

**Orderly Disorder: Rhetoric and Imitation in Spenser's Three Beast
Poems from the *Complaints* Volume**

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Master's Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State
University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

In

English Literature

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April 17, 2001

Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: Spenser, Beast Fables, Rhetoric, Complaints, Menippean Satire

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from the *Complaints* Volume

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(Abstract)

Spenser's *Complaints* volume is a Menippean satire, a form characterized by mixture. Within this mixture of forms and voices, the three beast poems, *Virgils Gnat*, *Prosopopoia or Mother Hubberds Tale*, and *Muiopotmos* are unified by shared traditions in Classical Aesopic beast fable and medieval beast poetry. Reading these three poems as a set reveals Spenser's interpretation of the literary history of beast poetry as one of several competing forms of order. The beast poems show ordering schemes of hierarchy, proportion, imitative practice, and dialectic, yet none of these is dominant. Thus, in the overall Menippean mixture that makes up the volume, the beast poems present an additional and less obvious mixture: the kinds of order available to a literary artist.

Spenser's *Complaints* volume was the object of some censorship, and scholars still debate whether he or his printer, William Ponsonby, designed the book. The many kinds of organization demonstrated by the beast poems coalesce to form a theory of contestatory imitation in which the dominant order is disorder itself, represented by the ruin brought about by time's passage.

Spenser appropriates both satiric and serious voices in the beast poems. He reflects on his political ambition to achieve the status of poet laureate in a noble, courtly manner, but he snarls like a fox, too, when he considers the ruin of his ambition.

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Introduction

It is well known that Spenser's Complaints volume pretends to be a random agglomeration of manuscript poetry put together by its printer, William Ponsonby. Scholars have long debated whether Ponsonby's "Printer to the Gentle Reader" has any truth in it. If we take his preface at face value, it logically follows the collection will exhibit little more in terms of organizing features than the "like matter of argument" (Ponsonby 12) mentioned by the printer. But Spenser's Complaints volume contains far more order than its overt claim to a chance mixture suggests. Examining the volume's three beast poems with an interest in their shared tradition in beast fable discloses that Spenser situates the traditional beast satires within a larger Menippean satire. The nature of the whole volume is Menippean, a form of satire conventionally understood to imply mixture. In keeping with this convention, Spenser includes a mixture of ordering forms. Ponsonby's preface is one more element of the Menippean mixture that makes up the whole work. Richard McCabe says,

Inclusiveness, contrast and variety are the principles most evident in the selection of materials. Classical mythology is juxtaposed with medieval beast fable, massive ruins with butterflies, translations with original works. The diversity of verse forms is also remarkable: rhyme royal, ottava rima, heroic couplets, sextains, English, Petrarchan and Spenserian sonnets. Equally evident, however, is an underlying unity of concern. (580)

My reading of the beast poems supports the argument that “The Printer to the Gentle Reader” is facetious, and Spenser himself assembled the volume’s nine polyphonic works. These are, in order: The Ruines of Time, The Teares of the Muses, Virgils Gnat, Prosopopoia, the Ruines of Rome, Muiopotmos, Visions of the World’s vanitie, Bellayes visions, and Petrarches visions. The tradition of animal poetry demonstrates that Spenser’s volume deals not only with a mixture of genres and forms, such as one would expect to find in a random assortment, but it also presents these in a mixture of kinds of order. A central concern with beast poetry throughout the ages has been with how to order them in collections, sequences, fables-within-fables, and narrative wholes. The kinds of order Spenser brings to his set of beast poems are carefully fashioned, based on literary tradition, and distributed so as to conflict with one another. The kinds of order challenge one another, and even call one another into question. This conflict is part of Spenser’s literary theory, and the explication of his literary theory is one of the purposes of the beast poems.

The volume’s nine works pivot around The Ruines of Rome: by Bellay, which is in position five—the middle—, with the three beast poems in closest proximity to this center, in positions three, four, and six. The three beast poems flank Ruines of Rome in a pattern suggesting a triptych arranged around a central focus, as if the triptych were an architectural feature, but had been installed on two sides of a door or window, so the two kinds of feature, structure and decoration, fall short of ideal harmony. The imitation of a triptych orders the beast poems, but their order cannot be reduced to a triptych. Other features interrupt. The triptych exists in contestatory struggle with sequential, topical, hierarchical, symbolic, and numerical ordering elements. These kinds of order demonstrate competitive struggle. They overlap and undermine each other in a mimesis of the contestatory imitation that was so much a part of renaissance poetic practice. When the beast poems are read with artistic emulation in mind, their order follows the kinds of literary imitation practiced by poets. Spenser arranges them in a sequence that mirrors the degrees an artist can choose to diverge from his or her textual sources. Alternatively, the beast poems can be read in terms of the poet’s political circumstances as an Elizabethan court outsider and would-be public poet. Then one can see that Spenser orders the beast poems around a dialectic between the voice of a “True Poet” who seeks to serve his

sovereign in a public laureate role, and a character I call the Fox-poet who is a subversive satirist. Additionally, time organizes the beast poems. If read with history in mind, they follow degeneration of poetry from an Ovidian golden age of heroism and memory to the Elizabethan court's despicable lack of learning or literacy. Spenser's intentional designs are evident from any one of many perspectives, and the many perspectives disclose a contestatory mixture of ordering principles.

It is consistent with the nature of Spenser's Menippean satire that the bookseller should be given the "setup" lines: Ponsonby's voice offers Spenser both a gentlemanly disclaimer and a political evasion, but furthermore it establishes in the first instance that voice is a theme in *Complaints*. Careful reading of the beast fable tradition shows that since animals don't really talk, beast poetry always automatically has the potential to satirize human speech. Spenser uses this property of the mode fully. The fact that Spenser opens in someone else's voice carries a satiric edge from beast poetry and Menippean traditions into the whole volume. The volume contains a mixture of high and low poetic styles, and the relatively high and low voices of would-be laureate poet, his trustworthy publisher, and the ever-present possibility that the Fox-poet is speaking are a valuable preface because they establish this hierarchy. They also introduce doubt. The rest of the human voices imitated in *Complaints* are drawn from a wide array, including the imitations of well-known authors such as Virgil, Ovid and du Bellay, the unknown collaborators of the *Astrophil* poems, and the traditional storyteller herself, Mother Hubbard. This multiplicity of voices points to Spenser's central concern with the relationship of poetic imitation to poetic intention.

The three beast poems offer an invaluable opening into Spenser's *Complaints*. Through his animal personations Spenser engages with imitation, rhetorical voice, history, literary theory and political satire, yet the beast poems are only part of a larger pattern. A theme of mutability runs throughout the volume, and the complexities I have found in the beast poems have yet to be articulated within this larger pattern. In my study so far, I have merely been able to confirm my sense of intentional design, and of patterns-within-patterns. Because of the studied complexity of these patterns, I conclude that no bookseller could have happened to throw together this interesting mixture of kinds of orders by chance, so Spenser must have intentionally designed *Complaints* as both

Menippean satire and theoretical opus. This paper is the beginning of a larger work that I hope will achieve these things, and help place Spenser's *Complaints* volume closer to the center of Spenser criticism, where I believe it belongs.

Chapter One

The Habit of Collecting

Spenser included three beast poems in his *Complaints* volume, published in 1590 or 91. The volume has nine "sundrie poems" in a list at its beginning, and although some of these are collections themselves, for example, the sonnet translations from Joachim du Bellay, the volume's designer saw fit to organize the poems into nine overall works.¹

¹ The most difficult question raised by the critical history of *Complaints* centers on Ponsonby's "Printer to the *Gentle Reader*" which prefaces the volume. In it Ponsonby, the printer, claims to be the sole collector, arranger and publisher of *Complaints*. Critics are not in unanimous agreement as to whether we should take this preface at face value, or assume that Spenser himself designed, implemented and attended the setting out of the volume, and inserted the preface as a gentlemanly disclaimer. Stein, the most widely accepted opinion to date, argues that Spenser was in London while *Complaints* was at the printer's, and he relies on evidence of authorial-style corrections made to the poems while in press to support his conclusion that Spenser was intimately involved in the production of the book. Recently, however, Brink has refuted this argument by pointing out that Spenser was indeed in London, but that he was waiting for the pension granted him for *The Faerie Queene*. To publish such a controversial and politically dangerous work as the *Complaints* (later called in) while still unsure of his pension would have been to contradict his intentions concerning patronage, and possibly jeopardize his pension. She claims that "No one preparing an edition of Spenser or discussing poems in *Complaints* should assume that the printed text of 1591 was authorized by Spenser" (168). In spite of this, the belief that Spenser probably did authorize and attend the volume's production has been and continues to be widely accepted by critics. In the *Variorum* Greenlaw took this stance; more recently McCabe, in *Edmund Spenser: The Shorter Poems*, has continued to accept the likelihood of Spenser's involvement. Both the Yale edition of the *Shorter Poems* and Brown's *The New Poet* offer readings based on this assumption, readings which rely on the dialogic nature of the poems contained in the volume.

Corollary to This concern are problems with dating the composition of the various poems in the volume. It is generally accepted, according to Stein, that *Complaints* was published sometime between Dec. 29, 1590, when it was entered into the stationers' register, and the 19th of the following March, 1590/91, when an inscription in a copy was made by a purchaser. As useful as these dates are, they do nothing to help us unearth the histories of the various works prior to publication. Most critics agree that *Mother Hubberds Tale* seems to have been written in two parts, the first section probably quite early, possibly 1579 or 1580 (Long 1916, Greenlaw 1961), and the second part composed and added shortly before publication. To what extent the putative early manuscript of this poem circulated privately is a matter of scholarly conjecture which has no definitive answer to date.

With somewhat more security, scholars generally accept that *Virgils Gnat* was translated quite early in Spenser's career, probably during his undergraduate days. Its famous dedicatory sonnet "can be placed with some assurance in the years 1579-81" (Stein 54), but Stein's assurance of this is based on biographical evidence and no more. With still less controversy, most critics agree that, based on stylistic evidence, it is likely *Muiopotmos* was written shortly before publication.

The trend in criticism is to read the volume as a whole. Schell introduces the Yale edition with a suggestion that *Complaints* complemented *The Faerie Queene*, "as gall complements honey and blame complements praise, so these two books complement one another and reveal two sides of the poet's

The beast poems are *Virgils Gnat*, *Prosopopoia or Mother Hubberds Tale* and *Muiopotmos*, and they occupy the third, fourth, and sixth places in the volume. These poems have been studied little, and this paper is the first attempt to treat them in terms of their meaningful connections to one another, connections due to their shared tradition in the antique mode of beast literature. Being united by their shared feature of animal characterization gives all three poems roots in the literary history of talking animals which makes them engage in more significant discourse with each other than with the nearby works from other modes. We ought to consider the beast poems as a set because traditionally beast fables come in sets, and the beast fable collection, rather than solitary individual presentation, has historically been the pattern for their literary publication. The habit of collections was initiated early and followed faithfully as classical fables were imitated and expanded throughout the Middle Ages and into the renaissance. Spenser cared deeply about tradition, history, and imitation, and he used discourses on these as themes to unify *Virgils Gnat*, *Prosopopoia or Mother Hubberds Tale* and *Muiopotmos*. The poems themselves show that he was keenly aware of the subtleties of beast fable's growth and development into longer poetic forms in medieval writing, and that he was careful both to reproduce growth patterns and to introduce meaningful variations on beast fable's history. Furthermore, critics gain an advantage from reading Spenser's beast poems together because the classical beast fable was a political form from its earliest instances, and its satiric nature was further developed throughout the Middle Ages. The talking animal fable is satiric in its very nature. Its essential conflation of human and animal hinges on two features: appearance and language, and the play created by talking animals and animals in clothes offered Spenser an expression for his satiric side that was simply unavailable in other modes. Spenser's intentions for the beast poems to

rhetoical skill" (Yale 219). Brown, although he accepts the opinion that Spenser designed the volume, finds reason enough in their shared mode of complaint to read all the poems in *Complaints* as parts of a whole. No critic has yet applied this reasoning to the beast fable genre to justify reading Spenser's three beast fables as an interconnecting set, defined by their relative isolation together in a very distinct genre. Stein clumps together *Virgils Gnat*, *Mother Hubberds Tale* and *Muiopotmos* under the heading of allegory, but analyzes them as discrete pieces. Cheney, working up a four-genre model of Spenser's career based on some of his shorter poems, specifically excludes *Complaints* from his study. Many critics have followed Renwick in finding *Virgils Gnat* and *Muiopotmos* more like each other than any of the others, yet this paper is the first one to suggest that beast fable unites the three poems in an important way. This can be done even while cautiously taking Ponsonby at his word.

interconnect thematically are consistent with the apparent disorder of *Complaints* as a volume. The entire volume is a Menippean satire that presents Spenser's idea of right poetic practice in a mixture of forms. *Complaints* includes poetry, prose, epistle, translation, tale, dialogue, oration, and other short forms in a seeming jumble; even Ponsonby's letter suggests the idea of a chaotic chance agglomeration of bits and pieces. The aim of Menippean satire is often to right an intellectual-political wrong, such as the public neglect of right learning, and this intellectual basis forms the cornerstone of Spenser's beast poetry. The unity provided by the talking animal mode provides a suggestion of structure within the disorder of the volume.

The Classical Aesopic Tradition

To seriously consider *Virgils Gnat*, *Prosopopoia* or *Mother Hubberds Tale* and *Muiopotmos* as a linked series it is helpful to place them in the context of the tradition of talking animals. The tradition is so old it is pre-literate. In sixth century BC Greece, a one-time slave named Aesop brought widespread popularity to short, punchy tales known as fables, many of which made their impact by featuring talking animals. Starting life as an oral form, it was hundreds of years before anyone committed the fables to writing. In the meantime, Aesop's life story became a kind of fable itself. In the version of Aesop's life that was later included in many collections, his fable-telling gift gives him a surprising degree of power. He uses this unique skill with language to save himself from slavery and to raise himself to heights of influence as advisor to a king. In the end, however, the fables seem to lose their effect, and an angry crowd throws Aesop to his death from a cliff. His final fable warns his killers of their own errors. The fable of Aesop's life imparts several important features of the classical animal fable: it is inherently satiric, seemingly designed to work as a tool for the disempowered, and it is a way of illustrating truth or giving advice or warning. The manner of delivering warning in an Aesopic fable is through metaphor, delivered in short, past narratives. In Patterson's analysis, the warning in the fable of Aesop's life indicates that if you do use this kind of language to rise to power, its effect will abandon you once you get to the top.

She argues the political effect of fable is uni-directional. As we'll see later, Spenser uses his beast poems to argue that he should be elevated to a position of poetic influence. He relies on the sardonic, worldly-wise voice of the Aesopic tradition to inform his arguments.

Aesop told many kinds of fables, and if one distinguishes them by means of their characters, one finds fables about animals, humans, plants, minerals, deities, and inanimate objects. In my study of Spenser's poems, I focus on the unifying mode of the humanized animal, and avoid discussing the history of non-animal fables, which usually mixed with them in the collections. Jan Ziolkowski has argued for using the distinction of the talking animal mode instead of the beast fable genre to unify his study Talking Animals: Medieval Latin Beast Poetry, 750-1150. He writes:

A more inclusive label for fiction about animals would be *beast literature*. As used in this book, beast literature is not a genre on the order of the epic, romance, or novel. Rather, it comprehends texts from many genres—texts in which the principal actors are animals, usually talking animals. Yet despite their generic diversity, such texts merit being examined together since many authors who produce beast literature perceive as soon as they begin to write that they are competing with, and benefiting from, not just other works in the genre in which they write but also all other stories about animals that they have read since childhood. When authors or readers are confronted with an animal protagonist, they are inclined automatically to think of other types of literature about animals, regardless of whether those other types are in the same genre. The moral of the story is that beasts override genre. (1)

We'll see that during the Middle Ages the classical beast fable expanded into many forms characterized by talking animals. Spenser's poems draw from the classical tradition as it was modified and changed throughout the centuries.

Aesop's fables were brief in their oral form, and this contributed to the habit of collecting them in writing. They could be irreverent, they were often funny, sometimes seeming more like jokes than stories, and they were always short. They usually ended with a pithy comment spoken by the fable's main beast, which wrapped up the intended meaning into a gnomic phrase usually having to do with "matters of worldly wisdom and shrewdness" (Perry xxiii). Because of their essentially metaphoric nature, talking beasts could be such a convenient way to plant ideas in the mind that when fables first begin to appear in writing we find them scattered in serious works, in Herodotus' histories, Plato's and Aristotle's philosophical writings, and the poetry of Hesiod, among others. It is clear that by this time they have been adopted as rhetorical tools in the official work of oral culture. While they appear singly, scattered about in these works, they are being drawn from a collectively known pool of oral literature at this time—a collection that was soon written down. At this time, beast fable belonged to nobody and everybody, having no literary value in and of itself.

The first written collection of Aesop's fables that we know of was put together by a late 4th-century BC antiquarian scholar and orator named Demetrius of Phalerum. Demetrius wrote a handbook of fables in prose to be used as a reference for speakers and writers wishing to use them as illustrations in oratory or serious writing, such as the kinds mentioned above. Demetrius seems to have indexed the fables. He rewrote the customary last words of the talking beast into a handy moral, and appended this to the beginning of the fable, where it served as a reference guide. Demetrius's collection has not survived, but Ben Edwin Perry claims "it was still extant at the beginning of the tenth century when Arethas had it copied, and it must have been one of the principal sources used by both Babrius and Phaedrus" (xiii), two poets who brought the fable out of reference and into literature. When Phaedrus adopted Demetrius' reference materials into literature for the first time, he assumed the quality of collection as a characteristic of the newly literary form. This collected nature has remained an integral part of the fable experience until this day. It causes the three beast poems in Spenser's *Complaints* to announce their relatedness to one another in the manner of a striking family resemblance.

Phaedrus was a first century AD tutor and scholar, writing in Latin. He sought to elevate fable to literary status by putting the stories into verse. Verse was necessary to

define a work as literature, and Phaedrus published five books of Latin verse fables over a period of many years, but he had limited success convincing people that even with his verses fable was worthy of being called literature. Phaedrus opens his collection with the argument that fables are doubly useful because they are both educational and entertaining, writing,

duplex libelli dos est: quod risum movet, / et quod prudenti
vitam consilio monet” (Perry 190).

