The Function of Forest in *The Faerie Queene*:
Seeing the Woods for the Trees

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April 1987
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Generally, the mention of place in regard to *The Faerie Queene* summons up the image of Alma's House of Temperance, the Bower of Bliss, or Isis' Temple. These settings are highly stagey: the narrative comes to a halt, and the reader is expected to interpret the composite images of the scene. The crocodile at Isis' feet enjoys the same relationship to her as justice does to equity. Equity, its allegorical representative embodied in Isis, exercises a restraining influence over the "cruel doome" of justice, i.e., the crocodile that Isis stands on. These places smack of the unreal; they and their set pieces exist primarily to illustrate a moral orientation or philosophical position. In Acrasia's Bower of Bliss, of course, unreality is just the point. With its "painted flowres" it caters to the whims of the men it hopes to ensnare. The Bower exists for them. It is made to please: "The dales for shade, the hills for breathing space"¹ (*The Faerie Queene*, II, xii, 58)

But what of place when *The Faerie Queen*'s narrative rolls right along? What about the landscape that doesn't make man happy or remind him of one or another truth? All the symbolic places of *The Faerie Queen* are, in a very real sense, interludes of a larger piece, brief moments in a landscape that undulates about them. The most pervasive of these landscapes, the forest, lends *The Faerie Queen* a complex matrix. Spenser creates woods with a vibrancy that isn't communicated in lavish, descriptive terms. In fact, the woods are scarcely described at all. Nevertheless, in contrast to the Bower of Bliss, or the Garden of Adonis, the forests are real places with considerable vibrancy
and power. The lack of descriptive detail doesn't excuse the reader's overlooking the dramatic significance that the woods, with a veritable life of their own, do exercise. Forest can create scenes, not only exist as a mere by-product of them. They are full of a potential energy and compelling spiritual power that drives the narrative of *The Faerie Queene*.

Spenser's indebtedness to the forests and groves of the literary traditions from which *The Faerie Queene* issues is undeniable. The evocative effect of a wood, whether deep and mysterious or botanically classified on the bank of a meadow stream, manifests itself in much of the literature Spenser knew and virtually all of his sources. Spenser, though, transforms the various forests of western tradition and creates a new synthesis. The woods of *The Faerie Queene* are not merely property pieces calculated to lend the right touch to a battlefield or a pastoral spring. When forests crop up, it is not their appropriateness to a given human activity that strikes us, nor are they mere symbols or elements of an allegory denoting a single moral condition, a single state of mind. The point is, they are and do more than this; in *The Faerie Queene* the forests are forest in their own right, with rules and a logic of their own.

The forest's dramatic function may contribute to allegorical developments, though the woods refuse to surrender dramatic independence and a life of their own. Una's sojourn in the satyrs' forest demonstrates such a tendency. Una (Truth) seems a missionary hoping to bring out the natural religion of the satyrs
(natural man?) who fall at her feet in adoration. These particular woodland creatures fail to conform to the allegorical pattern, however. Dissuaded from idolatry of Una, they turn their devotion to her Ass. Forest forces can be fickle and non-conformist.

Spenser’s forests represent a landscape that exists independently of morality, the character of heroes, or rhetorical propriety. While they retain the ability to affect and have meaning for all of these elements, Spenser’s woods are liberated by an artful transformation of earlier literary woods, and, with Spenser, landscape is able to become a dramatic agent with fascinating implications for the mood and dynamics of the work. "Landscape," as a word, didn’t enter the English language until the 1600’s and, when it did so, was strictly a technical term employed in painting. Even the usage of "scene" and "setting" was pretty much restricted to references to the theater. And yet landscape is a concept that must be dealt with in examining the ways in which the leafy world of The Faerie Queene runs against the grain of classical, idealized landscape and the selva obscura of medieval allegory.

"Landscape," of course, is a loaded term. It conjures up images of the windmills and gnarled oaks of Dutch naturalistic painters or the view from a train window. In Spenser’s time, naturalistic detail and accuracy were not the primary concern of the poet, nor was it in the literature of antiquity. Even with Spenser there is little sophistication in the modes of description. Whereas the train passenger might choose to describe the passing woods as alpine, deciduous, or redwood,
Spenser sticks to conventional labels—"wide," "wylde," "greene"—which could apply to just about any forest. [As will be shown later, Spenser's innovation lies not in descriptive technique but in his wood's character and energy.] Differentiating one landscape or wood from another was rarely the aim of classical or medieval literature; poets deemed it far more important to relate landscape to the activities of their heroes. Scene was, more often than not, an index of their personal condition. The forest in which a Knight loses himself was symptomatic of that Knight's spiritual isolation. In classical literature, nature was always inhabited nature, peopled by men or gods. Though any adequate account of the pastoral tradition's role in what E. R. Curtius calls "the adumbration of landscape" is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to point out the close association between nature and divinity established in Greek poetry. As extensions of the divine, depictions of the natural world tended, not surprisingly, to be pleasing and amiable. A grove was virtually always a sacred grove, just the place for contemplation of the divine. Descriptions became rather stock: the favorite haunt of a given shepherd had to have all the right flowers, a sacred grove all the right trees. Landscape came to be a function of the "correctness" of these places, these loci amoeni as they came to be known.

The locus amoenus, Curtius suggests, is rather unreal and strictly oriented towards humanity's concerns. "'Lovely places' are such as only give pleasure, that is, are not cultivated for useful purposes." Acrasia's Bower of Bliss, frivolous and
artificial, comes to mind (though the Bower is artificial in another sense and is an extreme example, it is represented as a trumped up display). Its raison d'être is provided by Guyon's presence there, though any other potential target for temptation would do. Without some wanderer to ensnare, the Bower loses its functional foundation. The behavior, dramatically speaking, of a locus amoenus can't really be separated from its one-sided simple character.

