spenser and Jokes', *SSt*, 25 (2010), 1–19 (p. 2).

9 See further Chapter 1.

10 Idiomatic speech is telling in this regard. If something is of great consequence and demands our deepest attention, it is 'no laughing matter'. This phrase dates to the mid-sixteenth century; see *OED*, s.v. 'laughing', *n.*, C2. See further pp. 8–9 and n. 24 below.

11 Few critics have suggested a link between Spenser's humour and his Christian faith. Those who have include C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979 [1936]), p. 356; Esolen, 'Highways and Byways'; Louise Gilbert Freeman, 'Vision, Metamorphosis, and the Poetics of Allegory in the *Mutabilitie Cantos*', *SEL*, 45 (2005), 65–93; and William A. Oram, 'Human Limitation and Spenserian Laughter', *SSt*, 30 (2015), 35–56.

the role of humour in a poem that proclaims its canonical aspirations. Humour in such a context works 'against the grain' to an intensified degree, and, as the history of Spenser criticism attests, is more likely to be missed, sidelined, or met with puzzlement.

Definitions

Henri Bergson (1859–1941) described the task of theorising laughter as 'a pert challenge flung at philosophic speculation'.[12] If finding something funny feels intuitive, analysing that response can be a tortuous business. Theories of the comic (which for the most part incorporate laughter but also speak to humour more broadly) have roots in discussions of jokes by classical rhetoricians, and, since the early modern period, have evolved within a range of contexts – moral, medical, philosophical, and psychological. Such diversely motivated attempts to encapsulate the essence of humour have been synthesised, by modern historians of comic theory, into three competing schools of thought, commonly referred to as 'superiority theory', 'incongruity theory', and 'relief theory'.[13] Each of these theories is associated with (though not exclusively attributable to) a major figure and intellectual epoch: 'superiority' with Hobbes, 'incongruity' with Kant and Schopenhauer, and 'relief' with Freud. However, although I draw explicitly on these and other theories below, for the purposes of my own analysis a modification of these traditional conceptual divisions has been useful. This is because my task here is not to historicise comic theory or its academic reception, but rather to identify some fundamental principles that have been associated with comic recognition since classical times – in other words, principles that serve to link rather than differentiate the three relatively modern 'schools' of thought. These I summarise as: 'reduction', 'ambiguity', and 'play'.[14]

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12 Henri Bergson, 'Laughter' ('Le rire' (1900)), trans. Fred Rothwell, in *Comedy: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), pp. 745–50 (p. 745); henceforth *Comedy*.

13 While superiority theory and relief theory are historically significant, incongruity is now the dominant theoretical model; see John Morreall, 'Philosophy of Humor', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive* (Winter 2016 edn), ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/humor/ (accessed May 2019).

14 'Reduction' is more capacious than 'superiority' because, although still reflective of the power of normative social hierarchies to generate humour, it incorporates all bathetic and downward-tending comic gestures without presupposing a particular response (as such 'reduction' may also be integral to both incongruity and relief). 'Ambiguity' captures verbal and visual tensions traditionally encompassed by 'incongruity' while

At a glance, each of these principles is also a comic technique. 'Reduction', that is, may be exemplified by bathos, error, rudeness, and social inferiority. For the most part, these are *things observed* – in contrast to two of the traditional theoretical schools, 'superiority' and 'relief', which are *things experienced*. Fascinatingly, however, it can be a challenge for the comic theorist to maintain a clear distinction between technique (that which elicits comic recognition) and response (the experience of recognising something as comic).[15] My two other conceptual categories, 'ambiguity' and 'play', bring this point into clearer focus. That is, the quality of ambiguity characterises various comic techniques (double meaning, incongruity, tonal inconsistency, for example) but it also characterises our responses to those techniques (confusion, ambivalence, tension). These things are distinct enough in theory, but in practice it is difficult to prise them apart, because a technique is comic only when it is perceived as such. Furthermore, in a literary context 'comic perception' can have multiple points of reference. For example, when a spectator or reader finds something comically ambiguous, their response may reflect their own ambivalence, or, conversely, their perception of ambivalence in the author or narrator or character (or an overlap of these things). In other words, comic recognition can depend upon, and effectively foreground, a dynamic relationship among the spectator or reader, the comic subject, the narrator, and the imagined author. Finally, 'play' broadly alludes to the recreative and pleasure-giving properties of humour and is also classifiable both in terms of technique (fictionality, artifice, nonsense, exaggeration) and response (relief, affirmation, consolation, validation). Again, there is an overlap, and a degree of mutual dependence, between 'play' as the perceived activity of the author, character, or performer on the one hand, and as the province of the reader or spectator on the other.

If the distinction between technique and response is at times difficult to maintain, so too is the distinction between the principles themselves: experientially speaking, 'reduction', 'ambiguity', and 'play' are

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also, by virtue of pertaining to both objective and subjective states of tension, accessing ambivalence as a response (see further my discussion of comic techniques versus comic responses below). 'Play', as I explain, is a more recent theoretical model canvassing the social functions of the comic, and I draw upon it to foreground the affirmative and pleasurable aspects of humour that are implied, to varying degrees, by all three established theories (i.e. superiority, incongruity, and relief). The element of surprise, also emphasised by theorists of humour, is a potential concomitant of each of the principles I discuss, and is not treated separately.

15 Reflecting this challenge, the three traditional theoretical schools are divided unevenly between technique and response.

largely interdependent. To give one of thousands of possible examples, the ironic activist battle cry 'the truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off' exemplifies reduction (via linguistic bathos and parodic biblical quotation), out of which arises an ambivalent combination of optimism and cynicism. The intentional starkness of this opposition, achieved through exaggeration and surprise, is essentially playful (which does not mean unserious).[16] For convenience, then, I will elaborate on each principle in turn, treating it like a separate ingredient, before moving, in the second part of this introduction, to the characteristic synthesis of all three principles in the humour of *The Faerie Queene*.

Reduction

Deflation, undercutting, lowering: these are fundamental, powerful generators of humour. The physical body is one of the most universal and timeless of comic themes, especially when its needs and vulnerabilities take precedence over the 'higher' faculties of mind and spirit. Bergson went so far as to say that 'any incident is comic that calls our attention to the physical in a person'.[17] While the lowness of the body is chiefly metaphorical, it is the literally lower regions of the body that dominate in comic situations, especially farcical ones. In such contexts, we also expect to see bodies brought low – for example, tumbling to the ground. Slipping on a banana peel is a twentieth-century cliché that epitomises the comedy of physical vulnerability and of humour's 'downward trajectory'.

The figurative equivalent of slipping on a banana peel is a descent from any perceived height. This may, for example, be linguistic (as in 'the truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off') or social. The cutting down to size of authorities, grandees, and high-mindedness is a prominent function of humour.[18] So too is the foregrounding of low or devalued cultural categories: bodily appetites and various kinds of unattractiveness, error, and disgrace, for example. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle identifies such things as the province of comic drama, so long as their negative consequences are limited. Aristotle takes it for granted that laughter on the stage will always be directed at the preoccupations and

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16 Cf. John 8:32: 'the truth shall make you free'.
17 Bergson, 'Laughter', in *Comedy*, p. 748.
18 Freud is unusual in attributing grandeur and elevation to humour, but this is because of what he understands to be its ability to *cut down or reduce* oppressive realities and to assert the 'invulnerability of the ego'; Sigmund Freud, *Art and Literature*, Penguin Freud Library, 14 (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 428–9 (my italics).

intrigues of low-class people (a rule that the drawing-room comedies of Oscar Wilde happily reversed).[19] Renaissance literary critics often echoed this rule of thumb regarding social class and humour, together with the connection between laughter and ugliness also forged by Aristotle (and Cicero and Quintilian after him).[20] However, comic practice could be far more democratic and wide-ranging than comic theory, as we shall see in Chapter 1.