A double dowry comes with this, my little book: it moves
to laughter, and by wise counsels guides the conduct of
life” (Perry 191).

Thus he argues they are worth reading for their own sake, but his attempt met with resistance. Perry reports, “Phaedrus repeatedly complains of jealous and hostile critics who denounced his fables as poor stuff unworthy to be rated as poetry” (lxxv).

Nevertheless, Phaedrus persisted, writing in the prologue to Book III,

ergo hinc abest, Livor, ne frustra gemas, / quom iam mihi
sommemnis dabitur gloria” (Perry 258)

Away then, Envy, lest you lament in vain, when perpetual
glory shall at length be given me” (Perry 259)

Phaedrus was right about gaining perpetual glory, but it took him many centuries to achieve that fame. His collections became one of the main sources medieval poets imitated, and thus an important source of Aesop’s fables in the English literary tradition, but Phaedrus’ personal contribution was overlooked, and his name forgotten. Perry says, “the paraphrasers of Phaedrus in late antiquity, probably in the fifth century, put the poet’s words and substance into prose, but they ascribe their fables to Aesop without ever mentioning the Latin author from whose text they are in large part taken” (lxxxiii). The *content* of beast fables was not considered worth putting one’s name on, because the public nature of beast fables persisted. Phaedrus himself isn’t mentioned until the fifteenth century, even though his first-century work has a presence in the mainstream of literary imitation: his work was adopted either anonymously or under the name of Romulus.

This thwarted hunger for recognition seems to have been an enduring part of the talking animal mode. The persistence of beast fables as educational material for the very young can partly account for this. Quintilian, the first century author of *Institutio Oratoria*, recommended that Aesop's fables be the first materials that young children be taught, and his recommendations determined the shape of education throughout most of Medieval Europe. As a result, a typical monastic education during the reign of Charlemagne, and later in sixteenth-century England, would begin with boys learning first to re-tell Aesop's fables just as they had done during the reign of Augustus. James J. Murphy explains that "It should not be surprising that the Roman geopolitics which made the Latin language a world-ordering device should have cemented its teaching methods into the very warp and woof of Western culture" (72). While this had the beneficial effect of also cementing Aesop's fables into the warp and woof of every literate person's thinking, it handicapped the beast fable as a literary form in a way that persists until this day. Associated so strongly with childhood, the fable was often left behind with childhood, and writers taking up the form as adults were faced with the challenge of making their talking animals shuck the clinging associations of infantilism. This is a challenge Spenser may not have fully overcome, and one that has probably inhibited scholarly study of his beast poetry.

Spenser's concern with recognition, however, was not confined to desire for recognition of his beast poetry as an adult genre. Scholars agree that public recognition was a central theme of Spenser's life, and Richard Helgerson has written persuasively on this subject in Self-Crowned Laureates. He argues that Spenser sought to fill a specific public role:

In poetry, as in all other domains, Renaissance theorists conceived of a hierarchy of value, and at the top of the literary hierarchy they placed the great public poet, the true poet, the laureate. Such a poet, they often argued, was as rare and as precious as a monarch . . . Both king and poet, the one as governor, the other as maker, were thought to reflect on earth, in a way that distinguished them from other men, the image of God." (49-50)

Spenser sought to fill this role in Elizabeth's England, and his beast-poetry set argues for this from the traditional vantage point of the successful Aesopic fable—the bottom. Its satiric angle requires that something be wrong with the order of things and the poem be the element of cure. In Spenser's beast-poetry set, Virgil represents the successful achiever, the man who invented the laureate role. The lifelong poetic complement to Augustus' political power, Virgil's poetry did as much to "make" the empire, especially from the point of view of literary imitators centuries later, as did Augustus' politics. Part of the argument of the beast-poetry set focuses on Spenser's frustration with his results at reproducing this in England. Menippean satire is an entirely suitable form for expressing these frustrations as warnings to the power figures who might be able to change things, as it traditionally lends itself to discontent with the status quo of learning, theology, and intellectual life. Eugene P. Kirk explains,

In theme, Menippean satire was essentially concerned with right learning or right belief. That theme often called for ridicule or caricature of some sham-intellectual or theological fraud. Yet sometimes the theme demanded exhortation to learning, when books and studies had fallen into disuse and neglect. (xi)

Talking animals are a traditional component of Menippean satire. In addition, critics agree that some specific satire takes place in *Complaints*, as I will elaborate later. Several themes link all three beast poems into a complex commentary on the right place of the true poet. Chief among these is Spenser's theory of the right way to be a poet.

The Importance of Imitative Practices

Spenser cared deeply about tradition and imitation, and about the history out of which these things came. In *The Light in Troy*, Thomas Greene's study of poetic emulation in the Renaissance, Greene outlines four ways that poets interacted with already-existing texts. These reflect their models in ways that achieve progressively greater distance from the original. Greene calls the first kind of imitation, which stays closest to the model, *reproductive or sacramental imitation*. It is based on the idea that

sacred texts were made in the past and contain truth that must not be altered or lost. Nevertheless, sacred or nearly sacred texts need to be translated or copied. In reproductive or sacramental imitation, the writer sticks as closely as possible to the original, believing that any change approaches heresy. This was not an uncommon attitude for medieval writers to take. Spenser opens his beast poetry collection with this type of imitation in a move that acknowledges Virgil as the source of public poetry. The first beast poem, *Virgils Gnat*, is a translation of the *Culex*, supposed to have been written by Virgil in his youth. Because of Virgil's stature as the great "maker" of Rome, and the awe of English renaissance poets for classical poetry, Spenser's translation represents reproductive imitation of an originating, and thus nearly sacred text. Spenser has been admired for how well his *Virgils Gnat* reproduces *Culex*. Richard McCabe writes, "Spenser generally sticks close to the original text . . . throughout the translation generally the Virgilian world view is deftly appropriated to the Spenserian" (599). As I will explain more thoroughly later, opening with a reproductive or sacramental imitation of one of the monumental personalities dominating English poetry allows Spenser to begin a discourse on literary imitation and poetic history. It also validates beast poetry. Virgil is effectively the source of poetry, and the *Culex* provides his stamp of approval for the humble talking animal mode.

In Greene's next type of imitation, which he calls *eclectic or exploitative imitation*, allusions and references to sacred or semi-sacred texts are quoted at will in new works, where they "jostle each other indifferently" (39). This type of imitation "treats all traditions as stockpiles to be drawn upon ostensibly at random. History becomes a vast container whose contents can be disarranged endlessly without suffering damage" (39). A good example of eclectic or exploitative imitation is unfolded in Ziolkowski's study of medieval Latin beast poetry. Alcuin, a monk at the court of Charlemagne, uses thirty-one Latin hexameters to write "The Cock and Wolf," a beast poem which Ziolkowski says "anticipates loosely the events of Chaucer's 'Nun's Priest's Tale'" (48). In its narrative the fable tells of a rooster, caught in the jaws of a wolf, who escapes by talking his captor into singing, but the poem contains more than narrative. It is an example of beast fable expanding into new poetic forms that take talking animals beyond the original brevity of

Aesop's fables, a process that engaged many poets during the middle ages.² Monks who expanded beast fable into something newer and larger seem to have been motivated at least in part by a desire to Christianize this pagan form. In "The Cock and Wolf" Christian allusion is incorporated into a basic fabular narrative. Alcuin adds enough Christian allusions to "put the poem on a solid Christian footing, and [they] alert the reader that the subsequent events in the poem are not to be interpreted literally, but allegorically" (Ziolkowski 49). Alcuin's "The Cock and Wolf" is an eclectic imitation of the beast fable tradition, in which the brief fable becomes a container, expanded to fit Christianity. Eclectic imitation reverses the flow of fable activity. Whereas in the classical past talking animals were used as small portions included in other works, now they begin to provide the frameworks themselves, into which small portions of other works, or imitating other works can be fitted. With the monastic education of boys so full of pagan fables, and fables so didactic in nature, the talking animal mode must have been ripe indeed for a Christian twist. It took an aggressive rewrite to Christianize the talking animal mode, and because the fable was so compact to start with, the result was consistently a longer beast poem. Spenser's three beast poems in the *Complaints* volume practice eclectic or exploitative imitation, and imitate this expansion of early fable to a degree that has yet to be fully understood.

Neither sacramental nor exploitative imitation engages in any competitive or adversarial relations with the work it seeks to copy. Both operate as if literary history were relatively seamless, venerating the originating texts that are seen to impart timeless truths that come from the distant past and must be preserved. Greene argues that when renaissance humanists developed an awareness that the meanings of the world and its words had changed significantly since the days when their originating texts were written, a contestatory imitation began. He writes,

. . . medieval intertextuality can properly be thought of as metonymic . . . because the later text touches, connects with, grows out of, the earlier one. All writing enjoys a neighborly community. Thus there is no perceived threat

² If *Culex* should seem to be a classical example of a long beast fable, recall that it was not actually written by Virgil. It does not contradict the pattern in which early fables were short and during the middle ages

of anachronism, no clash of *mundi significantes*, no
itinerary from one concrete historical moment to another.

(86)

The medieval writer sees himself as a contributor to an always-unfinished text that essentially welcomes his attempt to further draw out what the text is trying to say. Later, we'll see this unselfconscious shared authorship at work in The History of Reynard the Fox, published by William Caxton in 1481. Spenser is at some pains to imitate the effects of shared authorship in *Mother Hubberds Tale*. However, he is also deeply concerned with contestatory imitation, which had become a matter of public and political concern in the sixteenth century.

Greene calls his third form of imitation *heuristic*. He explains, "The first half of the sixteenth century produced the most vigorous and sustained debate over the proper modes and goals of imitation ever witnessed on the European continent" (171). The idea that ancient texts contained eternal Truth had become suspect. History had changed so many things about the world that renaissance writers became aware of greater and greater distances between their literary sources and their own worlds. Thus, the sacramental imitations of past works only fulfilled part of the need to bring texts into the present, because people simply understood things in different ways. Helgerson says it was Spenser's goal, as a would-be public poet, to "maintain an ethically normative and unchanging self . . ." (9), but this effort was exacerbated by the poetic problem of bridging a widening gap between both old and new ideas and texts. The unchanging ethical norm was under pressure and with it the idea that classical works were unquestionably superior. Spenser weaves the question throughout his beast-poetry set of whether the literary legacy was unattainably better than anything new. Renaissance theorists had developed many different approaches to the problem of imitation. To a great extent, they continued to venerate the ancient texts, using them as models and trying for perfect translations. Nevertheless, when the tension between needing to speak to a contemporary *mundus significans* (Greene 20) and desiring to imitate an ancient text became too great, writers found it necessary to admit in new work that new ideas might better fit new circumstances. Greene explains, "the humanist poem . . . sketches an

they grew longer.

incipient myth of origins but refuses to posit a ‘great Original’ . . . and its refusal takes the form of a simultaneous myth of modernity” (41). Contestatory imitation takes the ancient model as a paragon, but struggles to create its own meaning in the paragon’s intimidating shadow, and the new meaning acknowledges an essential distance or difference between then and now. It seeks to establish its own ground of meaning.

Heuristic imitation is contestatory, but it doesn’t seek to outdo or overthrow the shadow of antique genius. That remains the task of what Greene calls *dialectical* imitation. This form is the most removed from its subtext. It seeks to establish its own ground of meaning and more: to question the meanings of the past, and to allow the meanings of the past to question in return. Dialectical imitation acknowledges the potential for hostility and imitation at the same time. Writers engaging in this use the modern text with a kind of aggression:

To expose the vulnerability of the subtext while exposing itself to the subtext’s potential aggression . . . to prove its historical courage and artistic good faith by leaving room for a two-way current of mutual criticism between authors and between eras . . . The text makes a kind of implicit criticism of its subtexts, its authenticating models, but it also leaves itself open to criticism . . . By exposing itself in this way to the destructive criticism of its acknowledged or alleged predecessors, by entering into a conflict whose solution is withheld, the humanist text assumes its full historicity and works to protect itself against its own pathos. (45)

Spenser’s beast-poetry set engages in heuristic and dialectical imitation on many levels. All three poems include variations of these imitative practices, and as we’ll see, all three centrally engage the theme of right imitation.

Talking-Animal Growth Throughout the Middle Ages

The tiny talking-animal story, at first little more than a joke, eventually grew to epic proportions. Throughout the middle ages, poets at work in the talking animal mode experimented with a variety of forms, all tending towards one goal: to expand. Even Phaedrus had never re-written a fable to be shorter than his original. Ziolkowski writes,

Many of the medieval Latin poets held two broad goals in common: they aimed to fuse this material into longer literature and to retain its amusing qualities while overcoming its reputation for childishness. But they had no predetermined sense of the genre in which they wrote. (6)

Spenser imitates some of their methods. For example, an early method for fusing beast fables into longer literature was to link several fables with a related theme, and later writers found that several episodes containing one or two of the same characters were even more effective. Spenser's set of three poems is linked by themes of imitation and history. In *Mother Hubberds Tale* he demonstrates how two characters, a Fox and an Ape, can unify a set of episodic stories. In the middle ages, one small fable happened to form the center of all three of the era's major, medieval, full-length, talking animal works. The same fable is also at the core of Spenser's *Mother Hubberds Tale*. Attention to this fable, which Ziolkowski refers to as "The Sick Lion, Fox, and Flayed Courtier" (63), or just "The Sick Lion," will demonstrate some of Spenser's skill at appropriating medieval imitative practice to his own ends. The three medieval poems built around "The Sick Lion" are *Ecbasis Captivi*, *Ysengrimus*, and *Reynard the fox*.

"The Sick Lion" first appears in "a ninth- or tenth-century Byzantine recension in the Aesopic corpus" (Ziolkowski 63-4). Ziolkowski has located and translated from Latin our earliest, anonymous version, but I provide here a shorter one, for the sake of brevity. It is from Perry (1965).

An old lion lay sick in a cave. All the other animals except the fox came to visit the king. Then the wolf seized this opportunity and accused the fox before the lion of disregarding him as the ruler of them all and therefore of not coming to visit him. At this point the fox arrived and heard the wolf's last words. Now the lion roared at her,

and she asked for a chance to justify herself. “Who, she asked, “of all this assembly has done as much for you as I have, running everywhere to the doctors, looking for a cure for you, and actually finding one?” When the lion ordered her to tell him immediately of the cure she said, “Skin a wolf alive and wrap the hide around you while it’s still warm.” When the wolf lay dead, the fox laughed and said, “This is the way. One should inspire his master to love and not to hate.” (473-4)

“The Sick Lion” circulated widely in the manner of fables, being considered part of a public corpus open for adoption and imitation. It appeared in the Old French fables of Marie de France, written sometime between 1160 and 1190, and according to Ziolkowski “in many subsequent Latin fables and beast poems” (63). Ziolkowski’s translation of our earliest version casts a bear instead of a wolf in the role of the courtier. It is typical of medieval fable circulation that while a narrative unit might remain essentially unchanged, details such as character and gender can be flexible. Ziolkowski takes up one aspect of this flexible quality while describing “The Sick Lion’s” complicated origins:

Whether the poet of “The Sick Lion” learned the story through reading a Latin version of a Greek fable, through hearing an oral version of a beast folktale in his native language, or through being exposed to both oral and written versions cannot be known . . . the interchangeability of the bear and the wolf in such stories may have begun at a very early period among Indoeuropean peoples.” (64)

The wolf’s “usurpation” of the courtier role is indicative of certain fable developments occurring during these generations. Throughout the middle ages, education was largely confined to monasteries and cathedral schools. Pedagogues and literate people almost unavoidably spent either all or part of their lives as members of the established church. Because of this, the talking animal’s inherent capacity to satirize was focused on the church for centuries and became highly developed. It was not uncommon for specific individuals to become targets of talking-animal attacks. In addition to specific satire,

general satire of the reigning institution of power became so entrenched that it developed traditions of its own. The wolf was used so often to satirize the monk that a wolf-monk character emerged as a stock talking-animal personality with a high profile in more than just beast literature. Ziolkowski finds the wolf-monk first appears in Leo of Vercelli's "Meter," a mid-eleventh century fragment in which "the wolf is shown cowering within a monk's cowl" (124).³ He finds him also in oral literature and visual arts, including architecture (147). The wolf-monk was sometimes a pedagogue, often a student, but always the quintessential greedy monk, the bad shepherd who would eat his flock at the earliest possible opportunity. His archenemy was the fox. As the wolf-monk character develops, the wolf comes to take the bear's place as the courtier in all three major medieval "Sick Lion" poems. As this fable develops, it demonstrates the development of talking animal satire as a critique of monastic life. But, towards the end of the middle ages, the emphasis of talking animal satire shifts from clerical to secular feudalism. The talking animal mode, having satirized the church for centuries in Latin, turns at the end of the Middle Ages to satirizing politics of kings, courts, and feudal power. Significantly, this shift accompanies a shift to vernacular languages. This movement also marks the fall of the wolf, who is replaced by an explosively popular fox. Thus, when Spenser writes about the Fox in *Mother Hubberds Tale* he is resting on a tradition of secular satire in which the character the animal represents is already firmly established in the popular imagination.

³ "Meter" was written by Leo, Bishop of Vercelli from 998. It is a triptych in which three beast fables are connected by a shared theme, treachery. Ziolkowski writes, "In connecting three animal stories with the same basic message Leo, intentionally or not, carried out an exercise that had been stock in ancient rhetorical training: to link similar fables that were suited to confirm the same moral" (128). "Meter" is damaged; it was written columns, and about 100 or its purported original 500 lines are missing. It contains the first occurrence we know of to date concerning both the wolf-monk character and the fox-and-wolf enmity, neither of which appears again before the mid-eleventh century. The wolf and fox, probably evolving from a combination of literary and oral folk tale sources, are mixed up in "Meter" with the Aesopic fable of the ass in the lion's skin. The poem also includes an appearance by a well-dressed and enigmatic mule. Due to the obscurity of the manuscript it must be supposed that the triptych form and the mule are coincidentally similar to features of Spenser's three beast poems, but "Meter" nevertheless exemplifies a certain quality of medieval beast literature in general which Spenser seems to have taken the trouble to imitate. This is a certain looseness or lack of concern for the specifics of narrative for which Spenser's beast poems have been criticized, but which I believe are an intentional imitation of medieval style. Ziolkowski writes, "Without any explanation or transition, the she-mule that is discussed in the first column is metamorphosed in gender and genus into an ass" (123). This is not unlike Spenser's gender-switching, and other details, in *Mother Hubberds Tale*.