Spenser's forest, on the other hand, can be defined by contrast with Acrasia's Bower and other richly symbolic locales which seem little more than small niches in the larger landscape. The woods of The Faerie Queene escape the stasis and unreality of most classical landscapes. The woods do more than punctuate a battlefield or provide the proper context for a holy temple. Spenser's forests are capable of conveying the impression, at a given moment, that they yield only hostility, only vile beasts and monsters. The Faerie Queene delivers up forests in large doses; rarely is it a simple playground for gods and men. The forests are very much there, often boding and destructive.

Spenser chooses to endow his woods with productive, creative potential too. The forest, clearly, is Satyrane's schoolroom: educating him "Emongst wild beasts and woods, from lawes of men exilde." (The Faerie Queene, I, vi, 23) The woods instill a natural nobility in Sayrane as evidenced by his lack of patience with vanity and courtly finesse. [It's true this has a classic parallel in Achilles' education at the hands of Cheiron, a centaur. But it is the worldliness of Cheiron as a figure of education and respect, not forest creature, that qualifies him as
While I argue against a stage property-like role for Spenser's forests I concede that some of the conventional equipment of the idealized landscape tradition finds its way into *The Faerie Queene*. In the first canto of book I, each tree comprising Error's Wood is enumerated, and the wood seems to hark back to the "mixed forests" of rhetorical traditions. Such "catalogues" of trees were common rhetorical devices that had become almost mechanical with time. Chaucer, in his *Parlement of Fowles*, employs a very similar catalogue when he lists the trees of the highly Edenic garden of love. Spenser, however, neatly subverts the time honored device. As Donald Cheney has pointed out, here the catalogue (in ascribing specific function to each tree) represents a "moral dissection" of man's universe that is cruelly mocked by the actual behavior of the woods. More generally, Error's Wood is a maze of irrational complexity, and its relationship to this classical, ordered description of an ideal is a highly ironic one. Cheney points to the last tree mentioned and its accompanying descriptive clause. "The Maple, seldom inward sound," foreshadows the confusion and, finally, rottenness beneath the woods' apparent calm. No classic grove would so actively engage the drama it adorns. Rhetorical trappings enrich *The Faerie Queene* when, as in this illustration, Spenser is able to shake the dust off them and put them to work.

C. S. Lewis urges us to read *The Faerie Queene* for more than its "simple fairy-tale pleasure" by considering the imagery as a kind of representation through pictorial expression. It has, for
Lewis, "a simple 'moral' sophisticated by a learned iconography." The Elizabethans lived, on a day to day basis, with iconographical or emblematic representation in the decoration of churches, civic buildings and pageants. The hieroglyphic and emblematic traditions were further laid out for Elizabethans in the various emblem books, which followed a tradition of cataloguing icons and symbols started by an Egyptian Greek in the 5th century. These books offered their expertise to poets and playwrights and these popular volumes were especially helpful in coordinating the elaborate symbolism of the court masque. Lewis proposes that an informed reading of The Faerie Queene not find fault with the occasional occurrence of apparently clumsy handling of the narrative. The narrative completely abandons the lamb that Una leads when she is first mentioned, but this is not simply a case of lack of concentration of Spenser’s part. The poet creates, for a moment, a symbolic procession, in the spirit of a pageant or masque. The lamb’s presence is justified by its appropriateness to the particular image. If, in a staged masque, a personification of the one true church was seen to lead an innocent lamb, the appropriateness would have been applauded. 

Such an iconographical reading of The Faerie Queene is fine in so far as it serves to reconcile the reader to passages of high allegory that may not be consistent with the narrative, nor share its concerns. John M. Steadman cautions that the study of icons is anything but an exact science and interpretations of a single icon are sure to be various. 6 Iconographical focus, furthermore, does little toward developing an imaginative sense
of landscape. Here I refer to landscape in the modern sense, the background to action, but substantively independent of that action as the forest of The Faerie Queene so frequently are. The various loci amoeni (specific and highly allegorical bowers, gardens, sacred groves, etc.) of The Faerie Queene though, do have clear iconographical manifestations. A mere handful of trees might denote a mixed ideal grove in a medieval tapestry, and several maskers with green boughs would accomplish the same for a pageant. Some stage directions from Elizabethan plays suggest that attempts to create natural settings actually imported mossy banks and saplings: "Hector takes up a great piece of rock and casts it at Ajax, who tears of a young tree by the roots and assails Hector." Still it is doubtful that the visual arts could convey the sense of anything as formidable as Spenser's encroaching "forest wylde." The forest gaste rising from 12th century French romance could scarcely incorporate a tradition of pictorial representation. Simply put, the two-dimensional nature of medieval art could not convey the depth and breadth of an intricate wood. Furthermore, pictorial representations of forest didn't really exist for the literature to allude to. A substantial forest, in contrast to a grove or stand of trees, doesn't lend itself well to translation into emblem or symbol.

Symbolic readings of a given function or aspect of forest in The Faerie Queene are, of course, possible. But, more often than not, symbolic associations are dynamic ones--their correspondences are hard to pin down or ever changing, their very
complexity tends more to lend the woods a kind of independent essence and power than to classify them under any single, static relationship of vehicle to tenor. Granting the forests a powerful and mystical personality of their own is not Spenser's innovation alone. Virgil's "age-old" forest in the Aeneid, endowed with great spiritual energy is a case in point. As a condition for his entrance to the underworld Aeneas has to construct Misenus' funeral pyre of not one, but many species of tree. Here the trees comprise woods (no mere sacred grove--it is described as "immeasurable") that embody numen, the presence of deity. Chaucer's romance, "The Knight's Tale," also illustrates the notion of forest numen. In an analogue to the funeral pyre Aeneas builds, the felling of the woods for the cremation of Arcite is an act with significantly magical ramifications. Deprived of their woodland home, "the goddes ronnen up and down,/ disherited of hire habitacion,/ In which they woneden in reste and pees." ("The Knight's Tale," lines 2925-2927). Chaucer enumerates fifteen trees that fueled the fire of this solemn occasion. There seems to be a spiritual dimension to the woods that symbol alone can't do justice to. Spenser, perhaps more than any poet before him, realizes this spiritual dimension in The Faerie Queene's wooded environment, making more of numen than his predecessors had. The free play of symbol and the creation of environment, not strident, one-to-one codes, achieves this in Spenser's work.

