12

Choreographies of Order and Chaos: Pastoral and Courtly in Chaucer and Spenser

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This paper will look at some of the ways dancing, both pastoral and courtly, is used symbolically by Chaucer and Spenser to suggest a transcendent heavenly order and its chaotic opposite.

Generally, Chaucer is another of those irritating writers who merely point out, "They danced". However, I would like to look in more detail at two slightly more extended descriptions of dance, one in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" and a rather more famous one in the Garden of Love from Chaucer's translation of Guillaume de Lorris' love vision, *The Romaunt of the Rose.*

The Wife of Bath is an experienced woman. "Housbondes at chirche dore I have had five," she boasts and in "The General Prologue" Chaucer writes, "Of remedies of love she knew per chaunce,/For she koude of that art the olde daunce,"[1] here coyly referring to the arts of sex as dance. The power of sexuality pulses through *The Canterbury Tales* in ways doubly linked to the Wife of Bath since she is also one of the most experienced pilgrims in the group. The year opens "Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote/The droghte of March hath perced to the roote". A thrill of energy runs through all of nature and mating begins:

> "Smale foweles maken melodye,
> That slepen al the nyght with open ye
> (So priketh hem nature in hir corages)"

Chaucer then adds, "Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages." With this light touch, he assserts the ultimate goal of the whole book, arrival in the holy city and the fulfillment of a transcendent love at the shrine of Thomas à Becket.

In her tale, the Wife of Bath offers us a vision. Her thuggish young knight, convicted of rape by the Queen, is seeking to "keep [his] nekke-boon from iren" by discovering the answer to a crucial riddle, "What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren". To save his life, this knight sets out to find the answer:

> "And in his wey it happed hym to ryde,
> In al this care, under a forest syde,
> Wher, as he saugh upon a daunce go
> Of laydes foure and twenty, and yet mo:
> Toward the whiche daunce he drow ful yerne,
> In hope that som wysdom sholde he lerne.
> But certainly, er he cam fully there,
> Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where
> Ne creature saugh he that bar lyf,
> Save on the grene he saugh sittynge a wyf…"
> (ll. 989-98)

The maidens seem to represent some higher, more perfect, realm that lies beyond this admittedly very earthy young knight. At his approach, they disappear. By the end of the tale, however, the promise of this vision is fulfilled when the old and ugly wife transforms into a beautiful young woman. In "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale" then, Chaucer offers the imagery of dance as a metaphor for frank sexuality and also for transcendent escape from the world of change and decay. These are themes that Spenser will later pick up and expand.

Themes of court and courtliness, indeed courtly love, are woven into "The Wife of Bath's Tale", if ironically for the most part. However, in the dream-vision of *The Romaunt of the Rose* courtliness prevails. In Chaucer's first fragment, Lord Mirth's garden is a delight to all the senses, full of beautiful people and devoid of anything so vulgar as

crime or sin. The nameless speaker sighs, "So fair it was that, trusteth wel,/It semede a place espirituel"(ll 649-50):

> "So faire they weren, alle and some;
> For they were lyk, as to my sighte,
> To angels that ben fethered brighte." (ll. 740-2)

In this early example of an unreliable narrator, Chaucer is perhaps subtly warning us to question our young speaker's judgment, a technique he uses often in "The General Prologue".

The garden is repeatedly described as an earthly paradise. The mysterious richly dressed people dance a carole, "and made many a fair tournyng/Upon the grene gras" (l. 761-2). Two lovely young women begin a dance. Sadly, the speaker is so entranced he can't remember their dance afterwards, but manages this description:

> "But herof lieth no remembraunce,
> Hou that they daunced queyntely.
> That oon wolde come all pryvyly
> Agayn that other, and whan they were
> Togidre almost, they threwe yfere
> Her mouthis so, that thorough her play
> It semed as they kiste always.
> To dauncen well koude they the gise;
> What shulde I more to you devyse?
> Ne bede I never thennes go,
> Whiles that I saw hem daunce so." (ll. 782-92)

Sir Mirth's girls are pretty fast. I don't recall anything quite like that handed down to Domenico.

