

**The Fall and Bow to Bliss in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Book II Canto**

**XII, Stanzas 54 and 55**

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54

So fashioned a Porch with rare device,  
Archt over head with an embracing vine,  
Whose bounces hanging downe, seemed to entice  
All passers by, to taste their luscious wine,  
And did themselves into their hands incline,  
As freely offering to be gathered:  
Some deepe empurpled as the Hyacine,  
Some as the Rubine, laughing sweetly red,  
Some like faire Emeraudes, not yet well ripened.

55

And then amongst, some were of burnished gold,  
So made by art, to beautifie the rest,  
Which did themselves emongst the leaves unfold,  
As lurking from the vew of covetous guest,  
That the weak bowes, with so rich load apprest,  
Did bowe adowne, as over-burdened.  
Under that Porch a comely dame did rest,  
Clad in faire weedes, but fowle disordered.  
And garments loose, that seemd unmeet for womenhed. (1-18)

I have had few academic experiences so demanding and burdensome as reading, for the first time, Edmund Spenser's epic poetry. (Such is not the case anymore; his language, which I initially found unbearably weighty and complicated, has blossomed into verse that I can only describe as enchanting). The theme, then, of my chosen stanzas is a fitting one: the words and form of stanzas 54 and 55 in Book 2, Canto 12 of *The Faerie Queene*-- in which Sir Guyon, Knight of Temperance, travels

through the Bower of Bliss, territory of Acrasia, a witch-- sag with the concept of weight, of heaviness. Spenser's vivid, descriptive imagery is as present in this passage as in any one of his stanzas; here, though, it has a very specific downward pull, both in terms of its vocabulary and the individual plot that occurs in the 18 lines. The stanzas ooze with language, as opposed to soaring or humming with it; consider molasses sliding down the side of a jar, or sap creeping down tree bark, slow and heavy and culminating to a tempting, pooling mess (that temptation, a woman) at the end of its journey. The theme of weight, explicitly present in the passage, is explicitly present, as well, in the entirety of Book 3, The Bower of Bliss: it is attached, almost exclusively, to the temperate hero Sir Guyon himself.

In order to certify the weight or heft of something, one will often pick it up and drop it, let it fall into a hand, a body of water, or onto a floor. Just as an object falls, proving its weight by how fast and hard it travels down from its initial height, this passage falls from a high point as well, proving its theme of heaviness. Stanza 54, which reads "So fashioned a Porch with rare device,/Archt over head with an embracing vine" (1-2) starts in a high place: Sir Guyon enters under a "Porch," defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a high-up cover to an entryway; the reader's mental image is already, at the passage's fourth word, up in the air, facing skyward; in my mind's eye, I am examining where the edge of this Porch, this archway, meets the certain-to-be-colorful sky, knowing Spenser and his love for richness. The Porch is "fashioned" with "rare device"-- that is, the covering archway is remarkably designed, its appearance noteworthy, pretty, held to a *higher* standard than other, more common Porches-- and is written to have "Archt over head with an embracing vine" which again sends our mental

gaze up towards the sky. Our necks crane to examine the beauty this archway holds as we enter under it beside Sir Guyon.

These first two lines can be classified as the passage's highest point, not only because of their height-associated language but also because of their physical location. They are literally at the top of the text; our eye falls down the page to read the proceeding lines. The formation of the two lines, as well, contributes to the sense of height that they provide. Though the indenting of all lines excepting the first and last is consistent in every one of Spenser's stanzas, it is particularly poignant here; the first line establishes itself over all of the others which follow it, the two letters in that first word, "So," hanging proudly over the empty space provided by the rest of the lines' indentations, isolated in its height like a lone tree at the top of a mountain. The remaining text of the stanza hangs, literally, from that first strong, lone string of words.

It is significant, too, how that second line, "Archt over head with an embracing vine", does not overhang the rest of the text as the first line does. For although the line does contain some significant "starting height" imagery at its beginning (which is significant-- height remains flush to the very beginning of the passage, acting as a starting point from which something weight-bearing will fall), the end of the line, specifically the two words "embracing vine", do not provide us with the same figurative skyward tilt of the chin that words like "Porch," "rare," "Archt," and "over head" do. Instead, we are suddenly hit with the idea of constriction, even if it's of a kind, loving sort, as the word 'embracing' would suggest. "Embracing" has no association with downward motion, nor, particularly, with weight; however, it is not a free word, a word that suggests flight, upward movement, or that same skywards tilt to the sky. It is a word

that puts a stop to that type of thought, puts a literal, wrapping hold on it and onto the Porch itself. That vine's embrace binds those two first lines to each other and to the top of the passage, barring them from soaring higher, grounding them, providing a transition (since they're conveniently located at the end of the second line) to the weighted, falling language that will follow.

That falling, weight-bearing language follows the hard, "embracing" stop to upwardness immediately, in the very next line of stanza 54: "Whose bounces hanging downe, seemed to entice" (3). This line provides us with a rather astonishing, even affronting heaviness. The word "Whose" refers to the "embracing vine" of line 2; the "bounces hanging downe" are coming from that vine, so are also in turn acting as restraints, weights, to the archway Sir Guyon enters through; they are not simply bunches of grapes, but part of a more implicit, purposeful plan-- that is, the action of bearing down upon Sir Guyon. The very assonance of the line expresses a dropping movement. The deep, plunging sounds of the rhyming words "bounces" and "downe", with their long, low "oww"'s are not ones we have encountered thus far in the passage; in fact, they are the first rhymes we have encountered at all, suggesting a common cause, a unity (in this case, a unity with that same purpose of bearing down).