The tradition of creating literary forest of an allegorical nature may represent a more significant threat to the autonomy of the kind of literary forest we are considering, than more
strictly symbolic readings. The first allegorical association of forest to really catch on was the invention of French chroniclers of quest romance around 1150. Generally, these labyrinthine woods, or foëts gaste, corresponded to the wilderness in which Christ wanders in the New Testament: they were forests of sin and temptation, the shadows of which harbored ignorance and sordid evils. The questing knight found himself isolated in such a forest and often confronted by dangers complementing a character strength or flaw. In Le Chavalier de la Charette by Chretien de Troyes, Lancelot sets out to rescue Guenevere who has been snatched from the edge of a wood by Meleagant, an evil King. But a bridge of swords confronts Lancelot. Crossing it will incur self-inflicted suffering analogous to the pain that results from his passionate and, as yet, unrequited love for the Queen:

> Amid great pity he made he way across, and in great pain, wounding his hands, knees, and feet. But Love, his guide, soothed and healed him, so he found his sufferings sweet. 10

The Faerie Queene's Calidore provides a Spenserian example of this phenomenon: Calidore, a champion of courtesy, is teamed against the Blatant Beast, a voice of scandal and enemy to all that courtesy represents. The Blatant Beast is very much a forest creature. Calidore sits with Serena by the forest side when the monster appears and snatches away the maiden. "All sodainely out of the forrest nere, The Blatant Beast for rushing unaware" (The Faerie Queene, VI, iii, 24) From the forest emerges courtesy's natural foe, slander. It is, then, a simple logical leap, made the easier by Jung, to understand the woods of medieval romance as a jungle of the unconscious where the dark
side of the human soul, the shadow, must be grappled with. A forest journey becomes a metaphor for coming to terms with one's psychic self. Though these elements strike a dominant chord in medieval romances, Spenser's allegory puts less of a constraint on the dramatic freedom of his forests. The Faerie Queene's woods are an amalgam of medieval forests of allegory, transplanted and enriched by Spenser's extensive borrowing and transformation. Effective allegory needn't reduce forest to a single representational orientation. Allegory, if it is effectively applied, actually enables forest to behave in ways it normally would not.

Because allegory functions as an extended metaphor, it is possible to get farther and farther (in the process of encoding an allegory) away from any basis in reality. As long as a wood of error functions as an obstacle and obscures truth (limbs and pathways may become entangled, whole trees float about) it obeys the law of the allegory under which it was created. The more various the behavior of a forest (Spenser's woods are up to a lot of tricks), the easier it is to cull various and often contradictory interpretations from them. Dante's "selva obscura" is of clear allegorical significance though Dante might have had several allegorical interpretations in mind. Are the woods in which the poet finds himself at the beginning of the Inferno representative of general error and sin, degenerate Florence, or corrupt Christendom? 

The danger, here, lies in losing sight of the concept of forest we begin with; the woods become only a realm of confusion, not a world of pathways, briars, and
songbirds. If we forget what a real forest is like, it is simply meaningless to examine any other abstraction in terms of one. Spenser's woods generally remain true in important ways to the real, tactile, leafy places that he knew in Ireland and England.

Even Spenser's most other-worldly allegorical forest, Error's Wood, delivers only a glancing blow at a claim for topographical realism in *The Faerie Queene*.'s woods. In fact, Error's Wood achieves a telling victory over ideal landscape and its vocabulary. A "shadie grove" affording "faire harbour" is transformed into a "labyrinth" of "ways unknowne". Here, landscape is not necessarily benign and amenable to man. In the wood, Redcrosse and Una find no delectable pleasance: "When veening to return, whence they did stray, / They cannot finde that path, which first was showne, / But wander to and fro in wayes unknowne" (I, i, 10). Spenser subverts the associations of the ideal landscape and points to the naivete of its assumptions and its distance from a basis in reality. Una and Redcrosse are confronted with the shock of a path that is not easy to follow. Of course, Spenser's depiction of Error's Wood doesn't remind us of an actual woodland hike - unless one's sense of direction is really awful. The wood's almost willful deceptiveness in service of its allegorical function might seem to distinguish it from a forest that could be said to be real. And, like Dante, Spenser gives us his wood of error first. It is the first landscape we are confronted with, and a reader new to *The Faerie Queene*, to whom Spenser is chiefly an allegorist, could be excused for interpreting the first canto's wood of error as meeting the core requirements for forest in general, for assuming that all The
Faerie Queene's woods are woods of error.

One factor that might discourage this is the ambiguous nature of the Error this first woodland represents. The difficulty of defining a specific allegory should make one think twice before applying that allegory across the board. As in Dante's wood the exact nature of the error involved is unclear; is general sin implied or deviation from the teaching of the Anglican Church? One critic suggests that the wood represents the pitfalls of secular erudition and the corruption of sophistry. The serpent-woman Error vomits books, suggesting that the passage personifies intellectual error.\textsuperscript{12} Perhaps, though, the monster and woods represent two varieties of error. In this scheme, the woods, in contrast to the serpent and its books, may represent intuited error. Una bewails the failure of her instinctual apparatus to warn her of the wood's evil in time:

\begin{quote}
Yea but (quoth she) the perill of this place
I better wot then you, though now too late,
To wish you back returne with foule disgrace,
Yet wisedome warnes, whilst foot is in the gate
To stay the steppe, ere forced to retrate. (I, i, 13)
\end{quote}

Whatever the exact case, Spenser's allegory activates the forest landscape of the first canto, complicates the dimensions of forest rather than limit them.