Beast fable has always had a political, satiric quality, and the forms of beast poetry which grew from fable in the middle ages retained and developed these qualities. Spenser imitates the traditional political sharpness of the talking animal mode and he does it by placing his central beast poem, *Mother Hubberds Tale*, in “The Sick Lion” tradition. About halfway through the eleventh century an unknown poet used “The Sick Lion” as the central fable in a work of 1229 hexameters, the *Ecbasis Captivi*. This poet makes a breakthrough in the project to expand fable by developing what Ziolkowski terms a unique “envelope structure” in which talking animals become fable-telling animals. An inner fable, a version of “The Sick Lion,” is told by the wolf as an episode in a thematically linked set of fables. This linked set comprises an outer story in which the wolf has captured an escaped calf and is preparing to eat him. The calf represents a novice who has strayed from his devotions and thus been captured by the evil monk—the wolf, of course. The wolf tells the fable of “The Sick Lion” as a story that happened to his grandfather, and he tells it to explain his hereditary fear of the fox, whom he fears will try to rescue the calf. Ziolkowski describes the emerging character of the fox, female in this version, in terms set forth by Thomas Best:

Nearly every time when the fox enters the scene of action in the *Ecbasis captivi*, she is both crafty and genuinely pious, on the one hand the age-old victor over the wolf and on the other the champion of righteousness; the ambivalence of the later *Roman de Renart* tradition, in which the fox is admired for being shrewd but deplored for being immoral, is already evident. (177)⁴

Rhetoric is a central theme to this odd little fable that wound up in the middle of the beast epics. In the original version of “The Sick Lion” the wolf and fox engage in a rhetorical battle of accusation and lying. The fox escapes destruction by using rhetoric better than the wolf. As the fable expands, the poet of *Ecbasis captivi* elaborates at length on the fox’s display of rhetorical skill, but the basic narrative structure remains the same.

Although padded and expanded with numerous artifices, King Lion is still sick, the wolf

⁴ “In both “The Sick Lion” and the later *Ecbasis Captivi* the fox is female, in accordance with the feminine gender of the Latin word *vulpes*” (Ziolkowski 63).

still tries to defame the fox and get her killed, and he still ends up getting himself skinned alive because the fox is a better liar. The *Ecbasis captivi* was written in the same general vicinity as the beast epic, *Ysengrimus*, which followed it in the twelfth century, and while the poems share the character of the “rigorously literal-minded, insatiable wolf” (Ziolkowski 196), and they share “The Sick Lion” in a central position, there is no certain evidence that the poet of *Ysengrimus* was familiar with *Ecbasis captivi*. The development of the fox as a sly rhetorician has a wide basis, of which *Ecbasis captivi* is one example, and Spenser’s *Mother Hubberds Tale* is another. By adopting the fox, Spenser adopted the tradition, and by placing a rhetorical animal at the center of his central beast poem, Spenser placed rhetoric at the center. Rhetoric is an imitative and civilized practice, and tapping into the fox’s traditional abuse of language, Spenser was able to import an ongoing body of talking-animal discourse into his theory of imitation.

Although many scholars have attributed *Ysengrimus* to a man in Ghent named Master Nivardus, Ziolkowski and Jill Mann, author of a recent critical edition of the poem, both argue its authorship is uncertain. In addition to containing “The Sick Lion” at the heart of its narrative, *Ysengrimus* is thematically centered around the flaying episode that culminates this fable. The origins of the flaying motif may be very ancient. Arthur Leible explains several pagan customs from pre-Christian southern and northern Europe, in which animals would be sacrificed at religious festivals and the fresh hides worn in ritualistic parade, and he points out that the medieval church was at some pains to stamp out such behavior, but that this took a long time. Therefore it seems possible that a pre-Christian cultural idea linking a fresh animal hide with community health may have found its way into this motif. Another explanation for its persistence could be the usefulness of the flayed hide conflated with satire on priestly garments. From its beginnings the flaying motif was associated with sartorial satire. In several versions of “The Sick Lion,” including the earliest one and the one by Marie de France, the fox taunts his or her freshly skinned victim for his appearance, using terms that describe the costume of a bishop. Marie de France’s fox “. . . asked him what he meant to do / Without his hat on, sitting so. ‘I see your gloves in shreds,’ said he” (183 49-51). Throughout the medieval dominance of clerical satire, the flaying is a metaphor for clerical garments, either the lack of them, as in Marie de France, or the ironic presence of

brighter, because bleeding, “garments” beneath: “Who gave you . . .this fancy head-dress. . .these gloves for your hands?” taunts the fox (Ziolkowski 297). Later, the anonymous poet of *Ysengrimus* develops a deeper subtlety around the flayed hide, and the skin itself becomes a metaphor for the fox’s superior rhetorical skill. This subtlety is adopted by Spenser in *Mother Hubberds Tale* where he so repeatedly satirizes garments of many kinds, both secular and clerical, that his intention emerges: he is satirizing the idea behind the clothes. He is satirizing the idea of covering up, and the misrepresentations that come with it.

The one truly epic beast poem to emerge around “The Sick Lion” in the middle ages is a Latin poem of 6,574 lines known as *Ysengrimus*. This is also the name of its main character, Ysengrim, the wolf. *Ysengrimus* is the first expanded beast poem in which beast fables are not merely expanded and arranged together, but joined “as episodes within a coherent plot” (Ziolkowski 213), the linking method Spenser adopts in *Mother Hubberds Tale*. The sequence is connected by the fox/wolf enmity. This is the first public appearance of the fox with his traditional name, Reynard. Mann explains, “The Sick Lion” is central to the sequence of *Ysengrimus*, both because it occurs in the middle position of its 12 or 14 stories, and because *Ysengrimus* makes the wolf’s flayed hide into a metaphor that unifies the entire work. The story begins with the wolf getting the better of the fox in an arrangement concerning a ham, and the fox proceeds through most of the remaining stories to seek and gain revenge. The fables have a cumulative effect, so that harms inflicted on the wolf in one episode are still present in the next, another development in the fable-expanding project. Ysengrimus is tricked, pursued, attacked, beaten, battered, flayed, his cubs pissed on and his wife raped, and then he’s kicked, skinned alive yet again, trapped, and finally devoured alive. Mann says the flaying episode is “the central (in all senses) episode” (74) of the poem. Spenser appropriates the lion’s skin, removed from its beast and conflated with both rhetorical and sartorial satire, for the frame of *Mother Hubberds Tale*. His method is so complex that a detailed explanation takes up much of the next chapter of this study.

Spenser’s beast poetry set is intricately and intimately concerned with rhetoric. In the first poem, *Virgils Gnat*, 39 of 86 stanzas are devoted to the ghost Gnat’s display of persuasive speech. The pitiable Gnat, having been killed by the shepherd for the heroic

act of saving him from a serpent, comes from the underworld with a long harangue for his murderer. He talks the shepherd into honoring his memory by building him a monument. His rhetoric is honorable. By contrast, in *Mother Hubberds Tale* the Fox and Ape demonstrate again and again the misuse of both verbal and visual self presentation, twisting words and adopting disguises for persuasion's sake. And Spenser's third beast poem, *Muiopotmos*, uses an obvious silence to draw attention to the idea-carrying power of pictures, and the speaking pictures of poetry. With each different rhetorical emphasis, Spenser was still working within the tradition already established by the best medieval animal poetry. The poet of *Ysengrimus* uses the "The Sick Lion" to carry satire about rhetoric to new heights. As Reynard, appearing here for the first time under his soon-to-be-famous name, leads the other courtiers in denouncing the wolf, he uses massively more judicial rhetoric. The wolf's courtier enemies blather for pages and pages of

arguments about the wolf's age or degree of education,
with 'proofs' that he does not need his skin, with the
pretence that its removal represents an episcopal
consecration, or that the concealment of the scarlet 'robe'
beneath it constitutes an offence to the court." (Mann 58)

The putative "cure" offered by the fox remains, as always, a lie. But it is a lie delivered with such rhetorical skill that the nature of the true contest becomes obvious: to see who is able to construct the most believable fictional version of reality, or, as Mann puts it, to "resist the deceits of others, and to practice deciet successfully" (65). Mann avers that it is the poem's "extraordinary overlay of simple animal story with endlessly inventive streams of verbiage that gives the *Ysengrimus* its epic scale" (59). Rhetoric takes over as the theme, the subject, and the material of the poem. *Ysengrimus* develops into a fool undone by his inability to escape his own lies or create fictions others believe. In turn Reynard perfectly personifies the combination of beastliness and rhetorical skill that entirely divorces words from meaning. His performance demonstrates the belief that,

. . . affairs in the human world are governed by the same
laws of natural appetite and proportionate strength as in the
animal world; the processes of law are merely a verbal

gloss on a brutal reality, a polite fiction which masks the operations of appetite and physical force.” (Mann 59)

Ysengrimus further develops the removed wolf skin as a metaphor for this split between words and actions, building on the previously established skin-as-clothing metaphor brought in by the fable of “The Sick Lion.” Mann explains, “. . . the poem creates a new image of the body as composed of two essential components: inner flesh and outer skin” and goes on to explain that “The separability of these two components is constantly emphasised” (34). She continues:

. . . the most frequent means of emphasising the separability of skin and flesh is the metaphor of the skin-as-garment. The metaphor is based on the double significance of the words ‘pellis’ and ‘pellicium’, which can refer both to an animal skin on the animal, and to an animal skin worn as a garment by a human being. (34)

This by now well-worn metaphor is accompanied in *Ysengrimus* by a series of other metaphors about the animal body “which align the body and its parts with a motley collection of inanimate objects” (36). The most important of these is “the metaphor of the body-as-book, which recurs several times in the poem. In one of these instances, *Ysengrimus* “informs the fox that his medical advice does not derive from a doctor, but is ‘written’ on his teeth for anyone to read” (36), thus shifting language from its usual place in the tongue to the nearby and very wolflike location of teeth. It is easy to imagine what the text of teeth will say. But Mann’s analysis of the animal body as a book turns out less in the animal’s favor than the wolf’s teeth might infer:

More important than these flights of fancy, however, is the use of this motif in the flaying episode, since it reminds us that the notion of the body-as-book, like that of the skin-as-garment, in one sense hardly qualifies as a metaphor at all; it is a matter of sober actuality that medieval books were composed of the skins of animals. Thus, the bear’s motions from side to side as he slices off the wolf’s skin are interpreted as ‘reading’ a leaf of parchment . . . The poet

would thus have made his medieval readers aware that the very book which contained his poem was *literally* part of a dismembered animal body. (36-7)

Spenser picks up the same parallel in *Mother Hubberds Tale*, pushing the metaphor of language as a kind of self-presentation very much like clothing, and using the lion's skin to represent the poem. *Ysengrimus* presents language as the removable outer surface, and its beasts generate rhetorical power by the disjunction between words and deeds. The real is non-verbal, and the verbal is non-real. The superior rhetorical ability of the fox thus comes from his ability to take advantage of the circumstances in which language is "at best unnecessary and at worst misleading" (Mann 62). Everyone at King Lion's court is constructing verbal non-realities. The wolf falls for even his own lies, and the fox falls for nobody's. The removal of the wolf's hide is thus only one part of his punishment; the other part is the humiliation of believing his own lies, one of which is the fiction that skinned animals can regenerate just as shorn ones. Spenser's *Mother Hubberds Tale* also insists that language is a covering as flexible as clothing, as true or untrue as its wearer chooses to determine, and as deadly or essential to life as flaying or keeping one's skin. While Spenser could have taken these concepts from the basic development of "The Sick Lion," further study should try to ascertain if one of his sources may have been a manuscript of *Ysengrimus*.

Although *Ysengrimus* is an epic masterpiece of medieval clerical animal satire, "The Sick Lion" itself points out the potential danger of trying to operate in King Lion's court. It adapts well to the shift from clerical to courtly satire. Ziolkowski's translation of our earliest "Sick Lion" strongly conveys the danger in having a medieval court gang up against you. When the bear in the early fable (the wolf, later) says, "the impudence of the fox's attitude is indeed great" and the sick lion condemns her to death "the entire people at once raise their voices to the heavens: 'Just and good is the judgment of our prince!'" (Ziolkowski 296). The fox has her back to the wall. She "turns her thoughts in many directions, and prepares her long-known ruses. . ." (296). It supplies a chilling picture of courtly politics in which the conflation of animal and human behavior brings out the most savage of both. Spenser appropriates this tradition and uses the different perspectives offered by *Virgils Gnat*, *Mother Hubberds Tale*, and *Muiopotmos* to explore

the dangers faced by a poet in his position, a court outsider with public ambitions. Sometimes it was dangerous for poets to satirize kings and their courts. In Ziolkowski's study he finds "The Sick Lion" has had political overtones since its earliest writing. He writes, "In the last couplet the poet of our earliest extant version of "The Sick Lion" implies that the story has a higher application, perhaps to political affairs in which the addressee is involved" (64). Ziolkowski translates these final lines as follows: "Look, your humble servant offers these verses to you. Seek out with vigor what this fable can mean" (64). This hortatory ending replaces the usual moral. In a later chapter, I plan to demonstrate that Spenser's invocation of Virgil's presence in the first poem of his set is balanced by a powerful imitation of Ovid that calls to mind the biographical reality of the banished poet himself. Ovid was banished from Rome for the last eight years of his life, due to "duo crimina, carmen et error"(Wheeler xix). Spenser exploits the suggestion of seditious accusations that accompany the beast poetry tradition. Ovid had a difficult position with relation to Augustus' court, and beast poetry's dangerous political manners bring Ovid's banishment to bear on Spenser's troubles with the court of Elizabeth.

Before I can more thoroughly explain how Ovid and Virgil frame Spenser's beast-poetry set, it is important to examine one more major beast poem from the medieval European tradition, perhaps the most well known. The shift from clerical to courtly satire was completed in the French *Roman de Renart*, translated into English by William Caxton in 1481 as The History of Reynard the fox. Reynard is more of a cultural event than a single poem, with many branches flowering in the vernacular during the twelfth century. The first written versions of the Reynard branches appear within decades of the writing of *Ysengrimus*, and in nearby neighborhoods. Modern scholars have positively identified *Ysengrimus* as "the head of a line of descent running through medieval beast-literature" (Mann 6). Mann explains that there was "something like an explosion of medieval beast-literature between 1150 and 1200" (3) in northern Europe, and it was dominated by the character of the fox. Appearing first in French around 1176, Reynard was so popular in France that the French word for *fox* changes during the next century from *goupil* to *renard*. The stories of Reynard spread over the next 300 years into Dutch, Low German, and finally English by 1500. The first prose edition was printed in 1479 at Gouda, and later, Caxton worked off of what was probably a manuscript version of that

to bring Reynard to England (Best 133).⁵ Caxton's Reynard did well. The printer issued another edition in 1489, and several other printers reprinted Caxton's first edition in 1494, 1515, and 1550. Scholars agree the Reynard stories are one source for Spenser's *Mother Hubberds Tale*. In Caxton's Reynard the fable of "The Sick Lion" is altered enough to be somewhat occluded, and the plot tends to dominate, as if in making the transition from learned Latin to the vernacular the story necessarily lost some subtlety. In Reynard the Fox the subtle but powerful connections between the animal hide and rhetoric that were so well developed in *Ysengrimus* cease to be as clear. Nevertheless, the sartorial satire that is inextricably glued to the animal hide itself in the original fable remains an important feature of Reynard the Fox, and central to Spenser's work.

Reynard the Fox fully develops the character of the fox as a secular anti-hero. As his character rises in the public imagination, the wolf's declines. The courtly setting dominates, the plot device of rivalry is retained, and the wolf is less a monastic figure and more a vassal of the king. King Lion calls his nobles to court, although this time he is not sick. The motif of royal personal health is transposed onto national health, so the king's real problem is not one of merely being manipulated less skillfully by the wolf than by the fox, but that Reynard's malicious wickedness disrupts his attempt to govern the land fairly. His problem is not to get well, but to justly meet the demands of his quarreling nobles and thus maintain national power, or in his words, "my saufconduyt. . . and my commandement. . . thus broken" (Blake 53). In the Reynard branches almost the whole court accompanies the wolf in demanding justice against the fox. For the first time the fox's crimes are presented in such a way, and in such number, that it seems justice demands punishment. Reynard is far more on the defensive than the fox of the former epics. The fox "graduates from being primarily a tormentor of wolves to the status of a subversive at war with the whole establishment" (Best 59). He still uses lies and

⁵ Caxton also published a version of "The Sick Lion" in his Aesop, released in 1484. Here it is part of a two-episode fable "of the foxe / of the wulf / and of the Lyon" (Lenaghan 146). In the first half the fox abuses the wolf, setting up a motive for the wolf to seek revenge. Then the lion, "which was kyng over alle beestes felle in a grete sekenesse / for the whiche cause euery beest wente for to see hum / as theyr lord" (147). The fox overhears the wolf accusing him before the king, so before he comes to court he drags himself through a dunghill, fouling his fur, so that when the lion asks him to approach he demurs, saying, "Ha a syre kyng be not displeasyd / for I am to fowle arayed and al too dagged / by cause of the grete way / which I have gone / sekyng al aboute somme good medycyne for you / wherefore it behoueth not to me / for to be so nyghe your persone For the stenche of the donge myght wel greue yow for the grete sekenesse that ye haue" (148).

rhetorical tricks to escape justice, but this time it is really justice he is escaping, not just the rhetorical carping of a rival. In a sense, the split between words and deeds so well developed in *Ysengrimus* is shifted entirely onto the fox's character in the Reynard branches. This Reynard is the popularly known fox against which Spenser's Fox in *Mother Hubberds Tale* must be read.