Comic reduction is at the heart of the aforementioned 'superiority' theory of laughter, associated most notably with Hobbes but also integral to early modern justifications for humour. The essential idea is that when we laugh at others we recognise their limitations and raise ourselves above them.[21] Nevertheless, the lowness of comedy has historically rubbed off on its authors and consumers. Evident in both the *Poetics* and in early modern literary criticism is a further correlation between the ostensibly trivial themes of comedy and the subordinate cultural value of the genre itself. According to Aristotle, 'more dignified [authors] represented noble actions … of noble men, the less serious those of low-class people'. Elsewhere in the *Poetics*, Aristotle voices the common understanding that 'less vulgar art is superior, and in all cases what is addressed to a superior audience is less vulgar'.[22] Puttenham, too, associated the socially lower subject matter of comic drama ('vnthrifty youthes, yong damsels, old nurses, bawds, brokers, ruffians and parasites') with an audience composed of 'common people'.[23] Today we carefully avoid pejorative conflations of subject matter, audience, and artistic worth (if one of these

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19 Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. M. E. Hubbard, in *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in New Translations*, ed. D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 85–132 (pp. 94–6); henceforth *ALC*.

20 For Aristotle, ugliness includes ridiculousness. He observes that comedy exaggerates, showing us 'people worse than are found in the world' while limiting negative consequences; see *ibid*., p. 96. On the influence of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian in establishing ugliness as the object of laughter see Marvin T. Herrick, *Comic Theory in the Sixteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964 [1950]), pp. 37–46 (esp. pp. 37–8) and, for primary sources, p. 35 n. 13 below. Cf. Sidney's remarks on laughter as an expression of scorn in Sir Philip Sidney, *Sidney's 'The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. and intro. Gavin Alexander (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 47–8; henceforth *Defence*.

21 For Hobbes's theory of laughter as 'sudden glory' over others see Thomas Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. Sir William Molesworth, Bart, 11 vols (London: John Bohn, 1966), Vols III, p. 46; IV, p. 46. On early modern attitudes to humour see Chapter 1.

22 Aristotle, *Poetics*, pp. 94, 131.

23 George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1904), Vol. II, pp. 1–193 (p. 33); henceforth *ECE*.

factors is accounted 'low' in some way, it is not assumed that the others must follow suit). Nevertheless, as I noted above, the root assumption that 'that which is important and essential cannot be comical' persists as a tenet of modern culture.[24] It is commonly assumed that a comic perspective is less representative and more radically selective than a non-comic one, and that the truths it reveals are unimportant – indeed, funny *because* unimportant.[25]

The idea that comic works are necessarily lighter in substance or shorter in philosophical reach is, of course, a fallacy. The often involuntary nature of amusement (especially when expressed in laughter) can suggest that the causes and effects of comic material are somewhat self-evident, or, conversely, resistant to analysis. But the psychology of amusement is as complex and profound as is the psychology of suffering: both tap deeply into 'the way the world is' in ways that are revealing and elusive by turns. In the theatre, comedy and tragedy have separate (and, for Aristotle, hierarchical) spheres of jurisdiction – they treat different subjects. But as modes of perception, the comic and the tragic offer alternative perspectives on the same conditions of existence, as the traditional depiction of the laughing philosopher Democritus alongside the weeping philosopher Heraclitus is intended to illustrate. In the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, laughter 'is

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24 It is a measure of the power of this conviction that it can coexist with esteem for comic art forms and perspectives. Even Bergson, whose essay on laughter seeks to treat his subject with 'the respect due to life', felt compelled to add 'however trivial it may be'; Bergson, 'Laughter', in *Comedy*, p. 745. Mikhail Bakhtin famously (if controversially) dates the onset of this bias to the seventeenth century; *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 66–7; cf. p. 78 below. More recently, Derek Brewer has asserted: 'the exaltation of tragedy as a solitary extreme which is alone truly expressive of the human condition is a characteristic of twentieth-century literary theory'; Derek Brewer, ed., *Medieval Comic Tales*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996), p. xvi.

25 The connections among humour, enjoyment, and notional triviality are difficult to tease apart. Dalbir Sehmby proposes that 'the lesser status of all things comical' reflects both the assumption that humour is 'more easily knowable than other, more serious forms of art' and, paradoxically, its unsettling effects; Dalbir Sehmby, 'Comic Nescience: An Experimental View of Humour and a Case for the Cultural Negotiation Function of Humour', in *Developments in Linguistic Humour Theory*, ed. Marta Dynel (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2013), pp. 75–102 (pp. 80–1) (see further pp. 11–12 below). Human survival's dependence on toil and the related 'ethical notion that everything man does naturally and without effort is a falsification of true morality' may also cast some light on the cultural devaluation of the comic; see Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans. Alexander Dru (London: Faber and Faber, 1952), pp. 37–8. On the Aristotelian tenet that successful comedy depends upon the limitation of negative consequences, see pp. 12, 14–15 below.

one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man'.[26] And, as we shall see in the chapters to come, humour's downward trajectory and fixation upon low cultural categories has significant leverage. Comic reduction can conservatively affirm normative hierarchies – pushing the low lower and the high higher – but it also has an unparalleled power to challenge, if not dismantle, the assumptions that shore up those hierarchies.

Ambiguity

Defined as the 'capability of being understood in two or more ways' (*OED*, 3(a)), ambiguity is a common denominator of a very wide range of comic scenarios, portrayals, and statements. As noted already, the 'capability of being understood in two or more ways' implies something divided in both the comic object and one's response to it. Laurent Joubert, the French physician and prominent Renaissance theorist of laughter, recognised the prevalence of ambivalence as a comic response. His *Traité dv ris* (1579) asserts that conflicted feelings – repulsion and attraction, joy and sadness, for example – are released when we laugh.[27] Such a theory is hardly arcane; most of us will recognise that when we laugh a sense of distance or superiority can be complicated by feelings of identification or empathy, for example. Conflicted responses may also be more cognitive than emotional: for example, we find caricatures funny because they are both close to the truth and patently exaggerated – arguably it is the tension between these simultaneous apprehensions that is comically productive.

   Beyond localised examples of emotional or cognitive irresolution, comic ambiguity can have far-reaching, philosophical implications. A refusal to see the world from multiple angles is, essentially, a humourless position. Just so, a willingness to recognise ambiguity and admit confusion is conducive to comic recognition. So often and in so many contexts, laughter registers a fundamental tension between the human drive to make sense of the world (and our countless associated

26 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 66.
27 See Laurent Joubert, *Traité dv ris, contenant son essance, ses causes, et merveilleus effais, curieusemant recerchés, raisonnés & observés* (Paris, 1579), Book I, Chapters 10–14 (pp. 71–90); henceforth *Traité*. For an English translation see Laurent Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, trans. Gregory David de Rocher (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1980), pp. 38–45; henceforth *Treatise*. On the classical roots of Joubert's theory, see Erica Fudge, 'Learning to Laugh: Children and Being Human in Early Modern Thought', *Textual Practice*, 17 (2003), 277–94 (pp. 288–93).

expectations of 'how things should be') and the apparent reluctance of the universe to be known, manipulated, and physically negotiated. This is why dogmatic, fixed, and otherwise inflexible positions regarding 'how things are/must be done' are a prime subject of satire; laughter intuitively acknowledges the other side of the coin.[28]

Some experiences of comic recognition are more ambivalent than others. In his rich theoretical essay on irony and satire, Northrop Frye distinguishes between, on the one hand, 'low-norm satire', which he defines as 'conventional satire on the unconventional', pitched to reinforce shared values, and, on the other hand, a ludic perspective on human affairs that he calls 'quixotic satire', whereby 'the sources and values of the conventions themselves are objects of ridicule'. The latter is fundamentally more sceptical and disorientating than the former. Where the low-norm satirist laughs at socially deviant behaviour and implicitly endorses one or another standard of judgement, the quixotic satirist acknowledges a 'collision between a selection of standards from experience and the feeling that experience is bigger than any set of beliefs about it'.[29] To adapt Frye's formula to my own slight example, one may say that in laughing at the proverbial bad taste of the 1980s, the low-norm satirist passes judgement on the serious-looking people with teased hair, while the quixotic satirist acknowledges the absurd imperatives of fashion itself. Intuition of the limited standards by which we, as human beings, judge the world around us, even in the very moment that we judge, may be described as the linchpin of comic ambivalence at its most profound.