This line comes as somewhat a surprise, too, because these "bounces" do more than simply hang down towards Sir Guyon; they do so in a tempting, sexual manner. The words "embracing" and "entice", in lines 2 and 3, respectively, certainly suggest a level of intimacy or sexuality in the natural landscape/grove through which Sir Guyon is traveling. "... bounces hanging downe" could be considered a metaphor for any number of sexual organs-- breasts, female or male genitalia, etc. Indeed, this third

line is suddenly loaded with a weight that could be said to have been previously absent in the canto.

The next three lines of stanza 54 are riddled with that same sexual language:

All passers by, to tast their lushious wine,  
And did themselves into their hands incline,  
As freely offering to be gathered: (4-6)

and while words like “tast”, “lushious” and “freely offering” might not be considered words that bear lots of weight on their own, their sudden layering of sexuality is something that does. As the Knight of Temperance, Sir Guyon is certain to be affected by anything concerning sexuality; the “wantonness”, the sweetness, of ripened grapes, even, might be enough to put weight on his shoulders, to burden him with temptation.

The descriptions of the small fruits themselves are undeniably weighty:

Some deepe empurpled as the Hyacine,  
Some as the Rubine, laughing sweetly red,  
Some like faire Emeraudes, not yet well ripened. (7-9)

The words “deepe”, “empurpled” and “red” all suggest a plunging of sorts; purple and red are known to be deep, rich colors, colors of hell and deep-seated passion and far-stretching royal bloodlines. They are not breezy, airy pastel shades that might be used to describe a pale sunrise sky or a misty morning; they are colors that are toiling and intense, colors that occur as the sun sets, rendering the sky twisted, complicated and vibrant-- these colors, then, foreshadow the occurrence of something dark and passionate to follow in the next stanza or section of the poem (something that will probably challenge the steadfast, skating temperance of Sir Guyon). The assimilations of grapes to precious stones, as well, suggest heaviness; gems are far heavier, weight-wise, than grapes. These metaphors achieve in pulling the text down even further; our

eyes travel faster and faster with this extra weight, begging to see what the next stanza brings. The last line of stanza 54, though lacking the weighty effect of deep color, achieves in this pulling tenfold for its presence of unripe fruit; firstly, that unripeness, which is what the stanza ends with (“not yet well ripened”) furthers the comparison of grapes to precious gems, as fruit is harder, glassier, less pliable when it is unripe-- in other words, much more like emeralds than they would be at their fullest, sweetest stage. And secondly, that unripeness acts as a seducement to the reader. The grapes have not fully ripened, so neither, then, has the text; there are many more “juicy”, heavy things to come before Sir Guyon exits the Bower of Bliss. He is but at the green stage of his journey, the new stage.

More weight is added to the grapes in the first line of stanza 55. Spenser writes that “And them amongst, some were of burnisht gold” (line 10); we have moved from metaphor to imaginative creation of fruit made of a real precious metal (and, at that, one of the heaviest). How different the start of stanza 55 is, in comparison to 54; we have moved, in just nine lines, from an arch high in the sky to fruit made of gold that bends low the branches it hangs from, as Spenser describes in lines 14 and 15: “That the weake bowes, with so rich load opprest,/Did bowe adowne, as over-burdened.” Along with the vivid description of bending branches we hear that long, deep “oww” sound, in “bowes”, “bowe”, “adowne”, that sound of plunging, of downward movement-- and again in the three remaining lines

Under that Porch a comely dame did rest,  
Clad in faire weedes, but fowle disordered,  
And garments loose, that seemed unmeet for womenhed. (16-18)

With that word “fowle” the journey through this passage has been an undeniably downward one-- not unpleasantly so, but certainly a free or liberating one, pulling us and Sir Guyon to the depths of temptation. While the last three lines of the passage still have a touch of that heavy, downward pull in their literal meaning (a woman *under* the archway), they are more of an ending to the fall that the passage has taken: a spreading, tempting mess. We have loose garments, compared to weeds, which are notorious for their quick outward spread, as well as that word “disordered”, which immediately sparks the image of a sprawling mess. The length of the last line, too, suggests a puddling of sorts, a flattening culmination of the heavy pressure that has been pressing down through both stanzas. The fact that the passage ends with the presence of a woman, too, represents a culmination of sorts, the end of the temptation that Sir Guyon has encountered up until that point in the form of ripening fruit: he is now encountering real, revealed human flesh.

This concept of falling weight, made colorful and rich through the language of the passage, applies directly to the cumbersomeness of temperance that Sir Guyon probably experiences on a regular basis. It is more than temptation that weighs down on Guyon in stanzas 54 and 55; it is his own identity, the fact that he is obligated to resist the pleasures that this magical place has to offer him. Even the name of this place, the Bower of Bliss, suggests pressure; bower, although meaning a dwelling or abode, means to me in a more literal sense something that makes something else bend or bow down (and still, ever-present, is that same “oww” euphony, suggesting the deep plunging or falling of something). This is exactly what the Bower of Bliss does to Sir Guyon, and although Spenser’s gorgeous, rich vocabulary makes this pressure a

pleasurable, desirable one to read about, it is probably anything but pleasurable for the story's hero.



### Works Cited

Spenser, Edmund. "The Faerie Queene, Book 2, Canto 12," in *The Norton Anthology English Literature*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, 937-938. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2012.