Significantly, the flaying motif is still present, although altered. King Lion's first problem is in getting Reynard to come to court to face justice, so he sends Bruyn the Bear to fetch him. Reynard tricks Bruyn into sticking his nose and paws into a hollow oak to get some honey, but a peasant has wedged the oak open. Reynard knocks out the wedges and calls all the peasants. The tree snaps shut on the bear, who "wrestled and plucked so harde and so sore / that he gate out his heed / but he left behynde all the skyne and bothe his eeris. . . and or he coude gete out his feet / he muste lete there his clawes or nayles and his roughe hande" (Blake 16 23-8).⁶ Reynard then comes upon his victim in the woods and taunts him, pretending the bear must have taken holy orders, and saying: "in what ordre wille ye goo. That were this newe hode / were be ye a monke or an abbott. . . ye have lost your toppe And don of your gloves" (18 26-9). Here the skinning and taunting retain their importance as plot elements and lose their subtle rhetorical satire. The connections among fleecing, flaying and false rhetoric made so strongly in *Ysengrimus* devolve into a far less subtle demonstration of brutal trickery, yet the sartorial satire remains. In addition, flaying is still part of the culminating episode in which Reynard persuades King Lion to turn his anger from the fox onto his accusers. Having sent three missions to finally bring the recalcitrant Reynard to court, King Lion dooms Reynard to hang. Reynard lies and manipulates the king and queen into giving him permission to make a pilgrimage to the holy land instead of being hanged. Because of Reynard's long history as a rhetor, no-one is astonished at his next request, that Bruyn the bear forfeit a square foot of his skin to make the now pilgrim-fox a scrip, or pilgrim's pouch, for his journey. In addition, Reynard asks that Ysengrim and his wife be "haled of the clawes to the senewis" (43 34) or skinned on their feet, two each, to make four

⁶ Blake's edition of Caxton contains standardized forms of the only two punctuationmarks Caxton used, the stroke and the full-stop. The symbols represent comma and period, but to retain more of the flavor of Caxton's text, I have used the slash because it looks more like Caxton's stroke and full-stop. Regrettably, I don't have two sizes of slash, so my rendition is a little awkward.

shoes for Reynard's march. All this is done. Naturally, once this consummate villain has extracted this revenge, and as soon as he is out of sight of court, he continues his wicked ways and makes no pilgrimage at all.

Caxton's Reynard retains a feature present in *Branche I* of the continental *Renard* that is picked up and imitated by Spenser in *Mother Hubberds Tale*. The poem Caxton worked from developed two halves in the process of being copied, imitated, and added to in the manner described above by Greene as metonymic. Greene explained that in the process of copying, the medieval poet-scribe often saw himself as a contributor to a work-in-process. He writes, "the later text touches, connects with, grows out of, the earlier one" (86), with the later poet content to help draw out the true meaning of the originating text with his own additions. In the version Caxton worked from, it appears that someone wrote part II as more or less a repetition of the poem already told which he was imitating, giving it different emphasis. Best explains that "the fact that the second half is much more original than the first suggests the possibility of double authorship" (70). Blake describes one difference between these two styles of authorship, saying, "The second part is more openly satirical and didactic. The poet is not content to let the incidents speak for themselves, but he must add his own views and interpretations" (xx). The suggestion of a break about halfway through, after which the same story is repeated with variations, is retained in Caxton's edition and in Spenser's imitation. Spenser's *Mother Hubberds Tale* has been criticized by William Nelson (1968) for

. . . a defect so obvious that it is hard to understand how a skilled writer could have overlooked it. The world of the first two episodes so clearly a world of men into which the shiftless villains can intrude only by disguising themselves. The setting becomes vague in the third episode . . . (Berger 28-9)

Spenser is also criticized by Renwick for not sticking to a plan (Var. 564). Where these critics fall short is in analyzing Spenser's imitation of medieval imitation. Harold Stein comes close to understanding the truth when he writes, "for many years it has been a matter of common knowledge that *Mother Hubberds Tale*, the most important poem in the *Complaints*, actually consists of two poems joined together" (1934 56). I argue it

doesn't consist of two poems joined together, but it imitates the way medieval imitation allowed the plot to duplicate itself under the hands of two authors. Spenser's instances of "carelessness" (Nelson) can be attributed to the opposite, a high level of sensitivity and carefulness in capturing the sense of randomness established through multiple authorship occurring over several centuries. Spenser passed on this random quality because his beast poetry set intentionally presents his theory of how imitation works, and how it ought to work. He respectfully acknowledges history, as he did with his translation of Virgil, but in this case with a different kind of imitation in which he faithfully re-creates a pattern established by imitation itself.

The Triptych Model

It is not only necessary to read Spenser's beast poems as a set, but it is possible to read them as a series with sequentially ordered meaning. The three are arranged in a pattern resembling a triptych, with loosely proportionate numerical relationships between the sizes of the three poems.⁷ *Virgils Gnat* is 688 lines long, about half the length of *Prosopopoia or Mother Hubberds Tale*, which follows immediately with 1388 lines. A gap in beast poetry follows, filled by *Ruines of Rome: by Bellay*. In a longer study, articulations between the beast poems, *Ruines of Rome* and the rest of the poems in the volume should be examined. For the present, I assume significant connections exist. After the first two beast poems and *Ruines of Rome*, *Muiopotmos: or The Fate of the Butterflie* weighs in at a relatively tiny 440 lines, a little less than two-thirds the length of *Virgils Gnat* and less than one third the length of *Mother Hubberds Tale*. Further study ought to reveal some significance behind the inclusion of du Bellay, one of Spenser's chief models for the *Complaints*, here amidst the beast poems. For one thing, the numbers remain tempting, with the 32 sonnets containing 448 lines, or with *L'envoy* included, 462, in either case quite close to the number in *Muiopotmos*, thus making a loosely symmetrical arrangement on either side of the central *Mother Hubberds Tale*. The triptych was a common arrangement for medieval and renaissance paintings, with a

⁷ While these proportions suggest interesting ratios, they are not exact, and no one has yet found a number system in any of the beast poems that is exact.

dominant picture in the middle, often taller or wider than two supporting works flanking it, all three connected by a theme or set of themes. Spenser's theme of artistic imitation is consistent among the three poems; add to this the fact that *Muiopotmos* deals explicitly with visual art, and it becomes likely the arrangement of the poems intentionally imitates a triptych of paintings. The triptych model imposes a degree of order onto the otherwise jumbled Menippean satire which establishes conditions of mixture and variety for the book as a whole. The common motif of animal voices rises as one kind of consistent chorus out of what Kirk describes as the typical Menippean

. . . medley of alternating prose and verse, sometimes a jumble of flagrantly digressive narrative, or again a potpourri of tales, songs, dialogues, orations, letters, lists, and other brief forms, mixed together. Menippean topical elements included outlandish fictions (*i.e.*, fantastic voyages, dreams, visions, talking beasts) and extreme distortions of argument (often, "paradoxes"). (xi)

The triptych model allows the title of the "tallest" poem, *Prosopopoia*, which is central to the beast series both sequentially and thematically, to apply to all three of the "pictures" characterized by personating animals. This is consistent with George Puttenham's much quoted definition of prosopopoia:

. . . if ye wil faine any person with such features, qualities and conditions, or if ye wil attribute any humane quality, as reason or speech to dombe creatures or other insensible things, and do study (as one may say) to give them a humane person, it is. . . *Prosopopoeia*. . . (Hathaway 246)

Prosopopoeia logically applies to all three beast poems, and so it can be read as the heading or title of the triptych. Perhaps the most compelling argument in favor of the triptych model is that once the dominant themes of verbal and visual persuasion are identified in *Mother Hubberds Tale*, a task to which the next chapter is devoted, it becomes immediately evident that Spenser has separated these same themes into the two lesser poems. The central concern of *Virgils Gnat* is the persuasive power of oratory; that of *Muiopotmos* is the persuasive power of visual beauty. Furthermore, the triptych model

is sequenced historically, with a classical imitation at the beginning of the series, a medieval imitation next, and a renaissance innovation to finish.

Whereas the Fox in the central work represents the misuse of verbal representation, the Gnat in the first work represents a correct original form of poetic persuasion. Roughly half of the gnat's poem is taken up with his speech to the shepherd, and the poem's plot is resolved around the success of this persuasive speech. The Gnat's success transforms his speech into a public monument, the tomb. The shepherd raises

A little mount, of greene turffs edifide;
And on the top of all, that passers by
Might it behold, the toomb he did prouide
Of smoothese marble stone in order set,
That neuer might his luckie scape forget. (VG 660-64)

Spenser relies on Virgil's authority to establish a correct beginning for poetry: its purpose was established in classical antiquity, that it should store public memory of right action.

Starting with the translation of Virgil, Spenser's imitative project in beast literature proceeds in historical sequence to medieval beast poetry. *Mother Hubberds Tale* faithfully follows many of the developments beast poetry achieved in the middle ages, as I have pointed out. Spenser adopts the practice of linking a series of fables to make a longer story, using character, theme, and motive similarities to make the whole cohere. He imitates the sense in which the branches of Reynard the Fox were composed by disparate hands, mashed together at some point in history. He even imitates the carelessness with character, gender, and certain other minor details that was common in medieval beast poetry. Thus he follows his example of classical poetic practice with an example of medieval poetic practice. His sequence indicates thus far that while the purpose of classical poetry was to record public memory of worthy action, medieval poetry was collective, imitative, and conservative. Its sources of right action were as likely to be texts as deeds.

Whereas the Gnat and Fox represent two types of verbal expression, the Ape from *Mother Hubberds Tale* is the consummate disguise artist. He poses in the garments first of a soldier, later a clerk, soon a courtier, and finally the king himself. In the central poem the Ape personates the misuse of visual representation, and Spenser uses the

flanking poem, *Muiopotmos*, to draw this theme out more thoroughly. Just as clothing in *Mother Hubberds Tale* is a visual means of conveying misinformation, establishing a false impression and passing on distorted meaning, tapestries in *Muiopotmos* represent the visual practice of conveying stories, establishing truth, passing on meaning from generation to generation, and being beautiful—using art. The silence of the spider and butterfly characters is especially significant because Spenser ironically prepares his readers for more *talking* animals in line 1, where he calls *Muiopotmos* a “deadly dolorous debate,” but neither insect ever says one word.⁸ In this paper I have dwelt much on the *talking* animal tradition, because in most cases beast literature is defined by the fact that its animals speak. However, as Puttenham has pointed out, personation involves giving speech *or other human characteristics* to animals or other insensible objects. Aragnoll and Clarion have human emotions, motives, and reason, and Clarion has human armor. The creatures’ entire lack of participation in language highlights the story-telling or information-conveying effect of the tapestries.⁹ Their silence parallels the role of the Ape in *Mother Hubberds Tale*, who relies on the Fox to do the fast talking, while he presents a convincing, if false, vision of manhood through visual appearance:

. . . the fond Ape himselfe vpreparing hy
 Vpon his tiptoes, stalketh stately by,
 As if he were some great *Magnifico*,
 And boldlie doth amongst the boldest go. (*MHT* 663-6)

While this separation of the themes of visual and verbal representation helps to establish the triptych model as accurate, there are further details, which continue the sequential nature established by the historical imitative practices Spenser is theorizing about. The gnat personates an antique hero, but beyond this his tiny voice comes to represent poetic origins in time and history. In their turn, the spider and butterfly personate a pair of renaissance courtier poets. As the capstone to Spenser’s sequence of poetic history the contestatory spider and butterfly represent the renaissance present, and possibly the future of poetry. As Ronald Bond has written,

⁸ Clarion’s name, which can mean a kind of horn or trumpet, is doubly ironic in this sense.

⁹ Ziolkowski describes a medieval tradition of insect debates which adds credit to this argument. In this tradition spiders, flies and other insects engage in extensive, vituperative verbiage. The insect flytings are almost entirely dialogue, and not very friendly at that.

Perhaps, like *Mother Hubberds Tale* or *Virgils Gnat*,
Muiopotmos reflects on the political maneuverings of some
of Spenser's contemporaries whom it begs us to identify.
Or perhaps its mirroring of the contemporary scene
involves a disillusioned but general analysis of the place-
seeking and envy-ridden court that Spenser had visited
shortly before the poem was published . . . (1989 407)

Scholars have been unable to identify whether *Muiopotmos* is a general or specific satire, but they are in agreement that it satirizes Elizabeth's court. In *Muiopotmos*, Ovid takes his place across from Virgil, so the triptych begins to look like a set of niches holding their literary saints. *Muiopotmos* borrows heavily from Ovid, with the poem's lavish pictorial quality an imitation of his style, and with its tapestry contest directly based on the content of *Metamorphoses* 6. 1-145. Helgerson argues Ovid had similar stature among the courtier poets as Virgil had with the would-be laureate, Spenser. Thus, Ovid's presence at the end of the sequence is in a state of competition with Virgil's at the beginning. Helgerson writes, "without some recollection of Virgil or Horace the laureates would have been nearly unintelligible, as would the amateurs without Petrarch . . . or Ovid" (26). The triptych model creates a poetic portrait gallery of sorts, and as we'll see in the next chapter Spenser hides himself in the center, flanked by these antique literary heroes.

The arrangement of the three poets in their beast-ornamented niches invites comparison of their biographies as well as their literary styles. Virgil represents the successful political poet, the man who invented and fulfilled the role Spenser was striving for. In contrast, Ovid was banished. Augustus consigned him to spend the last years of his life in lonely isolation far from the heart of civic and intellectual affairs. Due to the tone of *Ars Amatoria*, Ovid had become to his Roman public "a witty and cynical man of the world" (Innes 15), and when Augustus desired to reform his people's morals the well-known cynical love poet seems to have become a threat to this effort. In addition, Ovid committed a political blunder unknown to posterity. Ovid's banishment reflects Spenser's position as a court outsider; Virgil's success represents his desire to serve his Queen as her trusted ethical advisor, a man "distinguished from other men" (Helgerson

50). The presence of Virgil opening the series offers an echo of Spenser's initiating goals in poetry. The presence of Ovid at the end may echo Spenser's later position as a civil servant posted in Ireland. For years, Ovid begged to be allowed back. Spenser places himself at the center of this triptych of poets to project a traditionally Aesopic warning towards his queen. He saw the courtier poets who surrounded Queen Elizabeth with their manuscript poetry as frivolous lightweights. In his pessimistic view, the tiny, murderous conflict among poets he satirizes in *The Fate of the Butterflie* has to be compared with the Gnat's heroic journey back from Hades to speak the truth and create a monument. In my final chapter, I will explain the Spider and Butterfly more carefully. For now, it is important that their competitive poetic practice is markedly different in intent from the Gnat's monument making, and Spenser presents himself between the extremes as an alternative kind of poet. He wanted Elizabeth to acknowledge that any throne hoping to outlast the ravages of time needed a royal poet as much as Augustus had needed Virgil, and that the courtier poets were never going to provide her with the kind of substance he could bring to the profession. Spenser may have placed Ovid at the end of his triptych, but he was not begging to be allowed back from Ireland. The foxlike tone of beast poetry does not lend itself to begging.

In the past, Spenser's *Complaints* volume has been neglected, but it should be read in the future as an important part of his oeuvre. *Virgils Gnat*, *Prosopopoia or Mother Hubberds Tale* and *Muiopotmos* should be read as a set, because literary beast fables have traditionally been collected into and presented as sets. The tradition of beast poetry from Aesop through the middle ages is the background against which Spenser intentionally placed his three poems. And these three are not only a set, but also a set organized sequentially. Their shared themes include poetic imitation, literary history, and Spenser's desire to fulfill a specific role as public poet in England. Spenser was interested in poetic imitation because it was his practice, a practice involving both his private and public sides. He used poetic history and tradition to introduce his theory of right poetic practice and to present himself as the right kind of poet. He was concerned with both visual and verbal art, and so he arranged his sequence to mimic a triptych. In the work on either side of the center, the triptych provides a niche for the biographical

and poetical presences of Virgil and Ovid, thus aiming political commentary towards the career of public poetics that Spenser desired. In the next chapter, I explain how Spenser uses the fable of “The Sick Lion” to hide himself at the center of this pattern, thus joining his poetic heroes in the literary tradition. Triptych and sequence both bring order to the otherwise disorganized medley of Menippean satire that characterizes the whole *Complaints* volume, and reading the beast poems as a set is just the first part of an attempt that should be made to read the whole volume as an intentionally designed, unified work. While some critics, notably Jean R. Brink, aver that Spenser would never have published anything as incendiary as *Complaints* at the crucial nexus of his career while he was waiting for his pension, it is evident from the tradition of beast poetry that this is expressly the situation in which talking animal satire is at its most effective: when coming from a position of inferior power.

Chapter Two

Spenser’s Fox and Ape: The Rhetoric of Praise and Blame in *Prosopopoeia* or *Mother Hubberds Tale*.

Spenser’s series of beast poems is rhetorical by both nature and design. Since any speech in an animal is artificial, beast poetry assumes as a starting point that any speech at all could be mere artifice. By using the technical rhetorical term *prosopopoeia* to make up half the title of his central beast poem, and also to be an umbrella under which all three poems could shelter, Spenser was calling attention to the centrality of rhetoric in his poetic theory. He chose to follow the traditional development of the fable of “The Sick Lion,” a fable-turned-epic that gave him a well-developed background for demonstrating both the artificiality and the power of rhetoric.

Rhetoric occupied a tense position in the Elizabethan political system. Classical rhetoric was the basis of the renaissance curriculum, and educated people were as familiar with its forms, figures, and purposes as schoolboys were with beast fables. However, being trained to speak persuasively and being allowed to practice persuasive speaking were two different things, and in some cases the training led to frustration. As

Daniel Javitch has pointed out, Tudor politics were not based on the same assumptions as classical government, republican assumptions out of which the art of persuasive public speaking had grown. In Elizabeth's England, the opportunities for rhetorical effectiveness were minimized, while training in the art form itself had been maximized. In her absolute authority Queen Elizabeth did not invite advice. Nor was she in the habit of warmly welcoming it, uninvited. Thus, opportunities for persuasion were limited, and the practice of it could be dangerous. Nevertheless, Spenser's ambition to be a public poet demanded that he attempt to persuade his "public" of certain things, and the first person in his "public" was his queen.