Observing humour's tendency to thrive upon and foster disorientation and interpretative uncertainty in a world that prioritises comprehension, Dalbir Sehmby proposes that this helps to explain the suspicion evoked by humour and 'the lesser status of all things comical'. Both Sehmby and Frye seem to agree that the production of uncertainty (and concomitant rejection or frustration of systematic approaches to knowledge and experience) is both the central 'problem' of humour – the thing that troubles theorists and moralists – and also its most valuable cultural

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28 A central thesis of Bergson's classic essay on laughter is that 'rigidity is … comic, and laughter is its corrective' (Bergson, 'Laughter,' in *Comedy*, p. 74). See also Schopenhauer on the pleasures of incongruity, pp. 13–14 below.

29 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 228–9. George Meredith, in his 'An Essay on Comedy' (1877), approaches Frye's concept of the quixotic when he asserts that 'contempt is a sentiment that cannot be entertained by comic intelligence' because part of us always identifies with, and in some sense accepts, the follies we laugh at; *Comedy*, p. 743.

function.[30] Specifically, the value of uncertainty resides in its implicit challenge to dogmatism, reductiveness, and oppression on the one hand, and its fostering of humility, pragmatism, and open-mindedness on the other.

Humour's potential seriousness in this respect, its preoccupation with human limitation, casts light on the sometimes surprising proximity of comedy and tragedy. Deep comic ambivalence admits this proximity, introducing elements of pleasure, consolation, and play into the darkest corners of human experience. Although Aristotle dictated that the negative consequences of human limitation must be kept firmly within trivial bounds for comic drama to succeed, in less pliant contexts (such as Shakespearean drama, or indeed real life) the comic may jostle alongside, and comment upon, even the most unflinching acknowledgements of human limitation or failure.[31] As this study will demonstrate, such 'light/dark' ambivalence toward human agency and the profound humour that is peculiar to it is deeply Spenserian.

Play

Reduction and ambiguity are key comic traits, but only when they are apprehended in a spirit of play. Whole books have been written on the conditions and functions of play, but for our purposes here, its defining characteristic is pleasure. This term may be paraphrased, according to context, as 'fun' or 'affirmation' or 'relief', but I would contend that without a kernel of pleasure, play is not play and humour is not humour. Theorists tend to unite on this point. 'Comedy', wrote Christopher Fry, 'is an escape, not from truth but from despair: a narrow escape into faith. It believes in a universal cause for delight.'[32] For Freud, humour offers an antidote to oppressive realities, and signifies 'not only the triumph of the ego but also [the triumph] of the pleasure principle'. Frye observes that 'in laughter itself some kind of deliverance from the unpleasant, even

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30 Sehmby, 'Comic Nescience', pp. 80–1. Cf. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 229–32. Of relevance here is Bakhtin's theory of carnival, according to which the sphere of popular festivity supplants seriousness and order with humour and chaos, suspending or inverting normative hierarchies (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 1–58), and J. Huizinga's *Homo ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980 [1949]), according to which play's creativity defies determinism and logic (pp. 3–4, and see further n. 38 below).

31 Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 96.

32 Christopher Fry, 'Comedy', *Vogue* (January 1951), reprinted in *Comedy*, pp. 754–6 (p. 755).

the horrible, seems to be very important'.[33] The alteration in our brain chemicals when we smile and laugh is now a familiar subject of scientific papers and magazine articles. But reflections on the affirmative aspects of laughter, and, more generally, of amusement, have been a staple of comic and literary theory for centuries. Thomas Deloney, Spenser's contemporary and author of a collection of comic tales (*The Mirrour of Mirth*, 1583), claimed that 'mirth and melody cutteth off care, unburdeneth the mind of sorrow, healeth the grieved heart, and filleth both soul and body with inestimable comfort'. Early modern and medieval examples of this claim could be multiplied here.[34]

Comic theories differ in the degree to which they emphasise the pleasurable aspect of humour and in how they account for it, though a common theme is the sense of validation that attends comic recognition. According to the Hobbesian superiority theory, for example, laughter arises out of feelings of self-worth evoked by the shortcomings of others. Complicating this valid but now marginal theory, modern theorists recognise that the shortcomings of others, where these are comically exaggerated, also allow us in some sense to participate in a refusal to take the self seriously.[35] In other words, comic recognition may 'validate' in opposing ways: by boosting the ego or by suppressing it, by reaffirming social mores and expectations or by momentarily escaping them.

As noted earlier, other major schools of thought are the 'relief theory' associated with Freud and the 'incongruity theory' associated with Kant and Schopenhauer. These theories, which I treat only briefly here, take a different approach to the correlation of humour and pleasure, though validation still plays a role. Relief theory postulates that laughter releases energy that would otherwise be used in tasks of comprehension or, as Freud also argued, repression. Incongruity theory overlaps to some extent with relief theory in that it links the perception of visual, verbal,

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33 Freud, *Art and Literature*, p. 429; Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 46.
34 For *The Mirrour of Mirth* (and Deloney's preface) see P. M. Zall, ed., '*A Hundred Merry Tales' and Other English Jestbooks of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), pp. 349–90 (pp. 353–4). For further observations in this vein see V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (London: Edward Arnold, 1966), pp. 124–44; Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, trans. János M. Bak and Paul A. Hollingsworth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 182; and Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 91.
35 On 'inferiority theory' see Aaron Smuts, 'Humor', in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://iep.utm.edu/humor/#SH2a (accessed May 2019), section 2(a); and, as cited by Smuts, Robert Solomon, 'Are the Three Stooges Funny? Soitanly!', in *Ethics and Values in the Information Age*, ed. Joel Rudinow and Anthony Graybosch (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002), pp. 604–10.

or experiential incoherence to pleasure. Exactly where that pleasure originates is a matter of debate. Anticipating Freud, Schopenhauer argued that we enjoy having the facts of sense perception thwart our expectations because the rational mind is a 'troublesome governness', perpetually reminding us of consequences, dangers, and regrets.[36] By contrast, contemporary theorists argue that incongruity affirms, more than it negates, logic: the pleasure of seeing 'why something is wrong' is akin to the intellectual pleasure of puzzle solving.[37] These are opposing ideas but it is possible to imagine a scenario in which both are applicable – a nonsensical children's book, for example, might well provoke pleasure both because 'it breaks the rules' and because 'we know the rules'.

A further theory of humour, one that does not contradict the other theories so much as contexualise them within a social and evolutionary frame, is 'play theory'. Max Eastman observes (with Aristotle) that humour, as a form of play, depends upon the limitation of negative consequences, emotional or otherwise. More specifically, Eastman argues that such safe bounds permit a detached, playful approach to the disappointing or disagreeable – let-downs, unpleasant surprises, apparent aggression, and so forth. In other words, things that might otherwise be perceived as serious or incommodious become sources of pleasure.[38] But it is not simply the case that the limitation of negative consequences permits humour. Equally, humour can impose a limitation on negative consequences, at least as these are perceived, by asserting the admissibility of play in a world of struggles and disappointments. Above I cited the example of Shakespeare, whose tragedies always include humour. In a non-literary illustration of the same principle, Thomas More reportedly shared a joke with the Constable of the Tower as he

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36 Kant argued that incongruity is displeasing, and that the physical stimulation of laughter reflexively counteracts this displeasure. On the pleasurability of relief and of incongruity, see further Morreall, 'Philosophy of Humor', Sections 3 and 4; and Smuts, 'Humor', 2(b) and (c), both of which resources I am indebted to here.