The allegorical courtiers who dance in order through the Garden of Love are led by Gladnesse, Mirth and the God of Love, clad in silk embroidered with flowers and beasts, a chaplet of roses on his head. Again, we're assured, "He semede as he were an aungell/That doun were comen fro hevene cler." (ll. 916-7).

This earthly paradise, however, contains plenty of pain; the God of Love proves a hard and vicious master. It is only with the arrival of Dame Reason, much later, that the lover begins to see this sort of love as "disordinat desirying" (l. 4816). These courtly dancers, stately and alluring as they are, in the end, belong to the world of suffering, change and decay, not to the unchanging order of the heavenly world. The claims to heavenly status are indeed a sign of human pride. We can recognize this pattern again, for example, in **Romeo and Juliet**, when Capulet invites Paris to his feast, boasting that, "At my poor house look to behold this night/Earth-treading stars that make dark heaven light" (I:ii). The chaotic tragedy that unfolds makes a mockery of his words. He would like to think his family's court dancing has the status of celestial order, but Shakespeare makes it plain that it does not.

Now to turn to Edmund Spenser. As a man of the high Renaissance, Spenser places himself in a revived classical tradition of great poets with Vergil at its head and Chaucer his English equivalent:

> "the olde famous Poete Chaucer: whom for his excellencie and wonderfull skil in making, his scholler Lidgate…calleth the Loadestarre of our Language: and whom our Colin clout in his AEglogue calleth Tityrus the God of shepheards, comparing hym to the worthines of the Roman Tityrus Virgile."
>
> (Dedication to Gabriel Harvey, *The Shepheardes Calendar*)[2]

Colin Clout, the poet/piper, is Spenser's pastoral alter ego. Like Vergil with his *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, Spenser knows he must serve his apprenticeship in pastoral before moving on to the demands of epic. *The Shepheardes Calendar* was published in 1579, 11 years before the first part of *The Faerie Queene*. However, like Chaucer, Spenser was to leave his longest and most complex poem unfinished. *The Faerie Queene* ends after only 6 of its promised 12 books. Spenser's deliberate archaisms in spelling, even in vocabulary and grammar, are self-conscious homage to Chaucer.

Dancing, "with heydeguies and trimly trodden traces" (June), is a natural part of the pastoral world of the *Calendar.* However, in the Fourth Eclogue (April), pastoral dancing opens up to include the court because "Elisa, Queene of shepheardes all", has come to hear Hobbinol's "silver song" in her praise and see the shepherds' daughters dance.

Spenser's pastoral is highly allegorical, layering court and country, ancient and modern, classical and Christian, with a differing emphasis from eclogue to eclogue. Elizabeth is praised as a goddess who outshines Phoebus and Cynthia. The imagery of heaven saturates her description and the Graces dance for her. This is heavenly, transcendent imagery indeed, but it rings with sincerity rather than pomp. The simplicity of the setting and of the singer somehow undercuts any show of pride. This is the monarch of a pastoral nation receiving that nation's just praise in music and dance.

We may forget how pastoral England was in Elizabeth's time. At her accession, England was predominately a single crop economy; it held nearly 11 million sheep, four times the human population. As her Exchequer and her progresses made very plain to her, her realm depended on wool, by far its most valuable commodity. Since the 14th century, the Woolsack had sat in the House of Lords as a symbol of the nation's prosperity. These facts, coupled with the Christian overtones of the good shepherd and his flock, made pastoral a language perfect for Spenser's nationalist and protestant purposes. So much so, that he never abandoned it completely for epic, but indeed concluded what we have of *The Faerie Queene* with a pastoral Book 6, whose hero Calidore, the knight of courtesy, lives as a shepherd.

However, before we look at the implications for the symbolic meanings of dance of Calidore's vision in Book 6, let's look at a much more sinister episode, the Masque of Cupid that ends Book 3 of *The Faerie Queene***.** Here we have dance as the courtly opposite of pastoral. The evil magician Busirane orchestrates a demonic Masque of Cupid in a bid for illegitimate power.