Significantly, Spenser chooses not to name subsequent forests and consequently discourages our extending the dramatic dictates of Error's woods to the other forestscapes of The Faerie Queene. Woods for Spenser, then, are not always labryinths of obscurity; characters such as foresters, satyrs, and Satyrane are introduced who are actually comfortable in the woods and know
their way around.

No critical treatment of Error's Wood can suffice or hope to serve as a discussion of The Faerie Queene's woods as a whole. Una and Redcrosse clearly leave the wood of Error behind midway through the first canto; that they enter another distinct forest a mere six stanzas later is testimony to the pervasiveness of The Faerie Queene's forest world. Nor is it possible to ascribe a consistent allegorical role to landscape throughout. The entwined branches of the Garden of Adonis may clearly point to the generative, sexual love associated with Venus:

There was a pleasant arbour, not by art,
But of the trees owne inclination made,
Which knitting their ranke branches part to part.

(III, vi, 44)

But allegory and the sort of proscribed function of what the trees' growth represents generally occurs in isolation, in the many loci amoeni that dot the landscape, not the forest at large.

In primarily narrative passages, landscape (hills, plains, valleys, seas, but above all forests) rolls by us, surrounds us, without commenting directly on the action. Allegory is certainly not sustained continuously in the narrative. Clearly, allegorical or symbolic landscape isn't called for in the comic account of the Squire of Dame's search for women who will refuse his charms.

John Arthos, in On the Poetry of Spenser and the Form of Romances, makes claims that would strip the forests of The Faerie Queene of much of the impact owed to a physical reality, of intrinsic characteristics or an independent personality as place; in other words, Arthos would suggest that one can't speak of the
forestness of woods in *The Faerie Queene* in quite the same way one can talk about the London-ness of London. In his view, the forests are imaginatively projected distortions of the questing knights to whom alone the forest signify. As such, the forest swallows up the questing knight, confronting him with little but evils and emphasizing his psychic isolation. In Arthos’ words:

> The scene, the setting, the forest, the world is meaningless, a mere condition for existence, for traversing, for enduring, for leaving, a thing of trial or convenience, but with no link to the harmony of things... The scene, the universe, is what circumscribes men and women, nothing more; it offers them no guidance, and it echoes to no need. It is merely a plain or a wandering wood or Error’s den, and any transformation it may endure in order to serve a human purpose is only in the mind.

Perhaps Arthos had the forests of Spenser’s Italian sources, Ariosto and Tasso, too much in mind. As heavily as Spenser relied on the two Italian poets’ narrative techniques, even lifting whole episodes from Ariosto, he imparts to his forests with considerably more vitality than do they. Arthos himself outlines the limited conception the Italians had of their own landscapes. Tasso had a fondness for uncomplicated ideal landscape, pastoral settings. His forests were straightforward, gothic woods of Error — unambiguously evil. Ariosto’s concern was with the intricate threads of his story lines, and he, like Tasso, kept his landscapes uncomplicated. Ariosto’s wood was a pathless, confusing expression of Orlando’s madness, and little more. Another of Ariosto’s despairing and suicidal lovers, Ruggiero, seeks the lunatic consolation and dissolution the forest offers:
He wanders from a wild and rugged hearth
To gloomy woods which hide him from all eyes.
Since he is desperate and longs for death,
This seems the very place remote from view
And suitable for what he means to do. 14

The evidence gets in the way, however, when Arthos assigns a similar truncated role for the forests of *The Faerie Queene*. They are much more than introspective landscapes or imaginative projections.

In the Arthurian romances Spenser would have known (Chretien de Troyes, *La Queste del Saint Graal*, Malory) the forests have less a life of their own than do Spenser's. *The Faerie Queene*’s woods owe their vitality, in part, to their creator's generous borrowing. Malory's forest, its magical qualities aside, exercises limited influence. It is a peripheral presence and doesn't crop up unexpectedly, the very act of naming it the Forest Perilous limits its psychological impact.

One extraordinary facet of Spenser's woods is its strangely engaging quality. This quality is not of the Elizabethan's invention alone. Malory and Chaucer incorporated forests that seemed to make things happen, to stir the hero's heart. C. S. Lewis asserts that "Nature, for Chaucer, is all foreground; we never get a landscape. "15 This does seem to be the case. Nature, when we see it, in Chaucer is as ordered and ideal as any of Spenser's high allegorical representations of nature (e.g., the sacred grove of *The Parlement of Foweles* previously mentioned) or represents, at a simple level, sensual yearnings run amuck. Sir Thopas, from *Caterbury Tales*’ parody of the
romance genre, falls into a lustful fit of longing for an elfin queen the moment he rides into the forest.

Sir Thopas fil in love-longynge,
All whan he herde the thrustel synge,
And pryked as he were wood

Katerynyg Tales, "The Tale of Sir Thopas", line 72-74

Sir Thopas then proceeds (accompanied by a wealth of sexual double entedres) to dream of the elf-queene and pledges to seek her out.

Here are obvious and amusing parallels to the dream of Spenser's more serious-minded Knight, Arthur, who has a similar experience upon his entrance into a wood. He has an erotic dream in which he lies with the Faerie Queene herself. The forest seems to have a strong association with physical attraction between the sexes, be it lecherous or noble. Arthur's love (he is after all Magnificence, and the Faerie Queene Glory) can only be of the most noble degree, but Sansloy, finding himself alone in the forest with Una, turns the scene to one of lust.

[Samsloy] Led her away into a forrest wilde,
And turning wrathful fire to lustful heat,
With beastly sin thought her to have defilde,
And made the vassall of his pleasures wilde.