37 See Morreall, 'Philosophy of Humor', Section 4.

38 Max Eastman, *Enjoyment of Laughter* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1937), pp. 19, 24–6, 31–2, 43–4. On play theory (which includes ethological approaches) see further Morreall, 'Philosophy of Humor', Section 5; and Smuts, 'Humor', Section 2(d). Another significant contribution to the study of play as a cultural phenomenon is Huizinga's *Homo ludens* (see n. 30 above). Huizinga characterises play as pleasurable and free from constraint ('fun'), and recognises humour as a form of play, although this overlap remains peripheral to his thesis that all human activity, and culture itself, is grounded in play (see pp. 1–27, esp. pp. 3, 5–6).

mounted the scaffold: 'See me safe up: for my coming down, I can shift for myself.'[39]

The playfulness of humour and its detachment from 'the real world' is inextricable from its low cultural status, but it also has profound ethical value. Previously, I approached the connection between humour and tolerance through the lens of ambivalence. I observed that comic scenarios often tap into, or depend upon, our capacity to hold two ideas in a state of tension, which can in turn be conducive to scepticism and open-mindedness. But pleasure is also conducive to tolerance, and vice versa. Partly, this is intuitive wisdom: I opened this section with a series of impressionistic remarks from comic theorists grappling with the fundamentally affirmative quality of humour: its capacity to convey, through a mood of play, a sense of 'everything is ok', and the way that this counteracts contempt and despair. We know from experience that being made to laugh when we are angry can diffuse our fixation, and that, in turn, being more tolerant increases our aptitude to make or take a joke.

There is a further, chiefly literary, connection between comic pleasure and tolerance. Pleasure is a concern of the humorist in two distinct yet related senses: (1) the pursuit of pleasure is an enduring comic subject; (2) comedy is intended to give pleasure. As an illustration of the first point, it may be said that the only character type more susceptible to satire than the one who seeks gratification in the face of all obstacles is the one who doggedly condemns pleasure (Ben Jonson's comic creation, the hypocritical Puritan Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, brilliantly harnesses the comic potential of both types). There is a connection between (1) and (2), not only because we find pleasure in laughing at the foibles of others, but also because the humorist who satirises unbalanced attitudes to pleasure is also an apologist for pleasure, by virtue of writing comic fiction.[40] Subtly qualifying any satirical denunciation of pleasure as frivolous or immoral are the pleasure-giving properties of the comic text itself. In the early modern period, this sense of audience complicity was grist to the moralist's mill, but it could also be an enriching irony. In *Bartholomew*

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39 James A. Froude, *History of England*, 10 vols (London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, 1862–6), Vol. II, retrieved from https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd. hw20o3;view=1up;seq=6 (accessed May 2019), p. 403.

40 Comic or not, fiction is itself an invitation to take pleasure, as R. Rawdon Wilson points out: 'all literature, simply in being literature, must manifest some of the modes of play and game'; 'game', in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), pp. 321–3 (p. 321); henceforth *SpE*. Cf. Huizinga, *Homo ludens*, pp. 119–35.

Fair, for example, Jonson develops an analogy between the world of the fair and that of the theatre, both of which hawk their 'ware' to punters. As consumers – humans watching a play for fun – we are reminded to identify with the fairgoers even as we laugh at them.[41] Such tolerant, self-inclusive satire, inclined to rehabilitate pleasure more than to condemn it, is typically Spenserian, as I shall now argue.

Spenserian humour

The Faerie Queene is a bathetic, ambivalent, and playful poem. Approaching the latter two characteristics through the first, this study as a whole may be described as an anatomy of Spenser's pervasive and idiosyncratic art of reduction – the principle of undercutting, contradicting, and parodying that, as Richard McCabe has observed, pervades the poem on 'almost every level'.[42] Key here, I shall argue, is Spenser's double vision of human nature: his Christian, Protestant perception of our potential for good as bestowed by grace on the one hand, and of our innate fallibility, limitation, and vulnerability on the other. The vehicle of Spenser's meditation on human nature, allegorical epic, is uniquely placed to accommodate this ambivalence. First, epic is a self-consciously elevated genre: its classical subject is heroism, or extraordinary valour and virtue. Opportunities for bathos are, by the same token, abundant.[43] Second, allegory is an inherently ambiguous mode; it is conducive to irony and to contradictory interpretation. Its indirection as a mode of representation, moreover, means that it can be visionary – pointing beyond itself – as well as deliberately naïve – a metaphor for the limitations of human sight. These traits are not synonymous with humour, but they certainly create favourable conditions for it.

A conventional argument in favour of allegory (voiced by Spenser's authorial persona in the 'Letter to Raleigh' (LR)) is its didactic usefulness: telling stories is the best way of engaging readers with moral lessons that they might otherwise be bored by (LR, lines 8–10; 21–5). But if allegory elucidates by dramatising abstract ideas, it also 'clowdily enwrap[s]'

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41 In the 'Induction on the Stage', the stage-keeper describes the play as 'ware' – the word repeatedly used for commodities hawked to fairgoers. One of the attractions of the fair is the puppet show – a parody of the theatre – which is as absurd as the antitheatrical diatribe it incites. The richness of *Bartholomew Fair* lies in its comic ambivalence – its ability, through humour, simultaneously to satirise and to defend recreative entertainments.

42 This study corroborates Richard A. McCabe's observation that 'for every heroic image [in *The Faerie Queene*] there is an unheroic double virtually indistinguishable from the real thing'; McCabe, 'Parody, Sympathy and Self', p. 16.

43 See *ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

(LR 23), willfully generating ambiguity. As we shall see, Spenser not only accentuates this natural property of allegory (whilst providing a misleading guide to the text in the form of the aforementioned 'Letter'), but also gives us, as companion and interpreter, an unreliable narrator. The tension between the moral aim of instruction and the equally moral aim of obfuscation will emerge, in the course of this study, as a primary generator of irony and humour in *The Faerie Queene*. As a poet with a professed intention to 'fashion a gentleman ... in vertuous and gentle discipline' (LR 8), Spenser occupies a unique position to parody his own project and to challenge its presumptions from within. Indeed, the poem educates its readers in part by critiquing simplistic notions of education – one simplistic notion being that morality offers a stable subject for dissection, another being that seriousness demands a straight face. Spenser tends to be most funny and most morally serious when he is exposing reductive and fixed habits of mind.

To call *The Faerie Queene* 'playful' may sound unhelpfully vague – broadly speaking, all literary fiction is a form of play.[44] But the play element of literature may be foregrounded through an accentuation of literary qualities: for example, generic conventions (culminating in pastiche or parody); puzzle, riddling, or patterning; heightened fictionality (fantasy, coincidence, exaggeration); or ironic narration (unreliability, feigned incompetence, contrived diction). All of these characteristics are recognisably, even intrinsically, Spenserian. Their applications and effects are, of course, wide-ranging, but where comic recognition seems to be invited, one or more of these play characteristics will certainly be operative.

Taken together, the playful qualities of *The Faerie Queene* have a bearing upon one of the poem's central preoccupations. As mentioned above, Spenser implies in his 'Letter to Raleigh' that the pleasures of literary artifice are only superficially important to his moral project. In deference to his more high-minded readers, he implies his own preference for plain sermoning, were it not for the demands of common readers 'these dayes' (LR 8–10; 21–5). For a moment, it sounds as though fiction is a carrot and little more. But *The Faerie Queene* itself offers a more complex meditation on the significance of imaginative and other forms of play in Christian life. The poem suggests, at crucial moments, that a capacity to take pleasure (intellectual, imaginative, bodily) is spiritually essential. Literary play has at least two roles here. First, it has a satirical function. Interpreted as a misleading guide to the text, the 'Letter to Raleigh' is itself a playful undercutting of utilitarian apologies for fiction, and of simplistic

44 See n. 40 above.

allegorical 'keys'. Within the fiction of *The Faerie Queene*, unbalanced attitudes to pleasure (overly indulgent or fearfully puritanical) are often comically represented through a variety of playful means, sometimes overt, sometimes subtle and indirect. Second, the poem as a whole contradicts the utilitarian defence of fiction alluded to in the 'Letter to Raleigh' by engaging us in game whose moral lessons are inseparable from the pleasure of playing. Reading allegorical fiction requires scepticism as well as an open mind – a willingness to question appearances, to accept uncertainty, to be receptive to humour. Literary play is vital to Spenser's moral project because good reading strategies are good life strategies.