In addition to Queen Elizabeth, Spenser's public included everyone interested in the English debates about national literature, the right value of poetry, and the place of poetry in the kingdom's politics. Having been a subject of literary concern for centuries, imitation was becoming a matter of political importance in late sixteenth century England. It was at the heart of a project many poets were engaged in, that of creating a national literature for England. E.K. is at some pains to explain this in the letter that prefaces *The Shepheardes Calender*. He refutes an English belief held by many: that their native language was not good enough for great poetry. England was a small but not insignificant power in the European political arena. She was constantly under threat of foreign domination, and national literature, if there had been one, would have been a matter of national pride. Its creation became a matter of national pride for Spenser. By the time he published *Complaints* he had dealt a deadly blow, with the first three installments of *The Faerie Queene*, to the popular belief that the English language couldn't sustain a national poetry. His beast poetry series is a deeply theoretical addition to this. We have seen from looking at the series how it situates Spenser's poetry within the literary traditions of beast poetry and imitation. In *Mother Hubberds Tale*, which is the leading piece in the set, Spenser sets forth the distinctions between right and wrong use of the poetic art of mimesis, using a textbook exercise in epideictic rhetoric from the schools, the rhetoric of praise and blame. *Mother Hubberds Tale* deliberately imitates the courtly satire of "The Sick Lion" to make public Spenser's opinion about noble and disgraceful practices of imitation in both poetry and politics. The Fox and Ape are charlatans who use both verbal and visual imitative practices to distort the truth and

subvert the world's right hierarchy. The poem imitates reality, with the Fox and Ape dramatizing how people lie and posture daily. Against them Spenser contrasts the rightful imitator, partly expressed by "rightfull Courtier" (793) and partly by the poet-god Mercury. *Mother Hubberds Tale* artistically re-creates what people really do with speech and clothing, hiding and masking their intentions and their true characters. In the process, Spenser develops a sense of interiority for both poem and person. Spenser blames the power of disgraceful imitation to subvert rightful order, and he praises the power of right poetry to defend justice. He takes the lion's skin and with it the tradition of the healing hide from the courtier wolf in "The Sick Lion," and expands this to represent the power of noble poetry to make right things that are wrong. The hide becomes a metaphor for the poem. Finally, book and healing hide conflate to represent the visual-verbal force of speaking pictures, Spenser's ultimate ethical weapon.

Mother Hubberds Tale uses two of "The Sick Lion's" central motifs in the same order and location as they are found in the fable: a gathering at the bedside of a sick ruler at the beginning, and a purloined hide at the end. Spenser's use of "The Sick Lion" suggests that he had either seen *Ysengrimus*, or that he and the *Ysengrimus* poet both saw the same potential in the originating fable: both poets exploit the same conflation of animal hide with the physical artifact of the book. In the sixteenth century the printed book was still bound in leather or vellum just as it had been in the middle ages. In either case its outer covering was an animal hide, and its pages were made of paper that had been manufactured from rags—much of the bulk of which came from recycled clothing.¹⁰ The book itself, an artifact in which words inscribed on transformed garments are wrapped in animal hide, is the central metaphor for *Mother Hubberds Tale*. I have already explained how Spenser imitates the medieval linked-episode pattern and shared characters to unify the *Tale*. Here, I will show how in each of the four episodes of *Prosopopoia* or *Mother Hubberds Tale* he links language to disguise, or gab to garb, as a central part of the animals' adventure and his satire. With this repetition Spenser fuses verbal and visual dissimulation as inextricably as two sides of a coin, as the Fox and Ape replay them with variations in every episode. Spenser reiterates this fusion to such an

extent that the beastly partners become figures for two kinds of wrong likeness, lying and disguise. The poem's preoccupation with lying and disguise culminates with the detached lion's hide, which in the hands of disgraceful charlatans becomes the acme of dissimulation, but in the hands of the Noble Poet is a metaphor for the healing quality of poetry, the timeless voice which calls justice to action.

In *Mother Hubberds Tale* the poem opens in the first person voice of the poet himself, who lies sick in his bed, oppressed by a "wicked maladie" (9). He says,

In this ill plight, there came to visite mee
Some friends, who sorie my sad case to see,
Began to comfort me in chearfull wise,
And meanes of gladsome solace to devise.
But seeing kindly sleep refuse to doe
His office, and my feeble eyes forgoe,
They sought my troubled sense how to deceaue
With talke, that might vnquiet fancies reauē. . . . (17-24)

This parallels the opening court scene of "The Sick Lion," with Spenser placing a sick poet in the place of the lion king. The sick poet holds a kind of mock court made up of friends. Since Spenser is the poet, this is where he insinuates his own person into the central niche of his beast poetry set, with Virgil and Ovid as company in the flanking works. As the sick lion receives the visits of his courtiers, so the sick poet is visited by his friends, and as the courtiers seek a cure for the king's illness, so the friends seek to relieve the distress of the poet. At King Lion's bedside, the wolf wastes no time defaming the fox to the king. At the sick poet's bedside,

Amongst the rest a good old woman was,
Hight Mother *Hubberd*, who did farre surpas
The rest in honest mirth, that seem'd her well. . . . (33-5).

¹⁰ Jones and Stallybrass offer a detailed account of the economy of garments, in which their final value was as rags to be sold to paper makers. The scope of this paper has required me to pass over some interesting ways in which *Mother Hubberds Tale* engages questions of economic concern.

Mother Hubbard's story expressly defames the Fox to the poet, and so she is analogous to the slanderous courtier of "The Sick Lion."¹¹ The way Spenser's humble poetic court mimics the pattern of the royal court from the fable mocks Elizabeth's real court. The beast and poet courts imitate the real thing with outrageousness directly from Menippean satire. In a further parallel to "The Sick Lion," in which the fox and lion use the wolf's skin as the cure, the poet's friends suggest a cure by stories. This is Spenser's first move in the complex conflation of poem with hide. The poem itself turns out to be his cure, and the poet writes it down after he has recovered, "for that my sense it greatly pleased" (39). In both *Mother Hubberds Tale* and "The Sick Lion" the outcome is a cure, in one case brought about by skinning the slanderous courtier, and in the other by telling a tale of praise and blame.

Given Spenser's relish for hierarchy, the order of dominance in his frame is especially important. The poet is seen to rule over a court of fictions (and possibly factions as well) the same way that King Lion rules over a court of beasts. The poem continues its imitation of reality in that each court has its complement of courtiers: the inference is that Elizabeth's court has its courtier poets, its tellers of tales, like Mother Hubbard and its rhetoricians, such as the Wolf and the Fox. This courtly model applies also to the world contained within the tale itself, the fiction-within-a-fiction of the Fox and Ape, which Mother Hubbard tells. The Fox and Ape subvert the hierarchy of their world. They begin at the bottom of the social structure, and as the poem progresses they are ever more successful in using their reprehensible mimicry to rise in status. By episode three, the wrongful state of hierarchy has progressed to the point at which the Ape and Fox are courtiers themselves, but haven't yet taken over kingship. Here, the "rightfull courtier," described in lines 710-793, is poetically surrounded by his opposites, the false poet and bad courtier, who are described both before and after him, lines 660-710 and 816-852. The good and bad imitators struggle against each other's methods. Eventually the Ape and Fox take hierarchal inversion to its ultimate by stealing the hide from the sleeping lion and masquerading as king and chief advisor. As they use deceit to rise to the top the world turns upside-down. The metaphor of sickness borrowed from

¹¹ I am capitalizing Fox, Ape, King Lion and so forth when a specific animal from one of the poems is under discussion. When any old fox or so forth is the subject, the word will be left in lower case.

“The Sick Lion” was developed in the Reynard branches to indicate King Lion’s problems keeping his kingdom unified and justly ordered; it is adapted here to fit Spenser’s sick fictional kingdom where Fox and Ape invert the rightful hierarchy of ruler above subjects. Near the end of the Fox and Ape’s progress in falsehood, “no care of iustice, nor no rule of reason, / no temperance, nor no regard of season” (1131-2) attends the usurpers’ wrongful government. Careful establishment of hierarchy among the poems is important because its parallels extend beyond the poem and eventually suggest two things. First, that all is not well in Elizabeth’s court and, second, that the serious poet who rules his own court of poetic fictions is in some ways parallel to a political ruler. Both occupy the top of a certain hierarchy, and both answer to a higher power.

The wrongful government or sick state of this inner fiction is under the dominion of Jove and Mercury. In hierarchal terms, Mercury is just above the royal throne occupied by the usurping beasts, and above Mercury is the highest god, Jove. Spenser’s parallels among the powers that rule imply a dangerous similarity between the poet and his queen. The sick poet who lies in bed and listens to Mother Hubberd, and then later writes up her story, although he is a figure made in imitation of the sick lion and therefore at the top of his own court of fictions, is actually ruled over by a figure more powerful—the real poet, Spenser himself. Spenser can dictate exactly what his poetic representative will do. The sick poet is only a poetic voice, both showing and hiding what the real poet intends, according to what the voice’s “wearer” determines, but he is parallel, as the ruler of his “court” of friends, to Queen Elizabeth who rules over her own court of tale-tellers. The occupant of the next-higher position above the sick poet is the True Poet. This person, Spenser, is parallel to Mercury, because Mercury is next highest above the usurpers in the tale. Kent Van den Berg has found his own reasons to argue that Mercury represents the poet, among them that Mercury is the messenger god, and the one credited with inventing letters. That Spenser would align his position as the True poet with that of a lesser god, and a messenger god at that, is fitting, since it would be blasphemous to suggest that his creative powers as poet were godlike in any but a metaphorical sense. But Spenser needs the godlike status of Mercury to argue that the poet shouldn’t take orders concerning his poetic actions from an ordinary sovereign, but from God himself, and this assertion is at the heart of his poetic project. Helgerson

explains that the needs of the laureate were to present “a self whose authority derives from the inner and outer alignment with the unmoving axis of normative value” (12). The “unmoving axis of normative value” is not the same as a mere mortal monarch, and in *Mother Hubberds Tale* Spenser declares his intentions of obeying what he considers a higher command than his queen’s. Hence, Mercury answers not to the sleeping lion, but to Jove.

It is also possible to read the higher god as poetic inspiration, that which
vewes with his blacklidded eye,
Whatso the heauen in his wide vawte containes,
And all that in the deepest earth remaines. . . . (1228-30)

and Mercury as poetic action, but this is not inconsistent with the political role Spenser is giving the poet. Mercury is highly active; in his 76 lines he performs no less than 33 actions, not counting the things his magic hat can do. Mercury’s actions heal the kingdom by restoring correct rule, just as the poem heals the sick poet, and the flayed skin of the slanderous courtier heals the sick lion. Both the skin and the poem are agents of healing.

After setting up this analogy between the skin and the poem in his bedside-scene framing device, Spenser appears to drop it, but he doesn’t drop it at all. He metamorphoses it. In each episode the Fox and Ape practice two forms of deception: they transform their skins by appropriating the garments of social groups to which they don’t belong, and they lie. The linking of these two kinds of deception begins with the pair’s first dialogue, in which the Fox complains to the Ape that his services have not been rewarded:

Thus manie yeares I now haue spent and worne,
In meane regard, and basest fortunes scorne,
Dooing my Countrey seruice as I might,
No lesse I dare saie than the prowdest wight;
And still I hoped to be vp aduanced,
For my good parts; but still it hath mischauned. (59-64)

The Fox's motive "to turne the next leafe of the booke" (68), and take up a life of deceit, is that his honest service has not been rewarded.¹² These lines either blame the Elizabethan system of reward for overlooking deserving servants, or they blame the Fox for being a liar. Resting on the traditionally deceitful character of Reynard the fox it is easy to see where the blame ought to fall at first.¹³ Yet Mother Hubbard calls the fox's words "unkind" (52), which could mean out of character, which in his case would mean honest. If for once the fox was telling the simple truth this would certainly be out of character. It is the poet's job to tell the truth. Is Spenser suggesting the poet may sometimes be foxlike? This theory will develop as the paper progresses, but in this instance it is clear he definitely introduces to his readers the poetic problem of lying. Sixteenth-century readers were likely to disbelieve the fox because of his bad reputation. As makers of poetical fictions, poets also were vulnerable to the charge of being self-serving liars, a vulnerability that increased with the sharpness of their satire. In this sense, they could accumulate a reputation most foxlike. A satirist's good repute was both entirely necessary and entirely at risk. Despite Sidney's opinion, "truly, that of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar, and, though he would, as a poet can scarcely be a liar" (Richter 149), the satirist and the Fox were sometimes in the same skin, both of them disreputable outsiders, not likely to be believed.

Having introduced the concept of lying and some of the poetical problems that accompany it, the Fox next complicates it with the concept of visual misrepresentation. When the Ape expresses sympathy for the Fox's discontents, the Fox explains his plan:

Certes (said he) I meane me to disguise
 In some straunge habit, after vncouth wize,
 Or like a Pilgrime, or a Lymiter,
 Or like a *Gipsen*, or a Iuggeler,
 And so to wander to the worlds ende,
 To seeke my fortune, where I may it mend:
 For worse than that I haue, I cannot meete. (83-9)

¹² The Fox slyly hints that changing clothes and turning the page are the same thing.

¹³ For some idea of the extent of this character's renown as a medieval anti-hero, see Ziolkowski, Leible, or Mann. Kaplan offers a useful discussion of the relationship between reputation and slander in Elizabethan

The Fox suggests the two beasts study to appear to be that which they are not. The word *like* is repeated in lines 85 and 86. More importantly, the Fox's whole opening dialogue with the Ape has been framed by repetition of the word *like*, twice at line 48 as it opens, "lyeke with his lyeke," and three times as the dialogue with the Ape closes,

Say my faire brother now, if this deuce
Doth like you, or may you to like entice.

Surely (said th'Ape) it likes me wondrous well . . . (93-5).

The repetition that opens this dialogue, "lyeke with his lyeke," (48) establishes the meaning of *like* as similarity: the Fox and Ape see themselves in each other; they are comrades. The second, in the passage about the *Gipsen* introduces the idea of false likeness, a visual lie or disguise based in part on costume. The third repetition (93-5) inserts the meaning of the word *like* as pleasing. The Ape is pleased with the Fox's plan. As we have already seen, serious renaissance poets were handicapped by the argument that on one side blamed fiction for being nothing but lies, and on the other praised it for being the best possible re-creation of a truth otherwise difficult to see. Murphy explains the classical roots of the renaissance discourse on *imitatio* as follows:

The concept of *Imitatio (Mimesis)* is much misunderstood today. On one hand it could mean the artistic re-creation of reality by a poet or artist; on the other it could mean the deliberate modelling of an existing artifact or text. (44)

As a serious poet, Spenser cared about this discussion, and he sought to sort out and identify the blameworthy imitators. He uses his Ape and Fox to re-create—from reality—the two kinds of wrongful lying practiced daily in verbal and visual forms. Neither of Spenser's blameworthy beasts has the least concept of the noble potential in mimesis. Ironically, they use it to rise to noble status, but it is an empty status, noble in name only. Spenser's Ape comes to represent visual mimicry, and the Fox, verbal wit. Spenser is saying that there are two ways people practice imitation every day, with their words, and with their wardrobes. People misrepresent themselves visually and verbally. By his poetic mimesis of this reality, Spenser implies that poetry is not alone in

England which, I think, could as well apply to fictional characters as not. Here Reynard's reputation increases the likelihood that his words are untrue slander.

presenting a changeable surface to the world, and the practice alone shouldn't be blamed. What is blamable is how imitatio is used. By the fact that his Ape and Fox are always an ape and a fox no matter what they wear or say, Spenser states that there is always a true core inside the fictions daily created for the world's consumption, be these fictions poetical or personal.

Spenser varies his approach to the linking of wit and wardrobe, but he sandwiches this important pair of ideas together in every single episode, and he makes the Fox and Ape always represent the disgraceful wrong use of these systems of representation. Immediately after making their plan, the Fox and Ape procure a soldier costume for the Ape. Spenser describes this in a passage of 15 lines that starts with clothing and ends with posturing: "The Ape clad Souldierlike, fit for th'intent, / In a blew iacket with a crosse of redd" (204-5) leans on his bat, "as one farre in elde" (218).¹⁴ Acting lame at first, the Ape quickly changes his behavior when the Fox sees their first mark, the "good yeoman" (230),

Eftsoones the Ape himselfe gan vp to reare,
And on his shoulders high his bat to beare,
As if good seruice he were fit to doo;
But little thrift for him he did it too:
And stoutly forward he his steps did straine,
That like a handsome swaine it him became. . . (237-42)

The combination of clothing and manner presents the pair's target with the initial false impression, and is followed by the Ape's long string of lies. This earns the Ape and Fox (posing as his dog) a place keeping the yeoman's sheep, which they devour.

The second episode begins when "the Foxe had gotten him a gowne, / And th'Ape a cassocke sidelong hanging downe" (353-4). They forge a new passport and go as clerks, which allows Spenser to involve them in a critique of the English clergy when they meet an illiterate priest.¹⁵ The priest praises the living to be made in the church for its comforts, its ease, and its garments,

Ne are we tyde to fast, but when we list,

¹⁴ According to Jones and Stallybrass the trade in used clothing was considerable, with either a pawn shop or frippery being a likely place to purchase second-hand garments.