(I, vi, 3)

Spenser's forests seem to evoke amorous feelings but of a morally ambiguous nature. They foster noble love or lechery and fail to provide a moral dictate.

Malory's Arthur, at the precise moment he enters a forest surprises a hart. "And as sone as he was in the foreste, the king saw a grete harte, before hym. 'Thys harte woll I chace,' seyde Kynge Arthure." In the course of the chase Arthur encounters the Questing Beast, one of the first signs associated with the
Grail. The love here inspired is especially profound; the hart symbolizes Christ and the Sangreal becomes the eventual object of Arthur's quest. What these incidents from Chaucer, Malory, and Spenser share, specifically, is the way in which the forest provides an environment which actively engages the participants. The element of coincidence that punctuates the three meetings, all occurring at the moment the forest is penetrated, echoes the predescribed fatefulness of the romance as a genre. For example, Guyon, like all the questing Knights, is pledged to engage just about any adventure which befalls him, willy-nilly. These apparently random adventures are, most often, products of yet another forest that crowds onto the scene. Guyon lights on his central adventure in book II:

In this fair wize they traveld long yfere,  
Though many hard assayes, which did betide,  
Of which the honour still away did bear,  
And spred his glorie through all countries wide.  
At last a chaunst them by a forest side  
To passe, for succour from the scorching ray,  
They heard a rueful voice, that dearnly cride  
With percing shriekes, and many a dolefull lay;  
Which to attend a while their forward steps they stay.  

(II, i, 35)

This last line implies that Guyon has some idea where he is going. Actually the forest by which he "chaunst" to pass is the site of the murders of Mordant and Amavia, the act which sparks Guyon's vendetta against Acrasia and her infamous Bower, the organizing quest of the book. When Guyon hears Amavia's cries, "he rusht into the thicke" (II, i, 38) and the quest is engaged in earnest.

It is hardly surprising the Spenser's wilder landscapes are portrayed as hotbeds of action and potential. The writing of The
Faerie Queene coincided, after all with England's exploration of the New World. Travelers to Virginia came back with conflicting descriptions. Was the new world the new Arcadia or a hideous wilderness? Often, the tenor of written accounts was directly related to the relative comfort of the ocean passage.

Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* discusses the influence of the exploration of the Americas with Elizabethan literature. "It is impossible to separate the taste for pastoral, and the excitement felt throughout Europe, about the New World."\(^{17}\) The woods of *The Faerie Queene* must have reminded the Elizabethan reader of the wilds of Virginia; Virginia was named for England's virgin Queen. The end of *The Faerie Queene*’s elaborate historical allegory, was, of course, praise of the same queen. Furthermore, the active way in which Spenser's knights engage the woods is, in a fascinating sense, analogous to New World colonization. Leo Marx says:

Colonies established in the desert require aggressive intellectual, controlled, and well-disciplined people. It is hardly surprising that the New England Puritans favored the hideous wilderness image of the American Landscape.\(^{18}\)

Spenser, a reformist Anglican, if not quite a Puritan, would have been pleased by such a comparison.

The fascination with the deep forests of Virginia is less easily understood in light of the fact that by this time the English forest was a dying breed. Already England's booming ship building industry relied heavily on imported timber. All the same, Spenser's woods spoke to the Elizabethan audience and its
concept of its native woods. Since William the Conqueror, forests in England were, by definition Royal Forests. Manwood's *Laws of the Forest* (O.E.D.) gives this definition of forest: "A forrest is certen territorie of woody grounds and fruitfull pastures, priviledged for wild beasts and foules of forrest chase and warren, to rest and abid in the safe protection of the King, to his prinely delight and pleasure." 19 So Belphoebe, allegorically identified with Elizabeth, enjoys her woodland home much as Elizabeth might enjoy a hunt in one of many royal forests. English forest law had been notoriously harsh, though by Elizabeth's time it had been liberalized considerably. The King's foresters were long detested by the populace as enforcers of an unjust system: death or mutilation was often exercised on poachers. The evil foresters that waylay Timeas would have struck a clear chord in an English audience, reminding them of the forests of their unique tradition. The Forests which produced Robin Hood, sworn enemy to the tyranny of forest law.

The *Faerie Queene*, independent of external realities, presents the reader with a forest of rich and complex meanings. Spenser's greenwood has more than a derivative existence. A sense is communicated in which the forests seem to be really there in a tangible way. In fact, Spenser gives his forest three dimensions and a spatial presence (spatial significance that can be felt). In a basic visual sense, Spenser's landscapes achieve a depth of field. Satyrane espies Paridell approaching on the plaine but doesn't recognize him until he can eclipse the distance between them.
They [Satyrane and the Squire of Dames] spyde a
Knight faire pricking on the plaine,
As if he were on some adventure bent,
And in his port appeared manly hardiment.

Sir Satyrane him towards did addresse
To weet, what wight he was, and what his quest:
And coming nigh, eftsoones he gan to gesse
Both by the burning hart, which on his brest
He bare, and by the colours in his crest
That Paridell it was.

(III,viii,44-45)

Spenser's forest are certainly wide (it is one of his favorite
means of describing them): they are also deep. In Book IV, a
turtle dove lures Belphoebe further into the forest where Timias
pines for her favor: "Till that at length into the forrest wide,
/ She drew her far, and led with slow delay" (IV, viii, 11).
These woods are not mere painted theatrical flats. They are
interpenetrible.