Much of Spenser's epic is Italianate in construction, a braided narrative that runs a whole series of plot lines across each other. Prominent in Book III is the story of Amoret and Scudamore, the little love and the shield of love, a couple seemingly meant for each other. Amoret has been raised by Venus in the Garden of Adonis, where the generative cycle of nature is forever replenished. All the forms of nature flow from here:

> "Daily they grow, and daily forth are sent
> Into the world, it to replenish more;
> Yet is the stocke not lessened, nor spent,
> But still remaines in euerlasting store,
> As it at first created was of yore.
> For in the wide wombe of the world there lyes,
> In hatefull darkenesse and in deepe horrore,
> An huge eternall *Chaos*, which supplyes
> The substances of natures fruitfull progenyes. (III:vi: 36) [3]
>
> But were it not, that Time their troubler is,
> All that in this delightfull Gardin Growes,
> Should happie be, and haue immortall blis." (III:vi:41)

Spenser's Platonism is evident here.

In Cantos x and xi, the story of Amoret and Scudamore begins in earnest. A despairing Scudamore tells Britomart, the knight of chastity, how the magician Busirane has kidnapped Amoret and tortures her to get her love. Britomart passes all the dangers of Busirane's House, witnesses the Masque of Cupid and defeats him.

After Amoret's rescue, Spenser relates that Busirane's Masque of Cupid, presented at court, was the means of Amoret's abduction. Busirane, it seems, is a courtly choreographer:

> "For that same vile Enchauntour Busyran,
> The very selfe same day that she was wedded,
> Amidst the bridale feast, whilest euery man
> Surcharg'd with wine, were heedlesse and ill hedded,
> All bent to mirth before the bride was bedded,
> Brought in that mask of loue which late was showen:
> And there the Ladie ill of friends bestedded,
> By way of sport, as oft in maskes is knowen,
> Conveyed quite away to liuing wight vnknowen." (IV:i:3)

Busirane's masque is presented as a theatrical performance:

> "All suddenly a stormy whirlwind blew
> Throughout the house, that clapped euery dore…
> And forth issewd, as on the ready flore
> Of some Theatre, a graue personage,

That in his hand a branch of laurell bore,
With comely haueour and count'nance sage,
Yclad in costly garments, fir for tragicke Stage." (III:xii:3)

This "sage" is Ease and, after him, there enter minstrels and singers and a jolly company "in manner of a maske, enranged orderly." Spenser's masquers are immediately more sinister than Chaucer's dancers in the Garden of Mirth, but they are in the same courtly tradition.

A set of 12 allegorical masquers follows: Fancy, Desyre, Doubt, Daunger, Feare, Hope, Dissemblance, Griefe, Fury, Displeasure and Pleasance, Despight, and Cruelty. Amoret follows these masquers, "and with her feeble feet did moue a comely pace." Is this procession, evidently set to music, a dance? A pavan, perhaps.

The horror of Amoret's torture is explicit:

"…Her brest all naked, as net iuory,…
And a wide wound therein (O ruefull sight)
Entrenched deepe with knife accursed keene,"
…
"At that wide orifice her trembling hart
Was drawne forth, and in siluer basin layd,
Quite through tranfixed with a deadly dart."
(III:xii:20-21)

Cupid follows in triumph (a common Renaissance motif, most notably from Petrarch). He unbinds his blindfold to glory in the sight of Amoret's torment:

"He looked round about with sterne disdaine;
And did suruay his goodly company:
And marshalling the euill ordered traine,
With that the darts which his right hand did straine,
Full dreadfully he shooke that all did quake,
And clapt on hie his coulourd winges twaine,
That all his many it affraide did make."
(III:xii:23)

Behind Cupid come Reproch, Repentance and Shame and many more ills, "a rude confused rout". Busirane's masque, with its "euill ordered traine", breaks down into chaos.

Britomart succeeds in entering Busirane's innermost chamber where Amoret is chained while:

"…the vile Enchaunter sate,
Figuring straunge characters of his art,
With liuing bloud he those characters wrate,
Dreadfully dropping from her dying hart,
Seeming transfixed with a cruell dart,
And all perforce to make her him to loue."
(III:xii:31)

Britomart forces Busirane to unsay his spells so that his masquers and all his illusory terrors disappear. Book III ends with the evil magician being led away in chains and Amoret and Scudamore reunited (in the 1590 edition at least).