Ne to weare garments base of wollen twist,
 But with the finest silkes vs to aray,
 That before God we may appeare more gay,
 Resembling *Aarons* glorie in his place:
 For farre vnfit it is, that person bace
 Should with vile cloaths approach Gods maiestie,
 Whom no vncleannes may approachen nie:
 Or that all men, which anie master serue,
 Good garments for their seruice should deserue;
 But he that serues the Lord of hoasts most high,
 And that in highest place, t'approach him nigh,
 And all the peoples prayers to present
 Before his throne, as on ambassage sent
 Both too and fro, should not deserue to weare
 A garment better, than of wooll or heare. (459-74)¹⁶

McCabe says “The priest exploits genuine Anglican arguments for the use of clerical vestments as a pretext for ostentation. The passage need not indicate Spenser’s sympathy with the Puritans in the vestiarian controversy” (614). Instead, even though this speech is in the mouth of an ironic figure, a priest more concerned with his creature comforts than with the comforts of his creatures, it registers the basis of truth on which disguise preys. The passage presents a three-part argument, starting with simple comfort. Uncomfortable woollen garments of the basic kind are rhetorically “tyde” in lines 459-60 with the physical discomfort of fasting. This simple alignment subtly suggests that clothing is a requirement as elemental as food. Next, in lines 467-8, Spenser refers to the longstanding custom of livery, by which employers provided both food and clothing for their servants. Jones and Stallybrass offer a detailed account of the way this system inscribed social belonging on a person, so that “clothing, as a form of material memory, incorporated the wearer in a system of obligations” (22). Spenser refers to these obligations because his poem is about breaking them. The truth that both Spenser’s

¹⁵ See Patterson (1995) for an interesting reading of the passport.

ignorant priest and his reprobate beasts flout is that it is right and proper for stations in life to mark themselves with appropriate sign systems. Clothing, going beyond the mere necessity of comfort and protection, ought to communicate a person's place in life. Finally, the poet once more ties clothing with speech. The suitably dressed priest is an ambassador to the most high throne: like Mercury, his work is to bring messages verbally "both too and fro." Because of Spenser's care to fuse verbal and visual representation, it is possible that this argument about the proper necessity of clothing also applies to language. Language is no less necessary to civilization than garments are to human bodies, and language systems indicate where people belong in the hierarchy. At its highest, language is either poetry or prayer, an "ambassage sent / Both too and fro" (472-3). Spenser's use of Mercury as the poet suggests that prayer moves in one direction, from earth to heaven, and poetry in the other, from heaven to earth.

The illiterate priest tells the Fox and Ape how to "mock out a Benefice" (509) using variations on the same combination of lying and posturing at which the pair are already so good. The priest's advice is two-part. He begins, "First therefore, when ye have in handsome wise / Your selfe attyred" (486-7), and this reinforces the order of impressions already in use: people respond first to what they see. Then he describes how to "fashion eke a godly zeale" (493), and finally, lists an array of dishonest language skills that will be necessary to succeed at court:

For there thou needs must learne, to laugh, to lie,
To face, to forge, to scoffe, to companie,
To crouche, to please, to be a beetle stock
Of thy great Masters will, to scorne, or mock . . . (505-8)

With this advice, and their natural abilities, the Fox and Ape obtain a benefice, which they abuse until they are forced to run away.

One perennial distraction of Spenser scholarship is to try to identify the targets of specific satire in both *Mother Hubberds Tale* and *Muiopotmos*. Edwin Greenlaw's identifications of the characters under specific attack in *Mother Hubberds Tale* has been widely accepted, and a little argued, since its publication in 1910. Greenlaw identified

¹⁶ Notice the similarity of the messenger service the priest sees as his duty to the job Mercury performs, both carrying information to and from the throne on high.

the satiric occasion as Queen Elizabeth's 1579 French marriage proposal, during which time Elizabeth considered marrying the French Catholic duc d'Alencon. In this reading, the Fox was the queen's lord treasurer, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, and the Ape was Jehan de Simier, the duke's master of the wardrobe, who carried out much of the duke's courtship by proxy in England. The queen would thus have been accused (by the image of the sleeping lion) of being irresponsible, and warned against allowing the nation to be taken over by this untrustworthy pair of foreigners. Greenlaw suggests that Spenser's dedication, in which he claims to have written *Prosopopoia* in his youth, means he had written "a harmless adaptation of Renardic material" some years earlier, which he later, under the threatening political circumstances, "retouched into a severe attack upon Burghley" (546), and which then caused him to lose the patronage of the Earl of Leicester and to be forced leave England. It is fitting that a poem that so strongly engages in the rhetoric of praise and blame ought to inspire scholars for centuries to discover who is being blamed for what, but Spenser's methods make this exceedingly difficult.

W. R. Renwick, who admires the poem for being "in temper and in purport, such satire as England had to wait a hundred years for, until modern party politics bred it after the Restoration" (226), also criticizes it for a certain inconsistency which has given people trouble when searching for one stable referent for each beast. He says that Spenser "was neither careful nor rigid in adherence to a plan once made, and his uncertainty of method infects the conduct of his fable" (227). Greenlaw himself, when he outlines his famous equation of the fox with Burghley, the Ape with Simier, and the usurpation episode with the dangers of accepting the marriage suit, qualifies his claims by saying "it is not necessary to consider the poem as a whole to have been written with this purpose in view" (553). This is as close as he comes to conceding what Nelson (1968) later finds at fault with Greenlaw's system, which is that "the text of the poem simply will not bear a consistent identification of Ape with Simier and Fox with Burghley" (27). In fact, before scholars agree at all that the poem criticizes Burghley (and perhaps others) they are required to accept inconsistency. Thomas Greene, more recently and quite usefully provides an explanation that reads Spenser's instability as a highly developed form of subtlety:

. . . moving vertically from one plane to another or to several at once might be called *transvaluation*. Spenser complements it with the sort of sideways movement by which the ape ceases to be Simier in order to be Alencon or both, and by which Mercury as concord comes also to represent reason. We might call this procedure *metamorphosis* (311).

Given the political nature of Spenser's satire, and the fact that the volume was called in after publication, Spenser's slipperiness with words and allusions must have been what we would call today a survival tactic. Harold Stein and Richard S. Peterson both argue "the very real possibility of unpleasant consequences after publication must have been predictable beforehand" (Stein 20). Most critics agree that Burghley at least, if no one else, is the target of specific satire in *Mother Hubberds Tale* and one or more passages in *The Ruines of Time*, and he is usually equated with the Fox. The Mule, whom Fox and Ape meet at the transition between episodes two and three, has confounded scholars for centuries. It is rich and haughty:

At last they chaunst to meete vpon the way
The Mule, all deckt in goodly rich aray,
With bells and bosses, that full lowdly rung,
And costly trappings, that to ground downe hung.
Lowly they him saluted in meeke wise,
But he through pride and fatnes gan despise
Their meanesse; scarce vouchsafte them to requite.
Whereat the Fox deep groning in his sprite,
Said, Ah sir Mule, now blessed be the day,
That I see you so goodly and so gay
In your attyres, and eke your silken hyde
Fil'd with round flesh, that euerie bone doth hide.
Seemes that in fruitfull pastures ye doo liue,
Or fortune doth you secret fauour giue. (581-94)

Most accounts agree that Spenser had at least political if not personal reasons to regard Burghley with antipathy, and according to Greenlaw, Elizabeth referred to the lord treasurer as her “fox.” However, the Spenser/Burghley relationship that we know of is fundamentally that of outsider/insider, which would, in this scene, suggest that Spenser is the fox instead of Burghley. Spenser was posted in Ireland, working his way into land ownership from the position of a nobody. Burghley was so close to the center of affairs in London that from time to time he was referred to as England’s unofficial king. In this passage the Fox and Ape are nearly starving; surely they are outsiders, and surely this starving fox is not the lord treasurer.

Burghley owned a mule. That Burghley may have been associated in the public eye with his mule is suggested by three things. First, he was lame for many years later in life, and the mule enabled the aging courtier to ride around in his famous, ostentatious garden. Second, the mule was one of the perks of high status, having been given him by Michel de Mauvissiere, the French ambassador to England from 1575-85. In 1586 Burghley wrote to Sir Edward Stafford, then English ambassador to France, that “both the “moyle” and her master are grown very aged and therefore, though I cannot amend, yet I would be glad to amend my old beast with a new” (Read v.2 350). Third, in one of his portraits the Lord Treasurer is painted riding on his mule (Williams 34). If the mule in *Mother Hubberds Tale* is an oblique reference to Burghley, its personation is in keeping with the analysis that most critics accept regarding the relationship, or lack thereof, between Spenser and Burghley. While the poet doesn’t praise the Mule in this passage, neither does he blame the Fox.

By this analysis, the Mule could be either the lord treasurer, or any court insider, sleek, fat, and haughty, and for just this scene, the Fox could be the poet. Their verbal exchange does nothing to refute this possibility. The Fox greets the Mule somewhat obsequiously, but his words hide a few digs the poet might not have minded getting in against a court insider. His reference to the Mule’s place of residence emphasizes the insider/outsider relationship between the two; his reference to the Mule’s sleekness emphasizes his own “almost steru’d” condition, and not in a way that flatters the Mule, and his reference to “secret fauour” hints at underhandedness on the part of the Mule.¹⁷

¹⁷ Possibly a reference to Burghley’s role in Elizabeth’s secret police.

Most importantly for this reading, however, is that close to the end of this passage Spenser's Fox rhymes the words "hyde" and "hide," saying,

. . . . Ah sir Mule, now blessed be the day,
That I see you so goodly and so gay
In your attyres, and eke your silken hyde
Fil'd with round flesh, that euerie bone doth hide." (589-92)

"Adnominatio," bringing together two words of different meaning but similar sound, is one of Spenser's well-worn techniques of punning. He uses it in line 232, "Gay without good, is good hearts greatest loathing" (Quilligan). He uses it here to remind the reader that a costly and grand "hyde" hides more than the flesh and bones beneath it. It hides intentions, as the Fox and Ape have been doing. It may suggest that a costly and grand hide is better at hiding intentions than the lower-status second-hand clothing the Fox and Ape have been wearing. The rhyme also anticipates the healing hide from "The Sick Lion," which is metaphorically linked with the poem itself. The starving Fox, in his flattering address to the fat mule, seems to claim that he can see beyond what the hide hides. If the Fox can imaginatively see the Mule's bones beneath his "round flesh" it is either because the Fox is a hungry predator or because the more all-seeing poet speaks, for a moment, in the voice of the Fox. This suggests that because the allegory and the hide are analogous, the poem is also a hide which hides, or which hides something sometimes, and sometimes doesn't. The sense of a veiled threat, that the poet has the power to see the proud courtier's "secret fauour" and thus the power to expose it, is emphasized by the Fox's animal nature.¹⁸ Starving, and in conversation with an herbivore, the only reason the Fox doesn't eat the Mule is the Mule's size. Again, this "imitates" the real-world difference in status between the lord treasurer and a fringe-dwelling poet. Spenser's whole discourse of hides and clothing makes clear his opinion of interiority: an animals' hide hides the animal itself, thus the poet is "inside" the poem-hide in the same way the Mule is inside his "silken hyde."¹⁹

¹⁸ "This seeing-through, or x-ray vision is something satirists and statesmen would share in common. Is Burghley a fox in mule's clothing?" (David Radcliffe, Dec. 15, 2000)

¹⁹ A recently published book, *Historicism, Psychoanalysis, and Early Modern Culture*, edited by Carla Mazzio and Douglas Trevor, (Routledge, 2000) asks if early modern Europeans had a "concept of an inner self," a question which *Mother Hubbard's Tale* seems admirably well suited to answering.

The encounter with the Mule initiates one of poem's most entertaining scenes of garment appropriation and mannerism mocking, because Fox and Ape finally make it to court. At court, rhetoric plays a new role. On the Mule's advice they clothe themselves as a gentleman and his groom. They go to court,

Where the fond Ape himselfe vprearing hy
Vpon his tiptoes, stalketh stately by,
As if he were some great *Magnifico*. . . . (663-5)

The Ape apes a proud courtier so well that other courtiers, hesitant to approach him themselves, "By secrete meanes gan of his state enquire, / And priuily his seruant thereto hire" (681-2). Direct speech is squelched by the mere appearance of the *Magnifico*. Visual representation at this extreme forces language underground. As if in response, the poem undergoes a change. The cartoonlike narrative of the Fox and Ape is interrupted by a pair of rhetorical exercises that use words differently. The first of these is the description of the "rightfull Courtier" (793), 82 lines of panegyric commonly believed to have been inspired by Sir Philip Sidney. This is one of the better-analyzed sections of *Mother Hubberds Tale*. In it, Mother Hubberd turns to description. She has described very little throughout the poem that isn't necessary to the narrative, except clothing. The lengthy description of the rightful courtier appears as something of a cameo, but the rightful courtier is not a character in the same sense as the Fox and Ape, or even the priest. The verbs used to describe him are all present progressive, placing this courtier in a state of continuing action that never actually intersects with the narrative. The rightful courtier is removed from the action and elevated; he is closer to an ideal form than a "real" character. Ostensibly, he is praised here in order to accentuate the blame being heaped on the villains. But the contrast the rightful courtier provides to the Ape, who is such a natural at shallow entertainment and "merie leasings" (699) that he hardly appears to be acting at all, is doubled by the fact that the rightful courtier isn't even present at court. Spenser suggests that the praiseworthy is an ideal removed from court, while the blameable is a daily occurrence. His shift in style, from narration to description, invites the question, who is speaking? Has Mother Hubberd allowed her mind to stray from her tale of "strange aduenture, that betided" (37)? Has the sick poet, now well, writing Mother Hubberds story, added something of his own? Has the true poet, the puppet-

master hiding behind the whole fabrication, chosen to overlay his voice here, and if so, for what effect? Since this is Spenser, we can assume that all three levels are operating at once, and probably more. The Fox and Ape have arrived at court, and with them the True poet. Direct speech has been chased underground by the intimidation of costume and posturing, so the poet, having admitted that he too hides inside a skin made out of words, plays with his own protective costume, adjusting it here to show for just a moment that speech is a surface as much as clothing: behind either form of cover lurks an artist or imitator of some sort. Stepping for a moment out of the satirist's costume he has been "wearing" to relate the tale of Fox and Ape, Spenser speaks in a courtly voice, allowing his language to do what the animals do: present a surface appropriate to the setting. To emphasize the partnership of garb and gab, our poet ends this episode with the Fox found out for his trickeries, and banished. The Ape, now lacking

. . . . his huckster man,
That wont prouide his necessaries, gan
To growe into great lacke, ne could vpholde
His countenance in those his garments olde:
Ne new ones could he easily prouide,
Though all men him vncased gan deride,
Like as a Puppit placed in a play,
Whose part once past all men bid take away:
So that he driuen was to great distresse,
And shortly brought to hopelesse wretchednesse. (925-34)

And he runs away into the night.

The second important digression from narrative this section contains is the suitor's lament, a fairly short section of 24 lines, but rhetorically striking and emotionally charged, so that it is one of the more well-remembered and oft-quoted sections of the poem. Again, the poet leaves off Mother Hubbard's "bad" (1388) language, but without saying so, and rises to a different tone. The suitor's lament is modeled on a grammar-school exercise called speech-in-character, and here the poet praises home and blames court. The lament shifts the poem from third-person narration

to first-person apostrophe, beginning with, “Full little knowest thou that hast not tride, /
What hell it is, in suing long to bide” (895-6), and ending with,

Who euer leaues sweete home, where meane estate
In safe assurance, without strife or hate,
Findes all things needfull for contentment meeke;
And will to Court for shadowes vaine to seeke,
Or hope to gaine, himselfe will a daw trie:
That curse God send vnto mineemie. (909-14)

Critics have often found the poet’s voice here, reciting the bitter frustration of his personal experience. Less noticed but equally important is that while the rightful courtier section provides contrast to the Ape’s aping, the suitor’s lament provides contrast to the Fox’s rhetoric. Its two complaints, the lack of advancement and the leaving of home, have already been introduced into the poem in the first dialogue between the Fox and Ape. Here, the complaint that was introduced when the Fox brought up the topic of lying is spoken again. Coming now from the voice of the poet, the complaint carries more authority. However, the fact that the Fox said it first, and said it at all, tends to cast some shadow of doubt on the poetic voice in the suitor’s lament. Or perhaps, conversely, it sprinkles some authority over the voice of the Fox. Why are the Fox and the poet saying the same thing, or is this just Mother Hubbard speaking? The lament could be in the mouth of any of three available voices: the character of Mother Hubbard, the narrator who is actually the sick poet, or the True poet, Spenser himself. By not clearly indicating whose words these are, Spenser raises the question that he suggests intelligent people should ask, just who is behind the rhetoric? His story and his play with voices suggest that just because words are spoken in a certain tone or style, that doesn’t mean the speaker rightly occupies a certain corresponding place in the social hierarchy. In addition, the lament once more subtly aligns the poet with the Fox. Furthermore, for Spenser to allow the wit of the beast on the bottom to carry the same authority as the poet on the top would travesty his sense of the world’s proper hierarchy, but that is one point of the poem: when the natural order is reversed things go terribly wrong. This suggests, however, that the relative truthfulness of speech is partly a matter of social hierarchy. As M. Lindsay Kaplan has pointed out,

while sexual slander of a common woman, if considered actionable at all under the common law, was seen as a tort which could be redressed by the award of damages, verbal imputations about the queen's sexual reputation constituted sedition, which was punishable by death. (115)

In other words, the truth might vary, depending on the social status of the person one is being truthful about. Satiric poets, especially those without titles, desperately needed authority in Elizabethan England to enable them to execute safely what Spenser saw as their poetic responsibility. Ovid's banishment looms large over Spenser's beast poems, and many scholars have suggested that Spenser's life in Ireland was more a banishment than an opportunity. It is uncertain to what degree Spenser saw it as either, but it is clear from his beast series that he imagined Virgil and Ovid as models for two different ways of being a political poet. Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, the poem which got him into trouble, was satiric. By suggesting that both Fox and poet might have the same message, praising home and blaming court, Spenser hints that the satiric poet, who actually has a noble role, has been miscast by his public. The purpose of *Mother Hubberds Tale* is to claim the authority from God to speak truthfully to people at all heights of power, all the way to the top. Knowing this could seem seditious, Spenser wrote carefully to hide the claim.

By letting the Fox and Ape claim the hide, Spenser both performs the poetic action of speaking truth to power, and parodies it. Soon the opportunity presents itself to Fox and Ape:

Whilst through the forest rechlesse they did goe,
Lo where they spide, how in a gloomy glade,
The Lyon sleeping lay in secret shade,
His Crowne and Scepter lying him beside,
And hauing doft for heate his dreadfull hide. . . . (950-4)

they steal the Lion's hide and get into an argument about which one of them should wear it. The satire present in the easily-recognized reference to the popular fable of "The Ass in the Lion's Skin," is that an ass might think a royal robe makes him a king, but once he starts braying his voice will betray him. Spenser takes care to heighten this voice/view pair again, and he keeps it consistent by insisting that both Fox and Ape are liars to the

core, as the Ass wearing the Lion's skin would also be. But Spenser has gone further, allowing "The Sick Lion" fable to color the incident with the idea that a "skin" of words can be noble, even medicinal. The argument between the two liars about who should wear the skin becomes a quarrel about which form of rhetoric is most powerful, visual or verbal. The Ape argues he should wear the skin, because he looks like a man, saying "I am in person, and in stature / Most like a man, the Lord of euerie creature" (1029-30). The Fox scoffs in reply and says he deserves it because he can think and talk like one:

And where ye claime your selfe for outward shape

Most *like* a man, Man is not *like* an Ape

In his chiefe parts, that is, in wit and spirite;

But I therein most *like* to him doo merite

For my slie wyles and subtill craftinesse. . . . (1041-5) [my emphasis]

This exchange is keyed to the pair's first dialogue by the repetition of the word *like*, and doubly emphasized by the repetition of the phrase which contains it, "Most like a Man" (1030 and 1042). The phrase is used twice; the word *like* four times. These repetitions and the debate they are embedded in centralize the debate about rhetorical power.