Like actual forests, these woods have a varying degree of
density which, in order to be appreciated, must be physically
explored: "running straight into the thickest wood" (Vi,iv,12)
"into the forest farre they thence him led"(III,v,3)
This is not to say that Spenser's representation of space shares
the exactness of scientific perspective that one sees in the
paintings of Masaccio. Lewis reminds us that "of the medieval
and even the Elizabethan imagination in general we may say that
in dealing with even foreground objects, it is vivid as regards
colour and action, but seldom works consistently to scale."20
This is certainly true of The Faerie Queene. Giants and
Giantesses are enormous, yet they seem to have little trouble
riding horses that, for all we know, are of a standard size.
On the other hand, a comparison to medieval hunting tapestries and gothic stained glass windows fails to capture the significant degree of spatial verisimilitude that Spenser does achieve. Uccello’s painting, The Battle of San Romano (see Fig. 1) is a compromise between representational extremes that neatly reflects the spatial tone of Spenser’s world. The static, solid forms of the Knights’ lances help delineate a foreground which indulges the viewer in pageantry, color and costume. Spenser, too, knows his audience expects emblematic detail. In the passage earlier cited, Paridell approaches from a distinctly distant plaine but it is the burning hart on his brest and his colorful crest by which he is known. Uccello’s painting includes a background distinct from its foreground, not sharing a proportional relationship to a vanishing point on the horizon. More accurately, the pictorial world of the painting is neatly sliced in half at the line of bushes. The background figures appear far away only because they are smaller and they relate in size to the other figures on the background place and not to the world of the painting as a whole in a precise perspectival continuum. Both the painting and the poem share a depth of field, however unsophisticated.

The dualism set up by the juxtaposition of background and foreground in Uccello’s painting is analogous to the dualism inherent in the universe of The Faerie Queene. This fundamental distinction Spenser sets up in the play between the forest and the plain. Over and over again, when the poet refers to the overall setting of The Faerie Queene it is by distinguishing
landscape in terms of "woods and plaines." The Faerie Queene teems with hills, valleys, and oceans, it is true, but the consistent use of "woods" and "plaine" to denote all landscape invests the scenic universe with a dramatic dualism. A kind of tug-of-war goes on between them. Action moves from the woods to the plaine, then back to the woods. They seem to be the two landscapes that really signify, dramatically. Here follow just a few examples of Spenser's tendency to group woods and plaines together in such a way they seem a trope for the whole universe of The Faerie Queen:

a) Una searches everywhere for Redcross -- "each wood and plaine/ Did searche, sore grieved in her gently breast (I, ii, 8);

b) Satryane seeks abroad for adventures -- "That ranged abroad to seek adventures wilde, as was his wont in forrest, and in plaine" (III, vii, 30);

c) Pryene flees her pursuer -- "Fear gave her wings, and rage enforest my flight. / Through woods and plaines so long did I her chace." (II, iv, 32)

The plaine and the woods set up, in turn, their own systems of logic. The plaine, of course, is a place for "pricking" and "pacing"; knights encounter other knights; they engage in greeting or combat. The great battlefields were frequently a plain: Knights "tumble" on "bloody" or "Trojan plaines." But, bloody or benign, intercourse on the plaine is social intercourse. The activities associated with the plaine are usually uncomplicated and down to earth; knights are unhorsed or victorious, men are pitted against men. Spenser most frequently describes the plains as "open" and no doubt keeps in mind simple
pun built into the word itself. The plaines are not especially fancy, and what goes on there is rather pedestrian in contrast to the wonders of the wood. If *The Faerie Queene* was a complex fantasy boardgame, competitors would probably roll a different color die upon entering the forest (I would suggest green).

Here, in contrast to the plaine, one is quite likely to engage supernatural agents and, whether they be representatives of deity or the human unconscious, they contrast sharply with the day-to-day jousting bouts of the plaine.

This scenic dualism has important implications for Spenser's narrative technique. *The Faerie Queene* is related as a series of digressive adventures, intricately intermingled—what Lewis has called a polyphonic narrative. Frequently, a single adventure branches into one or more adventures when some accident or other separates the participants, causes them to lose sight of each other. Rarely does this sort of disintegration happen on the plain. The plain, we are told many times, is "open," and we don't expect it to happen there.

It is easy to see, though, how the forest's physical presence (its very shadows, trees, and winding paths) lends itself to these frequent parting of the ways. It is because the adventure is so often broken into its constituent variants by the process of getting lost or losing sight of some one that the forests are so indispensable to the narrative rhythms of *The Faerie Queene*. The woods, as places where the senses can, in a basic way become confused or disoriented, provide a perfect setting for the losses and rediscoveries that punctuate and
enliven the narrative. "He sought the woods, but no man could see there" (VI, xi, 26).

Of course, at the same time, the woods contribute to the repetitiveness that many claim mar the work. In a universe so decidedly dualistic, in which movement is comprised so significantly of motion into and out of woods and plaines, there is the danger that one will discover, beneath the color and variety of an adventure's surface, a kind of monotony in the mechanism that drives it. Nevertheless, it is virtually impossible to imagine Spenser's incorporation of so many knights, so many colorful adventures without such a mechanism. Repetition is important to The Faerie Queene—it reflects forces which matter to the story. Also, the woods of The Faerie Queene play a crucial role in establishing the narratives momentum by providing the axis from which new adventures can spin off.

Spenser uses the woods in other ways too, employing them to dramatic effect in service of the narrative. Indeed, the forests of The Faerie Queene have those qualities to fascinate and attract in their own right. As a result, the forests punctuate the narrative in a convincing way. As we have seen in the discussion of their depth, woods in The Faerie Queene have an uncanny draw. Damsels and knights seem always to be rushing into them, entangling themselves more deeply. For the mythic quest, forests have long represented a grey area between this world and an underworld or celestial world, (e.g., the Inferno, the Aeneid, folk tale tradition) and, consequently, provide an appropriate context for a heroic knight engaged in a spiritual quest. At the unconscious level the woods can offer (seemingly) the protection
and security of the womb. Redcrosse seeks shelter from the tempest of the first canto and the forest’s shade entices. We have already seen that woods serve as a sort of incubator for Sir Satyrane. Satyrane is frequently visited with the need to revisit the scene of his incubation, perhaps regretting ever being loosed on the world, where, after all, he only barely fits in:

Yet evermore it was his manner fairs,
After long labours and adventures spent,
Unto those native woods for to re pare,
To see his sire and offspring ann cient.
(I,vi,30)

Spenser’s woods are, clearly, enchanting as well as enchanted. Knights are drawn to them and into them. Joseph Campbell has outlined patterns illustrating the sequences of adventure in mythic quest, and many qualities of The Faerie Queene’s adventure packed forests jibe rather neatly with Campbell’s mode. The hero, according to Campbell, has only properly engaged his quest/adventure after receiving a “call to adventure” and crossing a “threshold,” a boundary between this world (The Faerie Queene’s plaines, perhaps) and the world of adventure. Where plain and forest abut, Spenser frequently creates a marginal space. He calls it simply the forest-side. The forest-side functions very much as thresholds to the questing figures of The Faerie Queene. They are not arenas of action, certainly. Quite the contrary: they are often the scene of rest or contemplation. Scaudamour comes upon the edge of a wood and, “all unawa rente espide / An armed Knight under a forest side,
Sitting in shade beside his grazing steede”; (Iv, vi, 2).
Hermits, hardly the embodiment of the active ideal, chose to live in these margins. "A lowly hermitage it was, / Downe in a dale, hard by a forests side" (I, i, 34). Without fail, however, the forestside offers a sign or suggestion of an adventure to come, providing the call to adventure. Guyon's meeting with Mordant and Amavia (previously alluded to) occurs when: "By a forest side / To passe, for succour from the scorching ray, / They heard a ruefull voice, that dearnly cride / With perceing shriekes, and many a dolefull lay" (II, i, 35) Throughout The Faerie Queene, the forest-side is a favorite haunt of weeping damsels, perhaps the number-one stock call to adventure. Woods and forest-side actively engage a kind of quest logic, yet another example of their vital, autonomous significance.

The attraction that Spenser's woods represent is not the same as an attraction for the infinite or oceanic dissolution. In keeping with the still very medieval Elizabethan world view Spenser's forests can be (are, in fact) vast, but not infinite. Even the medieval world model did allow for great vastness; i.e. the fixed stars and the Primum Mobile remained at an awe-inspiring distance. The comfort and security of an enclosed space could, subsequently, be very appealing.

But the potency of The Faerie Queene's woods must be attributed to more than an adherence to a mythic pattern or ties to a particular world view. Woods and forest become, in addition, a place where distinctions between the natural and the supernatural, body and spirit, are blurred. Dryads are "woodie" Goddesses that reside in the very wood of the trees; Faunus and his satyrs are woodland deities with particularly earthly
appetites. The presence of deity, Numen, is a pervasive one in The Faerie Queene. As a result, confrontation with supernatural agents doesn’t have the comparatively contrived deus ex machina feel of romances in which forests are principally emblematic or manifestations of spiritual evils. Indeed, Spenser’s forests are comprised of much more than evils and temptations. The forests are clearly attractive places, as evidenced by the gods’ fondness for them. The woods are the preferred haunt of some very virtuous figures, Belphoebe and Diana, specifically. In the Cantos of Mutabilitie, the wooded hill of Arlo is favored by the gods and goddesses, Diana (Cynthia) in particular who is directly associated with forest:

The Gods then us’d (for pleasure and for rest) Oft to resort there-to, when seem’d them best; But none of all there-in more pleasure found, Then Cynthia; that is soveraine Queen profest Of woods and forrests, which therein abound. (VII, vi, 38)

Contrast this to the view of Arthos would have us regard the forest as little more than repository for the malignant forces of evil.

Far more than this, the forest is richly articulated, a multifaceted, interconnected community, peopled with nymphs, satyrs, and foresters. These are characters perfectly comfortable in the forest. For example, the Foresters’ familiarity with the forest is emphasized: “Nathlesse the villen sped himselfe so well, / Whether through swiftnesse of his speedy beast; / Or knowledge of those woods, where he did dwell.” (III,v,14) Even several Knights are at home there, Satyrane and Tristram of Book VI, who is dressed in imitation of Robin Hood, are
cases in point. Tristam is described: "All in a woodman's jacket
he was clad/ Of Lincolne Greene" (IV, i, 5) Furthermore the moral
stance of the forest is ambiguous or even neutral more often than
it is purely evil. The satyrs embody this ambiguity in their
vacillation between behavior that is lecherous one moment and
benign the next. Satyrs rescue Una, but rape Hellenore. In the
forest, then, are agents of both good and evil—the woods
themselves are neither. [This takes issue with Frye's comment
regarding what he calls the "black and white characterization" of
The Faerie Queene and his assertion that "the morally neutral
world of physical nature, never appears as such in The Faerie
Queene"22] In this important respect, the forests in The Faerie
Queene are behaving in much the same way we expect the woods in
our backyard to. This is not to deprive the woods of significant
potency. In fact, they retain a high degree of spirituality.
Spenser's Epithalamion shares the appreciation of this mystic
power. The forest joins in celebration of the poet's nuptials in
an intriguingly active manner. "For they of joy and pleasance to
you sing, / That all the woods them answer and their echoe ring."
(Epithalamion, 90-91).

Frequently, in The Faerie Queene the forests are said to
"echoe to a need" [in defiance of Arthos' claim that they
"echoe(s) to no need"23], The woodlands resound with the weeping
of several of The Faerie Queene's heroines:

Her [Una's] shrill outcryes and shriekes so loud did bray,
That all the woodes and forestes did resound. (I, vi, 7)

Here, Una's cries are carried to the ears of satyrs, who come to
her aid. Woods demonstrate an ability to be, at the very least,
sympathetic. Of course, the forest breeds creatures of decay and hatred as well. Error and the Blatant Beast are unambiguously nasty. Woods embody potential for both generation and decay. In fact, perhaps more than anything else, the woods are potential.