Spenser presents a shocking wedding masque; as if Prospero were to call down a masque of Harpies to carry off and torture Miranda, instead of the transcendent vision of Ceres and the pastoral dancers that he constructs for the young lovers. Spenser associates the courtly tradition of the masque unequivocally with evil, chaos and destruction.

In a roughly parallel position, towards the end of Book VI, Calidore's vision of pastoral dancing provides a contrasting pastoral choreography that shows Spenser making use of the episode from "The Wife of Bath's Tale" with which I began.

In Book VI, Canto ix, Calidore, the knight of courtesy, falls in love with Pastorella, daughter of Melib. In the hope of winning her, he takes up the shepherd's life, without losing any of his truly courteous ways:

"Thus Calidore continu'd there long time,
To winne the loue of the faire Pastorell;
Which hauing got, he vsed without crime
Or blamefull blot." (VI:ix:46)

Far from being blamed for abandoning his quest, Calidore is rewarded by a vision, one so wonderful that it would blind many, like looking into the sun, Spenser claims. Alone, he finds a lovely spot, Mount Acidale, haunt of the Graces, an open hilltop ready "to serue to all delight,/Either to daunce, when they to daunce would faine" (VI:ix:8). Here we return to the world of *The Shepherdes Calendar*; Calidore finds Colin, Spenser's pastoral persona, playing his pipe for a ring of dancing maidens in a reprise of the Aprill Eclogue. Calidore watches from the trees:

"An hundred naked maidens lilly white,
All raunged in a ring, and dauncing in delight.
…in the midst of them
Three other Ladies did both daunce and sing..[4]
And in the middest of those same three, was placed
Another damzell, as a precious gemme,"
(VI:x:11-12)

Spenser compares the ring of dancers to Ariadne's Crown, the constellation of Corona Borealis; these dancers circle "in order excellent".

Calidore, gentle knight of courtesy, far from Chaucer's young tough, moves towards the dancers. But not even he can join their dance:

"But soone as he appeared to their vew,
They vanish all away out of his sight,
And cleane were gone, which way he neuer knew." (VI:x:18)

Colin laments that he has no power to draw them back; they come and go only as they please:

"They are the daughters of sky-ruling Ioue,
By him begot of faire Erynome….
These three on men all gracious gifts bestow,
Which decke the body or adorne the mynde,"
... ….
"And all the complements of curtesie;
They teach vs, how to each degree and kynde
We should our selues demeane, to low, to hie;
To friends, to foes, which skill men call
Ciuility." (VI:x22-23)

This vision of universal beauty and good order as a dance, full of transcendent power, is outside the reach of either the poet or his knight of courtesy, quite a contrast to Busirane's triumphalist masque. Placed near the end of the last book of *The Faerie Queene*, Calidore's vision reasserts the modest values of pastoral and helps define the limits that Spenser places on his epic vision. Chivalric action cannot achieve the perfect world; humankind must accept its limitations. Beings bound by time and space cannot embody eternity and infinity.

Spenser and Chaucer's dancers, pastoral or courtly, however they seem to mirror the order of God's heaven, are beyond human reach. Approached, they disappear. Human nature cannot penetrate the heavenly realms, not even in pastoral dancing, where it comes closest. Boastful mirroring of God's good order in princely courts is futile and even dangerous.

To conclude, it seems to me that ideas such as I have traced today, in two major poets, are relevant to a text dear to the hearts of all English historical dancers, that is to Sir John Davies' *Orchestra*. I fear that the seductive attractiveness of Antinous' invitation to dance overlays an irony, deeply embedded in the framework of the poem. Its narrator is Antinous, ringleader of Penelope's rapacious suitors. He makes a powerful case that dancers are "earth-treading stars" but, if we remember the ending of Homer's Odyssey, we know that Penelope never takes his hand and that, when her lord Odysseus returns, Antinous will suffer an arrow through his throat.

Notes

[1] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed F N Robinson 2nd edn; (Cambridge Mass: Riverside Press, 1961)

[2] Edmund Spenser, *The Shepheardes Calendar* in *The Works a Variorum Edition; The Minor Poems Part One*, ed Edwin Greenlaw et al (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins 1966)

[3] Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A C Hamilton (London & New York, Longman,1977)

[4] These are the Graces.