The playfulness of *The Faerie Queene* is epitomised by its spirit of bathos. Fascinatingly, this was noted by one of the poem's first readers. In a much-quoted letter to Spenser, Gabriel Harvey described *The Faerie Queene* as '*Hobgoblin* runne away with the Garland from *Apollo*'.[45] 'Hobgoblin' (*OED*, *n*., 1: 'A mischievous, tricksy imp or sprite; another name for Puck or Robin Goodfellow') most obviously invokes the folkloric world of fairy queens and changelings that Spenser cross-pollinates with classical epic. But Harvey's invocation of the proverbial embodiment of mischief and impudence also captures the way *The Faerie Queene* up-ends its own laureate ambitions, persistently disavowing its proclaimed epic stature. The remainder of this introduction surveys the strategies by which it does so. First I will consider the poem's generic, stylistic, and tonal dissonance, before turning to the crucial role of Spenser's narrator. Finally, I will explain how each chapter draws out the comic agency of Spenserian bathos from a different angle.

Hobgoblin

The Faerie Queene is pervaded by provocative disjunctions. Chivalric romance infiltrates classical epic, and fabliau and burlesque infiltrate chivalric romance. Prince Arthur, inexplicably to many, is twice reminiscent of Chaucer's lampoon knight 'Sir Thopas'.[46] Other unsettling disjunctions are encountered at the level of register, which combines grandiose rhetoric with plain and rustic diction, as well as within the

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45 'Harvey's Letters and the Preface "To the Cvrteovs Buyer"', in Edmund Spenser, *The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Edwin Greenlaw *et al.*, 11 vols (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1932–57), Vol. X, pp. 441–77 (p. 472); hereafter *Var*. Surely Harvey's tone here is one of witty affront, though Mary Ellen Lamb reads it as more seriously critical; *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser and Jonson* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 54–5.

46 See pp. 145–8.

moral allegory, where a hero's ideal traits are typically belied by human faults, or by the grotesque characters he or she comes into contact with.

Harvey was not the only reader to be confronted by the tonal and aesthetic eccentricities of *The Faerie Queene*. Neoclassical critics were particularly preoccupied with Spenser's unembarrassed use of chivalric romance conventions (monsters, maidens, and marvels) and his archaic diction. Such retrogression was evidently apprehended as comic, though whether Spenser was in control of this comedy is doubtful. Numerous poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries parodied the incidence of the 'low, lewd, and ludicrous' in *The Faerie Queene* (alliteration obviously falling within this camp), and affectionately made fun of Spenser's 'Monsters' and 'Charms' in verse satire – one implication being that such comic recognition was the privilege of a more sophisticated literary age.[47] Abraham Cowley's tribute to William Davenant's *Gondibert* (1651) typifies the satirical vein:

> Methinks Heroick Poesie till now
> Like some fantastique Fairy-land did show;
> Gods, Devils, Nymphs, Witches, and Giants race,
> And all but Man, in Mans best work had place.
> Thou like some worthy Knight, with sacred Arms
> Dost drive the *Monsters* thence, and end the Charms.[48]

Others, however, found much to admire, and assumed that Spenser was in charge of his poem's disjunctive effects. Speaking of the climactic dragon fight of Book I, following which villagers and their children come forth

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47 Samuel Johnson spoke of the Elizabethan attraction to medieval romance as evidence that the nation was, in terms of learning and sophistication, still in its infancy; 'Preface to Shakespeare' (1765), in *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo, Vols. VII–VIII of *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, 23 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), Vol. VII, pp. 59–113 (p. 82); henceforth 'Preface to Shakespeare'. Richard Hurd set out to redeem *The Faerie Queene's* 'Gothic' traits by emphasising Spenser's concern for historical accuracy; see Richard Hurd, *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762), Vol. III of *Spenser's 'Faerie Queene': Warton's Observations and Hurd's Letters*, ed. David Fairer, 3 vols (London: Routledge, 2001). '[L]ow, lewd, and ludicrous' is the phrase of the (Spenser-admiring) Romantic poet Leigh Hunt, although it nicely encapsulates neoclassical disapproval; see Greg Kucich, 'The Duality of Romantic Spenserianism', *SSt*, 8 (1987), 287–307 (p. 299). On the Romantic reception of Spenser see further pp. 20–1 below. On neoclassical parody of Spenser see Howard Erskine-Hill, 'Pope', SpE, pp. 555–6; and on neoclassical criticism more generally see p. 57–60 below. On Renaissance ambivalence toward medieval romance, see pp. 62–3 below.

48 William Davenant, *Gondibert* (1651), ed. David F. Gladish (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 270.

to prod and marvel at the dragon's dead body, John Upton remarked in 1758, 'this mixture of the dreadful with the comic, the serious and the ridiculous, is much after the manner of Shakespeare, whose genius seems in many respects to resemble Spenser's'.[49] C. S. Lewis was to observe of Faunus's laughter at Diana in the *Mutabilitie Cantos*:

> this intermeddling of the high and low – the poet's eye glancing not only
> from earth to heaven but from the shapeless, funny gambollings of instinct
> to the heights of contemplation – is as grave, perhaps even as religious,
> as the decorum that would, in a different convention, have forbidden it.[50]

A similar sense of the unheroic inclusiveness of Spenser's vision emerges from Graham Hough's assessment of *The Faerie Queene*'s lovers: 'Eros is not to be confined in any particular moral sphere; he haunts the slums and alleyways as well as the heights. And Spenser's idealism is never of a kind that shirks the actual facts of the case.'[51] This apprehension of a pro-foundly broad-minded moralist – one whose sense of humour is inextric-able from that broad-mindedness – echoes the view of those Romantics who praised Spenser's 'extraordinary mixture of light and darkness – of the sublime and the sordid' and his willingness to bring together 'the gro-tesque and sedate, the lofty and the mean, the sad and the humorous'.[52]

A different view is that Spenser's taste for the discordant, the grotesque, and the humorous arises out of his didactic intent, and his poem's moral dichotomies. This view, still encountered in contemporary criticism, sometimes accompanied the neoclassical emphasis on Spenser's Elizabethan lack of refinement – because the obvious excuse for such 'low' and fantastic elements in an epic poem was the moral argument. The dragon-slaying episode of Book I, Canto xi, is a childish romance fiction, but it is also an apotheosis of evil drawn from Revelation 12:9. Similarly, monsters, whores, hags, braggarts, cuckolds, and seducers belong to the lower moral strata of the poem, travestying epic values, and disjunctions between 'high' and 'low' are straightforwardly hierarchical and didactic.[53]

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49 *Var* III, p. 306.
50 Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, p. 356.
51 Graham Hough, *Preface to 'The Faerie Queene'* (London: Duckworth, 1983 [1962]), p. 173.
52 On the Romantic reception of Spenser see Kucich, 'The Duality of Romantic Spenserianism'; the first quotation is from Leigh Hunt, the second from William Roberts; see *ibid.*, pp. 295, 299.
53 See, for example, Frances K. Barasch, 'Definitions: Renaissance, Baroque, Grotesque Construction and Deconstruction', *MLS*, 13 (1983), 60–7: 'moral clarity [in *FQ*] is achieved when ideal creatures come into conflict with grotesque monsters, giants, magicians, hags and spirits'.