Spenser asks the question, which is more powerful, the verbal man, wily and foxlike, or the visual man, so good at "merie leasings" (699)? Which of the reprobate beasts will get the throne? But Spenser raises the question of the power of surfaces only to drop it. By allowing these bad animals to quickly compromise and take the throne together he disqualifies the argument, as if saying, so what? If the beast within is a reprobate, it doesn't matter if his lies or his looks are more effective at misleading people. In this culminating chicanery Spenser blames the beast within for wreaking mayhem on society, but separates the surface effects from this blame. He insists that poetry is the surface of words that conceals or presents meaning within or beneath its rhetoric, and he praises it. After all, the Lion's skin is noble, especially when on the lion. In the wrong hands however, this noble art is no less noble, but far more dangerous.

In their upcoming book on renaissance clothing Jones and Stallybrass argue that "clothes, like sorrow, inscribe themselves upon a person who comes into being through that inscription," adding that "it is through the coronation service—the putting on of a crown and of coronation robes—that the monarch becomes a monarch" (2). This

contradicts the idea that there is a clear line of demarcation between the inner man and the outer man. This inscription is clearly what the Fox and Ape have in mind as they aim to be king by dressing in “his skinne the terror of the wood” (*MHT* 969). They resolve their disagreement by each taking the role he is best suited for; the Ape mimics royalty by wearing the lion’s hide, and the Fox uses his wit to manage the Ape from behind, like a puppeteer. But kingly garb fails to transform the reprobate beasts, or does it? What relationship do the behaviors of the Fox as the power behind the throne and the Ape as the callous show-off on it have with the truth? Are these kingly behaviors? Some would say yes. These descriptions may be, as many critics assume, the indiscretion which caused the volume to be called in. If this is true, then Spenser’s poem called down upon the poet’s head a real-world wrath brought on because the criminal actions of Fox and Ape moved beyond poetry and into reality. Oram writes, “they possess a demonic energy which may enable them to continue in their metamorphic career long after the poem has ended” (1989 332). In effect, the Fox and Ape usurp power at increasingly high levels of hierarchy in the poem and finally above it, as they overrun the sick state, the bedside of the sick poet who is unable to censor his own work, and finally the life of the volume, the True poet, and his public. The sick poet, as the sovereign ruler over Mother Hubberd, ought to have the power to re-tell her story so it doesn’t get everybody into trouble all the way up. He should be alarmed by the whiff of sedition, and shut the old woman up. But he can do nothing. He is, after all, sick. In turn, the True Poet passes on the damage too, but he has to take the consequences of the crimes of his subject-beasts. We don’t know what those really were beyond the volume’s calling in, and its re-issuance years later with *Mother Hubberds Tale* and a few verses from *The Ruines of Time* excised.

When the Fox and Ape rule, Spenser parodies the effect created when disgraceful intentions masquerade under praiseworthy surfaces. The lion’s skin represents the opposite, a noble cover for noble intentions. In the case of either the sick poet or the sleeping lion, language provides medicine, but Spenser claims that even the True Poet can do nothing to stop criminal misrepresentation in high places without the help of God. The tale told by Mother Hubberd has recounted the progression of civic illness, so that only at the end does the sick kingdom arrive at the peak of its fever. It is “devpiv’d of sense and ordinarie reason” (11) in this episode just as the sick poet and the sick lion

were at the opening. This is the state of the Lion King from the fable when he demands the cure and is told a freshly flayed wolf hide will do it. This is the state of the sick poet when he finds “gladsome solace” (20) in the tale. But the sick kingdom has no poet, and the hide has fallen into the wrong hands. As the Fox and Ape fake their way ever closer to the top they are spotted from on high:

Now when high *Iove*, in whose almightie hand
The care of Kings, and power of Empires stand,
Sitting one day within his turret hye,
From whence he vewes with his blacklidded eye,
Whatso the heauen in his wide vawte containes,
And all that in the deepest earth remaines,
The troubled kingdome of wilde beasts behelde,
Whom not their kindly Souereigne did welde,
But an vsurping Ape with guile suborn'd. . . . (1225-33)

Jove calling on the aid of Mercury represents Spenser’s Christian god inspiring the true poet to inform the monarch of injustice. Van den Berg calls Mercury “a superpoet” (98). Neither Mercury, who is just above the sleeping lion inside the poem, nor the True poet, who is just above the sick poet outside the poem, are sick. Both have the power to set the story straight, yet Spenser disclaims that it is the True poet’s decision to do so. Perhaps this explains in part the usefulness of these classical gods in *Mother Hubberds Tale*. Oram calls the sudden appearance of Jove and Mercury in this otherwise medieval-style imitation of a beast fable “Spenser’s most daring instance of generic mixing in the poem” (1989 332), and Greene calls it “an extraordinary breach of decorum” (1963 303), but how else could Spenser, at one and the same time, disclaim responsibility for his poetic actions and claim those actions to be sovereign in their own rights? By equating himself with a pagan god he assigns himself responsibility for the world within his fictions. It is his creation, and it does what he says. By allegorizing the poet as only a messenger god in service to a higher power, Spenser still pays homage to his own Christian god. By hierarchizing the deliverance of the sick kingdom, Spenser claims that as the True poet he takes orders from God. He is not exactly putting *himself* above Queen Elizabeth in the story of the lion, but he is calling attention to the nexus where her

command is not superior to that the poet takes from his most high sovereign. Spenser makes the point that if the kingdom and everyone who might be able to save it are all sick, it is especially important for the True poet to act on orders from a divine source. He has separated the poem itself from any blame in crimes that seek to overthrow rightful order, and now he shows the True Poet, on orders from the high seat of justice, using his voice to awaken the monarch.

When Mercury descends, Spenser asserts once more the healing power of the poem, and the hyde/hide nexus. The superpoet Mercury embodies a mysticized version of the same fusing of garments with words that Spenser has used in every episode. Arriving at the usurpers' castle, Mercury changes his accustomed face as easily as a mortal changes clothes, and he does it in order to hear the truth:

Then gan he to himselfe new shape to frame,
And that faire face, and that Ambrosiall hew,
Which wonts to decke the Gods immortall crew,
And beautefie the shinie firmament,
He doft, vnfit for that rude rabblement.
So standing by the gates in strange disguise,
He gan enquire of some in secret wize. . . . (1266-72)

Next, the superpoet makes himself invisible with his magic hat, so he can see for himself if the allegations against the Fox and Ape are true. Changing his look enables him to hear, obliterating it enables him to see the truth. These are heady powers that Spenser claims for the poet, but they are also his confessions. He is not that different from the Fox and Ape, manipulating his cover so that he can get what he came for. The difference is that the True Poet is not a fox or an ape, as he would be if he was a liar, nor is he trying to usurp power. He is a divine messenger, bringing truth wrapped in a hide of words. This is confirmed when Mercury wakes the sleeping Lion with gentle speech, and the Lion's skin disappears from the narrative to the sound of the mighty Lion's waking roar:

Thereat enraged, soone he gan vpstart,
Grinding his teeth, and grating his great hart,
And rouzing vp himselfe, for his rough hide

He gan to reach; but no where it espide.
 Therewith he gan full terribly to rore,
 And chafte at that indignitie right sore.
 But when his Crowne and scepter both he wanted,
 Lord how he fum'd, and sweld, and rag'd, and panted;
 And threatned death, and thousand deadly dolours
 To them that had purloyn'd his Princely honours. (1333-42)

The angry lion's roar is the voice of justice, and once the civilizing power of language has been activated, the satiric poem is no longer necessary. Naked, the Lion rages to his palace and delivers justice. The function of his lion's skin, which is to make him appear regal, has been provided by the poet's words, but he was regal all along in and of himself, and once the words have done their work, the Lion is still a lion, naked or not. Spenser has done nothing but praise the Lion's skin, or poem, but here he ends the metaphor. He is not claiming the governing power of classical rhetoric for his poetry. Using the lion's hide as a metaphor for the healing poem, Spenser shows that his poetry actually belongs to his sovereign. Its purpose is to make her more regal and more effective, and the praiseworthy poet should not be treated as an outsider, because he is not a starving fox trying to mislead the multitudes.

After this scene the Lion's skin is forgotten, but the flaying from the fable is remembered. Many critics believe the Lion allows the Fox to go unpunished, but if read with the shaping fable of "The Sick Lion" in mind, the Fox's punishment appears to be suggestively grim, for "the Foxe, first Author of that treacherie,/ He did vncase, and then away let flie" (1379-80). To uncasing is to remove the cover. In a poem as preoccupied with garments as this one, it has understandably been assumed that the Fox loses only his suit of clothes, as the Ape does at the end of his term as *Magnifico*, when "all men him vncased gan deride" (930). But remember, the ailing King Lion from the beast fable tradition was cured when the wolf, his courtier, was flayed alive. In the version from Caxton's *Aesop* this scene reads as follows:

Soone after came there the wulf for to see the lyon/ And
 Incontynent the lyon called hym to counceylle/ and
 castynge softly his feet vpon hym dyspoylled the wulf of

his skynne sauf the skynne of his hede and of his feet/ and
after the lyon bound it al warme about his bely/ And the
wulf ranne awaye skynles (Lenaghan 149)

The Fox doesn't escape justice; Spenser chooses to hint that he might. Or perhaps the Fox does escape justice, but Spenser chooses to hint that he might not. In either case, it is not the poet's work to create justice, just to keep the Lion on the job. And if the Fox was a dishonest, self-serving poet, wrapping a pack of lies in a good-looking hide, then the removal of his "case" represents his loss of power to use a praiseworthy surface of words to hide a disgraceful meaning underneath. By using the Lion's skin as the healing metaphor for the book, Spenser praises poetry itself for being regal, because it is divinely inspired. In addition, he parodies the consequences to England should she continue to ignore his offer to be a laureate. How will Jove wake the sleeping Lion without Mercury, his poet-messenger, to speak politely in her ear? Furthermore, Spenser blames self-serving courtiers for misusing poetry's power, and giving it a bad name. Spenser believes that without the noble poet, naked justice will sleep through any number of crimes, including those committed by disgraceful poets, but he is careful to lump disgraceful poets into the courtly category which includes a lot of non-poetic characters, for everyone at court is vulnerable to the charge of creating false impressions, whether they be visual or verbal. Spenser dignifies the True Poet with sovereignty over his own creations by hiding himself behind the tale told to the sick poet. By doing this he not only places himself in company with Virgil and Ovid, calling their careers to reflect on his own, but he also suggests that because the True or Noble Poet is serving higher powers, he can and should direct his subjects any way necessary. And the poet's subjects include everybody he writes about, from the Mother Hubbard to the Fox. Thus Spenser justifies the noble poet's use of foxlike poetry, or biting satire. A foxlike voice, he says, does not mean the poet himself is a fox.

Chapter Three

Contestatory Imitation and the voice of the Fox-poet

Spenser's beast poems have been unnecessarily overlooked and their value has been underestimated. Their nature is satiric, and for this reason they give us insight into Spenser's praxis from an unfamiliar angle. Readers since Gabriel Harvey have considered Spenser's normal mode, "the pure sanguine of her swete Feary Queene" (McCabe 609), and his beast poetry, especially *Mother Hubberds Tale*, a departure. But an unfamiliar angle is to be valued, for it may convey new information. Spenser's three beast poems are designed to work together, and yet the triptych model I proposed earlier is inexact. *Ruines of Rome* interrupts the series of three beast poems much the way, in an architectural setting, a door or window might be interposed between the parts of a triptych of paintings. While this interruption disrupts the *sequence* of generic similarity, it does not disturb the line-length *proportions* that order the series by size. *Mother Hubberds Tale* is still the longest beast poem, and the two flanking works, whether one includes *Ruines of Rome* or not, are proportionally smaller. The Menippean mixture established by the interrupting of beast poetry with sonnet sequence is only partially attenuated by the suggestion of order in the triptych, yet three-out-of-nine remains a significant number. The figures of Ovid and Virgil that neatly surround the sick poet of *Mother Hubberds Tale* order the poem in a similarly contestable fashion. To begin with, the sick poet himself is a suggestion, carefully hidden at or even behind the center of the central poem. Virgil and Ovid are more obvious, but at the same time that their biographical presences surround the sick poet and give the series unity, their poetical and political styles compete for dominance. They and their followers were two distinctly different types of poets both in their historical locations and in Spenser's England. If Spenser himself is behind the sick poet, then who of his antique forbears does he take as his true model? The nature of the final poem, *Muiopotmos*, in which competition between artists results in deadly destruction, emphasizes the importance of contestatory imitation in Spenser's poetic theory. Its story of competition illustrates the kind of artistic *paragone* in which one artist imitates another with every intention of besting the model; the nature of *paragone* is that *one* best artist wins. Thus, the laureate spot invented by Virgil and recast and desired by Spenser is not to be shared. For Spenser, struggle was an essential part of poetic action. It existed within poetry, and it surrounded the poet's life. He made his poems imitate life by embodying struggles within their texts

and among them. In his beast-poetry series the bigger poem dominates the smaller; the older model invalidates the newer or the newer tries to invalidate the older; *Virgils Gnat* cries out that poetry's right purpose is to enshrine memory, *Muiopotmos* that its right purpose is to create new memories. In *Muiopotmos* all these struggles are collected in the "deadly dolorous debate" (1) that takes place at all levels, from gods to insects, from the historical past to the very brink of the future. This struggle lies at the heart of Spenser's poetic theory and overflows into his life, as the "calling-in" of the volume indicates. Perhaps most tellingly, two poetic voices emerge from the beast-poetry series, the voice of the True or Noble Poet who seeks official service and recognition, and a voice we might call that of the Fox-poet. The Fox-poet speaks for Spenser's satiric side in the true Aesopic tradition of sardonic wisdom. The Fox-poet's and Noble Poet's voices compete for mastery of the beast-poem series. Being animal works and Menippean satire, the beast poems would seem to be the territory of the Fox, but Spenser's highly moral official poetic voice is supported strongly too, by Virgil's august presence and Mercury's divine direction.

The Struggle of Insect-sized Poets

Competitive struggle in *Muiopotmos* takes place on two noticeable levels. The tapestry competition between Arachne and Athena establishes a basis for reading artistic rivalry as an important theme. Spenser uses this Ovidian story to explain the spider's hatred of the butterfly:

The cause why he this Flie so maliced,
Was (as in stories it is written found)
For that his mother which him bore and bred,
The most fine-fingred workwoman on ground,
Arachne, by his meanes was vanquished
Of *Pallas*, and in her owne skill confound,
When she with her for excellence contended,
That wrought her shame, and sorrow neuer ended. (257-64)

The Fate of the Butterflie uses this etiological myth as historical background, and the main plot doubles this kind of rivalry. Furthermore, the spider and butterfly take artistic

rivalry to its most extreme resolution when it leads finally to the spider's murder of Clarion, the butterfly.

Spenser's two shorter beast poems work together to establish Spider and Butterfly as two types of courtier poet. It is important that the Spider and Butterfly are the sole beast-characters in the three-poem series who have proper names of their own, and even more important that they operate in complete silence. Given Saint Augustine's injunction to read more carefully in places where the text seems contradictory or troubled, it is fair to assume Spenser used silence to highlight language in his final beast poem. The beast-poetry tradition is fundamentally based on talking animals, and it is probable that *Complaints* is closer to Spenser's manifesto of poetic theory than anything else he wrote. In this nexus silence speaks eloquently.

Spenser weaves his beast poems together with a method in which one idea changes incrementally as it goes through several steps of association between two poems. He uses both *Virgils Gnat* and *Muiopotmos*, and two languages, to identify Aragnoll's name and his spider web with the weaving of memory into stories. The spider's name, Aragnoll, has an obvious similarity to a Latin word used in the opening lines of *Virgils Gnat*, *araneoli*. Depending on how *Aragnoll* and *araneoli* are pronounced, they can be more or less similar. One can pronounce the *g* in Aragnoll as hard or soft. If soft, the two words differ only in the fact that the last half of the Latin word has more vowel sounds. *Araneoli* is translated by Spenser as "cobweb" at the beginning of *Virgils Gnat* in the line "And like a cobweb weaving slenderly" (3). McCabe calls this a "mistranslation," (600) pointing out that the word actually means *little spider*. Spenser's "mistranslation," however, reinforces the contact between this word and Aragnoll, the cobweb weaver of *Muiopotmos*, who makes ". . . the cursed cobweb" (423). If this is not actually a poet's error, but rather a conscious although slight shift in the meaning of a word in order to establish a link almost present, but needing reinforcement, then by changing *araneoli* to *cobweb* Spenser is able to weave a reference to Aragnoll into the first stanza of *Virgils Gnat*. More importantly, he emphasizes the spider's relationship to spinning, and the concept of spinning, as a metaphor for tale telling is as old as poetry itself. Therefore Aragnoll becomes a kind of poet or taleteller. The word "cobweb" in

both poems is connected to the idea of spinning through the description of Aragnoll's work:

And *weaving* straight a net with manie a folde
About the caue, in which he lurking dwelt,
With fine small cords about it stretchyed wide,
So finely *sponne*, that scarce they could be spide. (357-60) [italics mine]

Through its association with spinning, Aragnoll's thread becomes a metaphor for the thread of story. This concept is reinforced by the tapestry contest in *Muiopotmos*, in which the woven works depict stories. This metaphor has a long history, dominated by the three Fates, and lightly touched in the opening stanza of *Virgils Gnat*, where the little spiders are a simile for playful songs. Ovid also uses it in the opening lines of *Metamorphoses*,

ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen!"
(*Metamorphoses* I.4).