According to this argument, such figures shore up the values they travesty, and 'good' and 'bad' describe different orders of humanity. As Spenser's narrator himself reassures us, 'white seemes fayrer, macht with black attone' (III.ix.2.4). Pope seized upon Spenser's combinations of grotesque and idealised imagery in his parody of *The Faerie Queene*:

> Her Dugs were mark'd by ev'ry Collier's Hand,
> Her Mouth was black as Bull-Dogs at the Stall:
> She scratched, bit, and spar'd ne Lace ne Band,
> And Bitch and Rogue her Answer was to all.

The comedy of Pope's imitation lies in its sudden transition into a conspicuously heroic register:

> All up the silver *Thames*, or all a down;
> Ne *Richmond*'s self, from whose tall Front are ey'd
> Vales, Spires, meandring Streams, and *Windsor*'s tow'ry Pride.[54]

The Romantic view of Spenser's dichotomies was comparatively subversive, and inclined to see the 'low' aspects of the poem as complicating rather than clarifying its ideal images. Leigh Hunt said of Spenser that 'no man, by seeing one thing exquisitely, saw further into its opposite than he did [… He is] at once sacred and seductive'. In Greg Kucich's words, the Romantics were attracted by Spenser's acknowledgement of the 'doubleness of all experience'.[55]

   Above I referred to the 'doubleness' of Spenser's Protestant understanding of human nature, its simultaneous corruption and dignity. It is by reference to this fundamental doubleness that I make sense of the poem's wider disjunctive effects, its combinations of the serious and the comic, and its repeated falls from epic height into the realms of the naïve or nostalgic, grotesque or homely. As I shall argue in Chapter 2, for example, the travesty of epic values that we recognise in Book I's lower characters epitomises Red Crosse's chronic sinfulness, and it is theologically crucial – indicative of his capacity for salvation – that we are able to laugh at him. Humour characteristically undercuts *The Faerie Queene*'s apparent optimism as regards human dignity, moral integrity,

54 Alexander Pope, 'The Alley: An Imitation of Spenser' (1727), lines 37–40; 52–4, in Alexander Pope, *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. Norman Ault and John Butt (London: Methuen, 1953–69), Vol. VI: *Minor Poems* (1964), pp. 43–5.
55 Kucich, 'The Duality of Romantic Spenserianism', p. 295.

and capacity for firm knowledge. But the same scepticism – because it is rooted in Spenser's Christian faith – also mitigates indignation at these shortcomings, displacing moral dogmatism with tolerance, humility, and empathy. Given that Spenser was the author of acerbic moral and political satire and a whole volume of disillusioned complaints on the theme of worldly vanity, these assertions may sound like misguided optimism. As this study contends, however, humour does not (as its notional triviality implies) function by turning a blind eye to hard realities. Like faith, it is capacious enough to acknowledge the very worst that humanity can do, and capable of putting even bile and spleen into a wider perspective.

The narrator

A premise of the following chapters is that our receptiveness to humour in *The Faerie Queene* is largely determined by how we approach the voice of Spenser's narrator. In his seminal study *The Allegory of Love*, Lewis remarked upon Spenser's shifting personae:

> For the study of Spenser himself, I think the most useful thing we can do as a preparative ('Laughing to teach the truth, what hinders?') is to draw up two lists of epithets after the manner of Rabelais. The first would run something like this:
>
>> Elfin Spenser: Renaissance Spenser: voluptuous Spenser: courtly Spenser: Italianate Spenser: decorative Spenser.
>
> For the second I propose –
>
>> English Spenser: Protestant Spenser: rustic Spenser: manly Spenser: churchwardenly Spenser: domestic Spenser: thrifty Spenser: honest Spenser.
>
> … It is the measure of his greatness that he deserves the epithets of both lists.[56]

With these contrasting lists Lewis points to a negotiation between licence and discipline in Spenser's art. Although Lewis would seem to imply a division within the poet's own sensibilities, his adjectives (which could be multiplied) also testify to the flexibility and theatricality of Spenser's narrator. The authorial identities themselves are not necessarily comic, though their provisionality can be. This is why some of the most valuable contributions to the subject of Spenser and humour have been generated

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56 Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, pp. 320–1. Lewis does not explicitly distinguish between Spenser and his narrator as I am doing, although the distinction is implicit in some of his chosen epithets.

by close attention to narrative voice; it is also why so much humour in *The Faerie Queene* continues to be missed altogether.[57] Spenser constantly changes the rules of the game: his narrator is a toolbox of voices, veering between naïveté, neutral dependability, and profound wisdom. The reliability or unreliability of the narrator at any given moment is not necessarily obvious. For one reader, the narrator's sorrow will intensify the pathos of a given episode, and his admiration for a particular character will heroically elevate them. Another reader, however, may interpret such bias ironically, and hear pathos tipping into the realm of melodrama and heroic elevation descending (or ascending, as the case may be) into mock epic. Likewise, the narrator's moral pronouncements ('So th' one for wrong, the other striues for right'; I.v.8.1, 9.1) may strike the ear as either authoritative or suspiciously reductive.

Such divisions of perspective are facilitated not only by *The Faerie Queene*, but also by its paratexts. I have mentioned the 'Letter to Raleigh' already; similarly equivocal are the Dedicatory Sonnets. Wayne Erickson discerns in these sonnets a 'lightly ironic and relatively sceptical' voice, where others have characterised the same voice as earnest and optimistic.[58] For the most part, the distinction at issue in these conflicting interpretations does not pertain to the poetic voice itself, so much as to the imagined author behind it. As I observed earlier, comic recognition depends upon the perceived dynamic among the narrator, subject, author, and reader. When Red Crosse is lavished with praise at a particularly ignominious moment in his quest, we do not attribute artful insincerity to the narrator; rather, any irony we perceive derives from our sense of the narrator's distance from 'Spenser'. I have noted, however, that Spenser's distance from his narrator is neither stable nor self-evident; it is subject to change and invites speculation. Our inclinations as speculators, in turn, have a direct bearing on our receptivity to irony and humour in the poem.

The narrator's habits of self-deprecation, and our perception of how these might relate to Spenser's perception of himself and his project, provide an ideal illustration of this point. We are familiar with the idea that the 'humility topos' served numerous purposes in the Renaissance. On one hand, it was conventional for authors to apologise for the idleness

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57 On irony, parody, and the unreliability of Spenser's narrator see, for example, Miller, 'The Ironic Mode'; Harry Berger, Jr, '"Kidnapped Romance": Discourse in *The Faerie Queene*', in *Unfolded Tales: Essays on Renaissance Romance*, ed. George M. Logan and Gordon Teskey (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 208–56; McCabe, 'Parody, Sympathy and Self'; Wayne Erickson, 'The Poet's Power and the Rhetoric of Humility in Spenser's Dedicatory Sonnets', *SLI*, 38 (2005), 91–118; and Oram, 'Human Limitation', pp. 45–50.

58 Erickson, 'The Poet's Power', 96.

of their undertaking and their lack of skill; on the other, it was equally conventional for poetry to be presented (sometimes on the same page) as a channel of divine inspiration, an educator of kings and noblemen, and a conferrer of immortality. There is something of this paradox in the first stanza of *The Faerie Queene*, where Spenser's narrator asserts 'Me, all too meane, the sacred Muse areeds / To blazon broade emongst her learned throng' (Proem I, 1.7–8), which may be translated as: 'although I'm not good enough to write an epic, I am inspired'. The Proems and Dedicatory Sonnets typically make reference to the poet's limitations – conveying his sense of unworthiness or his fatigue in undertaking so great a task – while also, on occasion, undermining the task itself ('these ydle rimes … / The labour of lost time, and wit vnstayd'; DS 2.7–8). In Spenser's case, such self-deprecation has variously been interpreted as class anxiety, as Protestant awareness of fiction's limitations and dangers, as homage to Chaucer, as *sprezzatura* (feigned carelessness concealing artistic graft and ambition), as flattering deference to patrons and potential critics, and as a cloak for contentious social and political commentary.[59] In other words, self-deprecation may be interpreted as a real authorial impulse, or as wholly artificial and ironic.

In his reading of the Dedicatory Sonnets, Erickson sides with the latter view, but argues that it is not enough to recognise artifice; we must be alert to the 'powerful complexity of the idea of convention itself' in this period, and be able to distinguish between degrees of irony and authorial detachment.[60] When, in the poem's second Dedicatory Sonnet, 'Spenser' abases himself before Lord Burghley, praising the latter's grave eminence as a statesman and dismissing *The Faerie Queene* as 'these ydle rimes', Erickson discerns an intensified irony because the poet's false modesty – here in a particularly ostentatious form – speaks directly to Burghley's real prejudices against poetry. Erickson proposes a distinction between

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59 On class anxiety see Craig A. Berry, 'Borrowed Armor/Free Grace: The Quest for Authority in *The Faerie Queene* I and Chaucer's "Tale of Sir Thopas"', *SP*, 91 (1994), 136–66 (pp. 138–40). On Spenser's debt to Chaucer see Glenn A. Steinberg, 'Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender* and the Elizabethan Reception of Chaucer', *ELR*, 35 (2005), 31–51; and Anthony M. Esolen, 'The Disingenuous Poet Laureate: Spenser's Adoption of Chaucer', *SP*, 87 (1990), 285–311. On Protestant attitudes to fiction see A. D. Nuttall, 'Spenser and Elizabethan Alienation', *Essays in Criticism*, 55 (2005), 209–25; Nelson, *Fact or Fiction*, pp. 73–91; and, for the classic reading of Elizabethan anxieties about literary pursuits, Richard Helgerson, *The Elizabethan Prodigals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). On humility as a conventional veil for ambition see William A. Oram, 'Spenser's Audiences, 1589–91', *SP*, 100 (2003), 514–33 (p. 520). On political subtexts see Esolen, 'The Disingenuous Poet Laureate', pp. 285–311.

60 Erickson, 'The Poet's Power', pp. 91, 101.

the irony of false modesty and the more trenchant irony of parodic *sprezzatura* (what might be called 'false false modesty'). While the sonnet to Burghley arguably has a barb in it, Erickson characterises the tone of the Sonnets as playful, and observes that in dismissing his verse as idle folly, the poet simultaneously flatters his powerful addressees and destabilises the praise he heaps upon them.[61]

I would further argue that the rhetoric of humility playfully (rather than anxiously) destabilises *The Faerie Queene*'s pretentions to elevation more generally. While the humility topos is most visible in the Sonnets and Proems, it is also inscribed into the very language of the poem. Here I am referring to the narrator's archaic and 'rustic' diction. While these registers are not to be equated, they do overlap; as E. K. observes in his Epistle to *The Shepheardes Calender*, 'olde and obsolete words are most used of country folke.'[62] E. K. has a lot of flattering things to say about the dignity, patriotism, and elevating effect of old words, and about the admirable decorum of rural idiom in the mouths of shepherds, but he studiously ignores the most obvious thing about Spenser's language: its naïve inelegance.[63] At a time when Latin was pre-eminent, many considered archaic words to be unrefined and obscure – as Ben Jonson implied with his verdict that Spenser 'writ no Language'.[64] William Webbe commented that Chaucer sounds 'blunte and course to many fine English eares at these dayes', and Thomas Greene was of the opinion that archaic

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61 *Ibid.*, p. 105.
62 Edmund Spenser, *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. William A. Oram, Einar Bjorvand, Ronald Bond, Thomas H. Cain, Alexander Dunlop, and Richard Schell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 14 (lines 43–4); henceforth *Shorter Poems*. Spenser's archaism is chiefly characterised by a mix of Middle English borrowings and coinages masquerading as borrowings, while his 'rustic' language pertains to a literary rendering (often with the help of northernisms) of the idiomatic diction of country folk. These registers share stylistic features such as alliteration, syntactical inversion, and grammatical inflections, as well as vocabulary. On the crossover between northern dialect and archaic diction see further Paula Blank, *Broken English: Dialects and the Politics of Language in English Writings* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 100, 115–18. See also Dorothy Stephens, 'Spenser's Language(s): Linguistic Theory and Poetic Diction', in *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser*, ed. Richard A. McCabe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 367–84 (henceforth *Oxford Handbook of ES*); and Noel Osselton, 'archaism', in *SpE*, pp. 52–3.
63 E. K. cites Cicero on the nobility of old words and associates their restoration with national pride; *Shorter Poems*, pp. 13–16. On the patriotic use of obsolete words, see Richard Foster Jones, *The Triumph of the English Language* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1953), pp. 117–18.
64 Ben Jonson, *Timber; or, Discoveries*, in *Workes* (1640), excerpted in *Spenser: The Critical Heritage*, ed. R. M. Cummings (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 294. See also Blank, *Broken English*, pp. 102, 114.

language 'might not be red without great misliking or lothsomnes to the eares'.[65] Moreover, the Count in Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* points out that the use of obsolete vocabulary sounds a bit silly and affected: 'if I should use in this communication of ours, those auncient Tuskane words … I believe every man would laugh at me'.[66]

Where E. K. defends the purity of old and dialect words and plays down their ambiguous connotations, Spenser exploits them. In *The Shepheardes Calender*, the shepherds' love-problems and seasonal plights imply a range of authorial agendas, from self-advertisement to political critique. Accordingly, plain-speaking ingenuousness is a source of acute irony. In *The Faerie Queene*, a poem that makes a point of banishing pastoral at the door (Proem I, 1.1–4), archaism and rusticity play off against the poet's ambition and sophistication in an even more provocative way. The Dedicatory Sonnet addressed to Raleigh draws attention to the poem's lack of refinement, calling it 'a rusticke Madrigale', and declaring its style unsavory and rude (DS 14). This is the humility topos, with all the range of possible motives and effects mentioned above, but what is being humbled is, in part, the heroic fiction itself.

When E. K. praises the language of *The Shepheardes Calender*, he invokes the principle of *concordia discors*, comparing the poem to an exquisite painting in which 'daintie lineaments of beautye' are set off by 'rude thickets and craggy clifts': 'Even so doe those rough and harsh termes enlumine and make more clearly to appeare the brightnesse of brave and glorious words.'[67] But in *The Faerie Queene*, the effect of the narrator's archaic and rustic diction is often bathos rather than elevation. As Anthony M. Esolen has pointed out, the fact that Chaucer adopted an amusingly naïve and self-deprecating authorial persona and also happened to be a native speaker of Middle English enhances the humble and comic connotations of Spenser's antiquated diction.[68] On the Chaucerian model, moreover, Spenser's narrator is capable of veering

65 William Webbe, *A Discourse of English Poetrie* (1586), excerpted in Derek Brewer, ed., *Chaucer: The Critical Heritage*, 2 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), Vol. I, p. 125. Greene's comment appears in his prefatory epistle to the anonymous *Hystorie of the seven wise maisters of Rome* (London, 1576). Both quotations are cited in Glenn A. Steinberg, 'Chaucer's Mutability in Spenser's *Mutabilitie Cantos*', *SEL*, 46 (2006), 27–42 (p. 28).

66 Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Sir Thomas Hoby (London: J. M. Dent, 1974 [1928]), pp. 49–50; henceforth *Book of the Courtier*.

67 *Shorter Poems*, p. 15.

68 Esolen, 'The Disingenuous Poet Laureate', pp. 293–4.

into crudely unsophisticated territory, with heavy-handed alliteration
(Malbecco is a 'cancred crabbed Carle'; III.ix.3.5); jaunty, minstrel-like
addresses to the reader ('Then listen Lordings, if ye list to weet'; III.ix.3.1);
and crude monosyllables such as 'dugs' and 'rompe'.[69] Anglo-Saxon
and dialect vocabulary is often accentuated when we encounter 'bad'
characters such as Duessa (with her 'scurfe and filthy scald'; I.viii.47–8)
or Despair (whose 'hollow eyne / Lookt deadly dull'; I.ix.35.6–7).