Spin out my song forever! (Miller)

Here, *deducite*, from *deduco*, is defined as "to lead, draw; esp. in weaving: . . . hence, fig., to draw out, spin out in speech or writing" (Cassell's New Latin Dictionary). While the opening lines of *Metamorphoses* are only distantly related to the opening lines of *Virgils Gnat*, Spenser's "mistake" helps make them pertinent, and the Ovidian reference also subtly reinforces the idea that the spider is a poet.

Spenser augments the tiny beast-identities of both spider and butterfly with etiological myths, to present modern courtier poets as diminished versions of the ideal, true, even heroic poet. He alters the Ovidian version of Arachne's transformation to suit his own purposes. In *Metamorphoses*, when Arachne loses the weaving contest she tries to hang herself. Then Athena uses her divine power to make the woman into a spider instead. It is an act of mercy. Spenser changes this so that the envy in Arachne's own heart turns her into a spider with no help from the goddess:

Yet did she inly fret, and felly burne,
And all her blood to poisonous rancor turne.

. . . .

That shortly from the shape of womanhed

Such as she was, when *Pallas* she attempted,
She grew to hideous shape of dryrihed . . . (343-47)

Thus the spider-poet is descended from a human artist who was good enough to take on the goddess in one-to-one contest. In addition, the butterfly descends from an artist who was formerly one of Venus's nymphs. This nymph outshines her peers in collecting flowers for Venus, and when the other nymphs become envious at her success they stir up the goddess's jealous fear with false tales.

Eftsoones that Damzel by her heauenly might,
She turn'd into a winged Butterflie,
In the wide aire to make her wandring flight;
And all those flowers, with which so plenteouslie
Her lap she filled had, that bred her spight,
She placed in her wings, for memorie
Of her pretended crime, though crime none were:
Since which that flie them in her wings doth beare. (137-144)

The butterfly is a poet, too, because he wears the lion's skin, a sign of poetic power since *Mother Hubberds Tale*:

And then about his shoulders broad he threw
An hairie hide of some wilde beast, whom hee
In saluage forrest by aduenture slew,
And reft the spoyle his ornament to bee:
Which spredding all his backe with dreadfull vew,
Made all that him so horrible did see,
Thinke him *Alcides* with the Lyons skin,
When the *Noemean* Conquest he did win. (65-72)

And if this isn't enough, Clarion's "feete" are mentioned twice in stanzas 22 and 23. Clarion's descent from a nymph of Venus identifies him as a love poet. Aragnoll is certainly an occasional poet, spinning his web for the purpose at hand, and perhaps also a playwright, creating a real-life revenge tragedy. In *Muiopotmos*, as one poet kills another, poetry consumes itself in envy. In contrast to these devolved courtier poets, the

True or Noble poet is not a silent insect, but a figure who stands apart from the courtly scene of envy and revenge.

Renaissance humanists such as Bembo and Erasmus promoted innovative imitation, arguing that the literature of the ages should be sifted and known for what is good and useful, then adopted and made one's own, for one's own time. Johannes Sturm urged students and poets to use the matter of the classical past in an aggressively personal manner, as if taking old armor from an arsenal, but using it in their own battles. Sturm, here paraphrased by Greene, advised his readers that

Old authors are like arsenals from which we borrow arms
or material for arms. Arguments and *sententiae* are
common to all orators to be used like javelins; each
becomes the private possession of a given orator to the
degree that he is able individually to throw it in his own
way and to wound his particular opponents. (Greene 1982
187)

In this light, it must be important that the butterfly's armor is tiny; and if he is a poet, he wields a diminished version of the armaments of the past. Du Bellay's influence on Spenser is widely known and may be demonstrated most emphatically in *Complaints*. He became known for his leadership in shifting imitation theory away from its "movement back and forth between a nourishing, overshadowing tradition and a groping, miraculous invention . . ." (Greene 1982 195), by encouraging its movement simply towards the "groping, miraculous invention." Spenser appears to be following du Bellay's advice in *Muiopotmos*, and fighting his own battles while wearing the armor of the past, yet the Lion's skin thrown over the Butterfly-poet's shoulders has also become a tiny thing since *Mother Hubberds Tale*. When this shrinking culminates in the beautiful, degenerate love-poet of the modern court being murdered by the hideous, degenerate, tragic-playwright poet of the modern court it is a scene of poetry itself imploding.

The Ordering Force of Time

In the *Complaints*, only one force is capable of establishing uncontested order over this perpetual and ubiquitous struggle: Time. Spenser's beast poetry sequence,

which opens with the origins of poetic time in Virgil's youth, closes at the end of *Muiopotmos* with death, dropping swiftly into a sudden, sad, and possibly silent future. The spider mercilessly slays the butterfly, and the poet offers no eipitaph:

Which when the greisly tyrant did espie,
Like a grimme Lyon rushing with fierce might
Out of his den, he seized greedelie
On the resistles pray, and with fell spight,
Vnder the left wing stroke his weapon slie
Into his heart, that his deepe groning spright
In bloodie streames fourth fled into the aire,
His bodie left the spectacle of care. (433-40)

FINIS.

Spenser's statement about finality repeats itself throughout the entire volume: the ruination of time orders all. As various forms of order compete to dominate the series, the degeneration of Time overrides their struggles. Starting the series in the classical past, with his translation evoking Virgil's youth, the series moves into the more recent literary past. *Mother Hubberds Tale* takes Spenser's series through the Middle Ages, and *Muiopotmos* represents the cutting edge of modern renaissance poetry. Spenser uses the Ovidian concept of a Golden Age to also demonstrate an array of imitative practices. English and other European intellectuals believed that time was devolving from a distant Golden Age, or that the world was weaker and worse with each succeeding generation. This belief is expressed in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and imitated in a different manner in each of Spenser's matched beast poems. Thus, while the three beast poems travel the span of literary history, at the same time they represent opposite extremes of imitative practice. *Muiopotmos* is "Spenser's most original poem" (Renwick Var. 603), a highly original blend of courtly poetry and satire. It finishes a sequence started with *Virgils Gnat*, and the sequence shows the varying distances a poetic imitator can take from his model: from translation to innovation.

In the *Metamorphoses* Ovid explains that the first age of humanity was "aurea" (gold) (I.89), an age of seasonless plenty ruled by Saturn and characterized by honest, communal anarchy. This gave way to a silver age, when the seasons arrived and people

were forced to learn shelter, cultivation of crops, and domestication of animals. After this, the brazen age followed,

. . . saevior ingeniis et ad horrida promptior arma, / non
scelerata tamen (I.126-7).

. . . Of sterner disposition, and more ready to fly to arms
savage, but not yet impious” (Miller 11)

Ovid explained that he was writing in the iron age, when things had grown still more savage, and his words are,

Protinus inrupit venae peioris in aevum
Omne nefas fugitque pudor verumque fidesque;
In quorum subiere locum fraudesque dolusque
Insidiaeque et vis et amor sceleratur habendi. (I.128-31)

Straightway all evil burst forth into this age of baser vein:
modesty and truth and faith fled the earth, and in their place
came tricks and plots and snares, violence and cursed love
of gain. (Miller 11)

In Spenser’s beast-poetry series, *Virgils Gnat* represents the originating force of youth and timelessness that marks the idea of a young world. Many critics accept Stein’s suggestion that Spenser probably translated *Culex* when he was young, perhaps an undergraduate. Translation was a pedagogical practice that was the first school experience of very young students since well before Virgil’s age, and it had been practiced in virtually unbroken continuity through the ages, continuing essentially the same when Spenser was a schoolboy. Translation was part of the classical praxis of being a schoolboy, and as such, was somewhat removed from historical change. Being a translation of a young man’s poem by a young man, *Virgils Gnat* represents youth and close proximity to an original. By collapsing the centuries that separated Virgil’s and Spenser’s student days into one timeless praxis of studenthood, Spenser’s translation represents synchronic time in the beast-poem collection. In *Metamorphoses* this concept

of timelessness at the beginning of things is symbolized by “ver erat aeternum” (I.107), an everlasting spring that knows no history. Spenser does not refer or allude to this kind of time; instead he enacts it, and thus provides the first element in his multiple reference to history: timelessness.

Prosopopoeia uses heuristic imitation to refer directly to Ovid’s text about the Golden Age in *Metamorphoses*. The Fox, complaining about his unhappy state, recalls a different time:

Nor ought cald mine or thine: thrice happie then

Was the condition of mortall men.

That was the golden age of *Saturne* old,

But this might better be the world of gold:

For without golde now nothing wilbe got. (149-154)

The Fox’s reference to the Golden Age is an heuristic imitation of Ovid’s concept of time. In Greene’s words, such imitations “advertise their derivation from the subtexts they carry with them . . . [and] proceed to *distance themselves* from the subtexts and force us to recognize the poetic distance traversed” (40). Spenser advertises his debt to Ovid by using Ovid’s terms and recounting some of the features of his description; and he achieves his distance by ironically putting this report of the golden age into the mouth of the Fox, a character of the iron age (or worse) if ever there were one. The Fox blames Time for his lack of opportunities. This complaint echoes in other places throughout the volume, and as we have seen, opportunity was a personal problem for Spenser. Because the Fox’s complaint could be Spenser’s own, Spenser may be using the antiheroic Reynardian tradition to suggest that he sometimes speaks in the voice of a Fox-poet. At the same time, Spenser points out that as time degenerates, all creatures come down with it; and he may be suggesting that if he has to speak like a fox sometimes, it is not his fault. It is the fault of time.

When Spenser refers to the Ovidian golden age in *Muiopotmos*, he uses dialectical imitation. Again: in dialectical imitation “the text is the locus of a struggle between two rhetorical or semiotic systems that are vulnerable to one another and whose conflict cannot easily be resolved . . . anachronism becomes a dynamic source of artistic power” (Greene 46). In *Muiopotmos* Spenser appropriates and re-casts the whole concept of

devolving diachronic time offered by Ovid. He adopts an entire Ovidian myth of origin, the transformation of Arachne from a woman to a spider and re-writes it his own way. He demonstrates, rather than refers to, the historical distance between his poetry and Ovid's by emulating Ovid's practice and his style with his own new myth of origin for both spider and butterfly. Both have degenerated from superior beings. Probably their poetics also devolved from superior forms. The butterfly is the degenerate progeny of a nymph of Venus, and the spider comes from a human mother. Spenser admits the validity of Ovid's concept of the winding down of history by first of all imitating it, and second by satirizing his own age. But when Spenser takes Ovid for his paragon, he tries to outdo him. Spenser challenges Ovidian time by his attempt to write new poetry. An uncomfortable dynamic stretches between Spenser's poetically stated belief in the inexorable force of ruin that Time brings, and the poetry itself. Spenser appears to be trying to write poetry better than ever, while Time makes all things worse than ever. He enacts the struggle endemic to his whole beastly series more thoroughly in this defiant attempt than anywhere else, because in the very context of the idea that such a triumph is impossible, he still tries to be better than the ancients. In this poetic moment, the True Poet portrays himself locked in noble combat against an immeasurably more powerful force of destruction.

But is this the Noble Poet who struggles against ruination, or is the Fox-poet laughing as poetry devolves into chaos? Who is this artist who dares to write so beautifully about the end of poetry? And does he write about the end of poetry *at its* close, or is he foretelling an inevitable future? Further, which force wins the debate, chaos or order? In the sequence of time so carefully maintained against the chaos of Menippean satire undermining every other ordering design of the beast-poetry set, *Muiopotmos* remains solidly at the end of both the beast poems and of time, either in poetry's immediate present, or its unseen future. It is consistent that Spenser imitates the final verses from Virgil's *Aeneid* in the final struggles of the butterfly—he is writing about endings. But the volume isn't ended here, and neither are his spider and butterfly heroes or warriors. Instead, they represent the distance that courtier poets have descended from their semi-divine and human origins. In a classic pun for which all of beast fabledom seems to have prepared him, Clarion and Aragnoll are anything but

humanists. Their silence is portentous in a work concerned with the place of poetry in the world. The presence of these two poetic opposites is further evidence that Spenser's Noble Poet has a dark side expressed by the Fox-poet.

Feeding on itself, Spenser's history of beast poetry comes to a silent end. As Aragnoll murders Clarion, the Spider does not even take the hide that represents poetic heroism for his own. Poetry itself means that little to him. Critics agree it is consistent to read the garden as a court, in which case I believe Spenser himself, always the court outsider, must be removed from this scene of dismay. Standing aside as he bitterly forecasts Clarion's death, a life-sized Spenser excludes the voice of his serious poet from murderous courtly envy. In the fourth-from-final stanza he apostrophizes,

Who now shall giue vnto my heauie eyes
A well of teares, that all may ouerflow?
Or where shall I finde lamentable cryes,
And mournfull tunes enough my grieffe to show?
Helpe O thou Tragick Muse, me to deuise
Notes sad enough, t'expresse this bitter throw:
For loe, the drierie stownd is now arriued,
That of all happines hath vs depriued. (415-16)

The fact that the poet is still speaking bodes well for the future of poetry, but that "all happiness" has been taken away indicates either a fairly wide application for the meaning of the small butterfly's death, or a mocking tone behind Spenser's invocation of the tragic muse. It is possible the butterfly is a symbol of all that could be admired about courtly love poetry, a case the Noble Poet would rightfully lament. But these lines could be Spenser speaking in the voice of the Fox-poet. The sad fact the Noble Poet relates with his etiology and his Golden Age is that neither butterfly nor spider is a serious or True poet. As one extinguishes the other, the cry of lament is ironic on one hand because humanity's loss to the Spider is small, and genuine on the other hand because humanity's loss to Time is great. It would be consistent with Spenser's established pattern of polysemy for both voices to be at work. In this case, as courtly poetry continues to diminish itself, the voices of the Noble Poet and the Fox-poet draw closer together. The Fox-poet's satiric voice belittles the invocation of the tragic muse to mourn the death of a

mere butterfly. This belittling resonates throughout the volume. All the muses are already lamenting; they have been since *The Teares of the Muses*, which just preceded the animal poem sequence. They lament with vigor the fall of true learning from positions of political and social honor—the antique subject of Menippean satire. But is the Fox-poet satirizing his own satire? The kind of poetry practiced by the courtier poets, good ones as well as bad ones, spiders as well as butterflies, is not what Spenser advances as true learning. To the Fox-poet it hardly matters if revenge tragedies are all that remains of poetry. The Fox can laugh it off. In the winding down of time, what else can be expected? The satire is that everyone fails to see the true tragedy—that Spenser's offer to be a noble poet to his prince and people has been rejected, and his warning is that if the Noble Poet cannot speak, the Fox-poet probably will.

A Final Note

In these pages I have argued several things. By reading Spenser's beast poems as a set or a series, I have been able to find patterns among them that raise the three to a discourse on poetic theory. Spenser uses imitation and history to unify his beast poems into a whole. As he does this, he elevates himself to share the central niche in a kind of portrait gallery of great poets, with Virgil and Ovid on his left and right. His discourse on poetic theory separates the poet from poetry just as people can be separated from their clothes or a beast from its hide. According to Spenser, poetry itself is noble, but a poet can be good or bad. Poetry is a surface that can be manipulated. And as he develops the concept of a Noble or True Poet, Spenser demonstrates that in the hands of a True Poet poetry is a divine gift. He warns that a successful kingdom needs a poet laureate. Spenser's plea to be accepted as a laureate rings throughout his animal-poetry series, but at the same time as he argues that he is the True Poet, his voice slips repeatedly into a vulpine snarl. The Fox's satiric voice adopts the random, chaotic quality of Menippean disorder, appearing and disappearing from various parts of the text. It represents the classical Aesopic animal voice, coming from below.

Indirect, subtle, and double meanings are the essence of the talking animal fable. As scholars have sought specific targets for Spenser's satire, Lord Burghley has been

regarded by most as the chief target of Spenser's attack in *Complaints*. From his high position, the Lord Treasurer appears to have thwarted what Spenser considered the true purpose of poetry. From Spenser's point of view, the poet laureate ought to have been in Burghley's skin, distinguished and separated from other men in a dignified public role. The True Poet's natural function was to maintain national ideals. During the winter of 1590-91, which Spenser spent in London following the publication of the first three books of *The Faerie Queene*, he must have seen that he was probably not going to get the recognition of laureate status, and so he published this Menippean satire, in which he disguised his literary theory but not his poetic disappointment. The talking animal mode is traditionally linked with Menippean satire, and here the beasts' warnings about the future of poetry retain all their admonitory Aesopic power. The beast poems make it clear that Spenser already felt "unrewarded and misapprehended . . . alone at the moral center of an otherwise erring society" (Helgerson 53). Helgerson insists that Spenser was "too much shaped by the values of a civic humanism to find in private rectitude a satisfactory consolation for the defeat of [his] public ambition" (54). Marc Schell supposes that Spenser was showing his diverse range as a poet, following *The Faerie Queene's* sweetness with the bitterness of the *Complaints*, "as gall complements honey and blame complements praise, so these two books complement one another and reveal two sides of the poet's rhetorical skill" (Oram 1989 219). Jean R. Brink argues more specifically that "a civil servant could not afford to treat lightly a pending appointment or royal pension," (1991 158) and thus there would be no way that Spenser, waiting in London for his money, would have published anything so dangerously offensive as the *Complaints*. In this line of reasoning, publication of the volume must have been Ponsonby's doing. I argue instead that *Complaints* is Spenser's earliest public manifestation of the "lonely disillusionment" (Helgerson 51) that scholars have found in *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* and Book VI of *The Faerie Queene*. To publicize his discontent, Spenser imagined the destruction of London in terms of the fall of Rome, and he blended a series of ordering structures into classical Menippean satire to create an entirely unique condemnation of almost everyone except the True Poet. And even the True Poet struggles against the unruly foxlike voice that comes from beneath his rule. It would seem that Spenser was mistaken to use Menippean satire to elect himself to a

public poetic role; the tone of it is somewhat like suggesting the Fox ought to serve the queen. But then, Spenser has suggested with the insinuations about Lord Burghley that were later excised from the second printing of *Complaints* that one kind of fox already does serve the queen. In his beast-poetry series Spenser offers to make the True Poet dominate the Fox-poet and keep him quiet in exchange for the laurel wreath.

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Curriculum Vitae

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