Of course, Spenser's antiquated language has a polite and idealistic side,
too. Rather than imitating the diction of country folk, as *The Shepheardes
Calender* does, the antiquated vocabulary of *The Faerie Queene* is often
drawn from the world of medieval chivalry, giving, as Noel Osselton
has put it, 'instant verbal access to an idealized past'.[70] But in *The Faerie
Queene*, idealism is a form of pastiche. Typically, nostalgia is tinged with
irony, coinciding, for example, with simplistic and naïve definitions of
heroism or female virtue, as though Faerie Land were a bygone place and
not a spiritual and psychological allegory. Moreover, the poem's archaic
language does not always avoid the rustic flavour of *The Shepheardes
Calender*. Although Spenser's narrator takes up the 'trumpet sterne' of
epic in the first stanza, at critical moments in *The Faerie Queene* the
pastoral world restakes its claim on our attention, puncturing the poem's
heroic façade and underlining the theatricality and bias of the narrator's
competing voices (see especially Chapter 2).

The voice of Spenser's narrator is mercurial, as are the connotations, in
any given context, of old and unfamiliar words. The important point for
our purposes is that both the narrator's self-deprecation and his diction
participate in the poem's wider economy of bathos. But this bathos is
not just about contradicting heroic myths, or 'lowering the high'; it is
also about 'elevating the low'. I agree with Esolen that Spenser's postured
humility, his blending of heroic and unheroic elements, and his ironic
allegories are best understood in the light of the paradoxes, reversals,
and metaphysical wit at the heart of Christianity, epitomised by Christ's
comparison of the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed. In Esolen's words,
'the faith that claims that the last shall be first, that finds its Savior as

69 For an interesting note on alliteration and promiscuity see Paul J. Hecht, 'Letters for the
    Dogs: Chasing Spenserian Alliteration', *SSt*, 25 (2010), 263–85 (p. 270). As Hecht rightly
    argues, alliteration is a remarkably fluid stylistic feature and bathos is only one of its
    aspects. The final quotation echoes 'Sir Thopas': 'Listeth, lordes, in good entent' (line
    712). All references to Chaucer are to *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd
    edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
70 Noel Osselton, 'archaism', in *SpE*, pp. 52–3 (p. 52).

an unknown carpenter … may well play the Hobgoblin unseating the Olympian deities'.[71]

The chapters that follow take a selective and non-chronological approach to the books of *The Faerie Queene*, paying closest attention to Books I, III, and IV. While the remaining books also contain a wealth of humour, my focus is deliberate. If holiness and romantic love are among the most revered and inspiring of human pursuits, they are also unparalleled in their capacity to provoke displays of folly. For Spenser, the core tension between ideal and unideal behaviour in two areas so utterly central to his Christian ethos – faith and love – proved to be especially fertile ground for humour, and my focus on the Legends of Holiness, Chastity, and Friendship reflects this. Moreover, the apparent disillusionment expressed by the second installment of *The Faerie Queene* is often compared to the greater sense of heroic possibility and moral optimism conveyed by the earlier books, and by Book I in particular. In their edition of Book VI, Andrew Hadfield and Abraham Stoll are alert to the ways in which humour intersects with moral scepticism and political critique, and their commentary certainly invites further work in this area.[72] My purpose, however, is to show that political satire and comic scepticism regarding humanity's capacity for moral good are as much a feature of Book I as Book VI. 'The Legend of Holiness' possesses an assured narrative trajectory, and is decisive in its celebratory ending, because its scope is eschatological and its heroic agent is divine grace; by contrast, the later books are committed to describing how particular virtues are promoted and embodied, obstructed and impersonated by distinctly human mores and institutions. The redemptive humour of Book I provides a larger context within which to place the follies and moral irresolutions of every book that follows, and it is for this reason – especially in light of its popular reputation as *The Faerie Queene*'s most serious and heroically affirmative book – that I devote two chapters to Spenser's rich and underexplored comic handling of Red Crosse as Christian Everyman.[73]

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71 Esolen, 'Highways and Byways', p. 4.

72 Edmund Spenser, '*The Faerie Queene': Book Six and the Mutabilitie Cantos*, ed. Andrew Hadfield and Abraham Stoll (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007); see in particular Hadfield's introduction, pp. vii–xviii.

73 As Paul Suttie notes, the earnestness of Book I's design is 'surely the most taken for granted of any [book] in the poem'; 'Edmund Spenser's Political Pragmatism', *SP*, 95 (1998), 56–76 (p. 65).

Following the historical survey of Chapter 1, which moves Spenser from the sidelines to the centre of the celebrated comic Renaissance, Chapter 2 reflects on the fundamental conflict between heroism and holiness in Book I, and demonstrates Spenser's use of comic strategies to expose the defectiveness of classical heroism in a Christian context. Chapters 3 and 4 highlight Spenser's talent for communicating the comic vulnerability of lovers through acute psychological observation and situational comedy. Chapter 3 revises the traditional assumption that Book I's sexual satire is directed at lust and infidelity, and argues that what it really sends up is bodily shame. Building on this groundwork, Chapter 4 argues that romantic love uniquely testifies to the intersection of sin and redemption in Christian life, and examines the way humour foregrounds this intersection in the central books of the poem. Chapter 5 analyses *The Faerie Queene*'s images of Elizabeth I, and finds that idealisation can be as funny as grotesque caricature. It also argues that Spenser is not above poking fun at himself: in recognition that the poet's ambitions are inextricable from those of his monarch, Spenser's parodic images of Elizabeth often incorporate elements of self-satire. Finally, the epilogue to this study reflects upon the preceding chapters' collective preoccupation with allegory as the foundation of Spenser's comic art, showing it to be a powerful generator of bathos, ambiguity, and pleasure.

In *Spenser's International Style*, a landmark in Spenser studies, David Scott Wilson-Okamura argues that in writing *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser 'wants to write a high-style poem, with "trumpets sterne", and he wants to imitate Virgil'.[74] Aware that *The Faerie Queene* falls conspicuously short of actually being a high-style poem, Wilson-Okamura takes Spenser at his word that the six books we have constitute the first instalment of a projected twelve-book work. He proposes that the unwritten second half would, on the Virgilian model, have been public and epic-tragic (high style) as opposed to private and epic-comedic (the middle style of the present six-book poem).[75] Without disputing Virgil's enormous influence on Spenser or the complex vocabulary of style that Wilson-Okamura so sharply illuminates, my take on the discrepancy between Spenser's

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74 David Scott Wilson-Okamura, *Spenser's International Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 55.

75 Spenser's 'Letter to Raleigh' refers to 'these first twelue books' (lines 19–20). See Wilson-Okamura, *Spenser's International Style*, Chapter 6 (esp. pp. 198–211). Wilson-Okamura understands the narrator's stated commitment to attaining the highest reaches of 'true epic' (in the sense of narrating bloody war in a high style; I.xi.7.1–4) to be a measure of Spenser's ambitions; see pp. 189–96. See further Chapter 2 n. 85 below.

narrator's grand plans and the stylistically ambivalent poem we have is very different. 'Height', I contend, is a useful theatrical illusion, but not an earnest goal, for Spenser.

Spenser's sense of humour, once recognised, cannot be contained or relegated to a specialised area of critical interest. This study is more than a nod to 'the funny bits' in *The Faerie Queene*; it is a proposal that we need to read the poem differently. Receptiveness to humour valuably balances the deep-rooted critical emphasis on Spenser as being subject to, or rendered anxious or frustrated by, the demands and limitations of his text, circumstances, and historical moment. Anxieties and frustrations there surely were, but humour (unlike satire in its angrier guise) thrives upon a certain philosophical and artistic distance from biographical and historical facts. As we shall see, Spenserian humour has a capacity to affirm the licence of the creative imagination, the contradictory experience of being human, and the consolations that wait upon failure and disenchantment.