Spenser was not alone among Elizabethans in instilling literary forest with numen and potential. In A Midsummer Night's Dream, Hippolyta is aware of the uncanny attractiveness of the forest's confusing song. She remembers the echoes of baying hounds while hunting in a Cretan forest: "... every region near/ Seemed all one mutual cry. / Never heard / So musical a discord, such sweet thunder." (A Midsummer Night's Dream IV,i, 117-119). This same "musical discord" is part of the appeal of Spenser's woods, too. They echo to a heroine's needs or wedding celebration while remaining morally ambiguous, full of contradictions.

Perhaps surprisingly, Shakespeare gives us as little description of his woods as Spenser does of his. It is enough that they are there. "Well, this is the forest of Arden" (As You Like It, II,iv,14) Rosalind tells us, pastoral logic can now take over. The forests in Shakespeare's plays, clearly, must be representatives of places that are real at least in the sense that they are represented on an actual stage and dramatic events and transformations of some diversity take place in them. Without the dictates of theatrical production, though, Spenser delivers up a forest that doesn't suffer in comparison to the woods realized on the boards of Shakespeare's stage. In fact,
the ideal landscape creeps into Shakespeare as with Spenser. Titania's Bower (which, analogous to a locus amoenus of Spenser's, is richly described—"I know a bank . . .") has all the right flowers, and the Forest of Arden is replete with olive trees and lions.

Shakespeare, too, may have had the wilds of the New World in mind when writing The Tempest. His mention of the "Bermoothes" suggest a familiarity with the travel diaries so popular with the Elizabethans, thought the playwright locates his drama, vaguely, in the Mediterranean, not the West Indies. As a real place, the wild New World offers the potential for good and evil: it is either well-disposed to Gonzalo's Utopian schemes or no. To some, the island air breathes "most sweetly"; to others, "as if it had lungs, and rotten ones." (The Tempest II,i, lines 48-49) Shakespeare's woods, like Spenser's, are conveyed as real, not through descriptive technique, but through the forces they embody and the dramatic necessities that they dictate. In A Midsummer Night's Dream, Demetrius remarks "And here am I, and wood within this wood," (II,i,192) not because he wanders in a selva obscura, but because he finds himself in "a wood near Athens."

Shakespeare's deliberate play on the very word "wood" sheds some light on the way in which Elizabethans regarded forest. "Wood" came to English, not from Romance roots, but from Teutonic and Scandinavian ones. The word probably conjured up images of the still dense forests to the north in England, the very forests on which English ship building so depended as Great Britain's forests shrank to an alarming degree. "Wood" or "wode", furthermore, had an additional usage still very much current in
Spenser’s day. For centuries it had also meant reckless fury or violence, irascible passion, even madness (though technically this is a different word altogether, sharing spelling but not roots). Elizabethan authors didn’t have to expend energy on the creation of allegorical forests of passion and confusion—this was done for them at the most basic of levels, a linguistic one. Proverbs employing the woods were also known in Elizabethan times. "In a wood" (at a loss, perplexed), "to have an eye to the wood" (to be on the look-out for some advantageous opportunity), or as we learn from the Oxford English Dictionary: (1546) "Plentie is no deintie, ye see not your owne ease. I see, ye cannot see the wood for trees." Without the kind of detailed analysis, the linguistic dimension demands, it still seems safe to say that woods carried with them a rich set of associations for Spenser’s audience, apart from those a poet might impart to them.

The forests of The Faerie Queen assume great significance, beyond the simple allegory that Error's Wood might first seem to be. An omnipresent force, woods provide a narrative matrix in which both leafy entanglement and footpaths (more or less obscured) give the narrative impetus for movement, keep up the pace. While incorporating diverse elements of traditional poetic landscapes, Spenser creates a forest with the spirituality and potential that could only come from an independent existence, existence as actual place. The Faerie Queene moves through a complex woodland community, not a few trees designating a pretty little place. Romping through Spenser's deep woods isn’t unlike
a hike in the state forest. The possibility of losing one’s way, especially without guidance, has to be confronted. But, lost or otherwise, the forest isn’t all poison ivy and mosquitoes (or worse); it is growth as well as decay, and shafts of sunlight penetrate the gloom. What the woods have most (Spenser’s or the state park’s) is woodsiness. Spenser achieves this in a roundabout way. Without telling us forthright that his woods really work like woods, or describing them in such a way that we expect them to, he brings them to life. Much more than a stand of however many enumerated trees of classical propriety, Spenser’s woods feel even more correct. They are correct because they are "wylde," "greene," and "wide," not because they are conventionally or aesthetically proper. In any case, Spenser lets us see, encourages us to see, the woods for the trees.
Plates 68-69. THE BATTLE OF SAN ROMANO, London, National Gallery

Figure No. 1
Notes


3 Ibid., p. 192.


7 Sylvan Barnet, from his introduction to The Complete Signet Shakespeare (New York, 1972), p. 9. Subsequent references to Shakespeare’s plays are taken from this edition.

8 Curtius, p. 192.


12 Steadman, p. 166.


18 Ibid., p. 43.


23 Arthos, p. 47.

Bibliography


TO: Mr. Pierce
   Mr. Jones
   Mr. Longsworth

From: Nick Randell

April 22, 1987

Looking over the paper, I've come across some errors, particularly toward the end, that I had better point out. I apologize for any confusion they have caused; I expected far too much from the computer's spell-checker function. Here I've listed some of the more obtrusive errors and their corrections. Again, sorry for the far-from-perfect copy you received.

**Page 15:** omit "with" from the fifth line of the second paragraph

**Page 19:** five lines from the bottom the word "less" should be omitted

**Page 20:** the third word on line 7 should read "princely"

**Page 22:** in the tenth line from the bottom, "place" should read "plane"

**Page 23:** "the" should be inserted between the last two words; on this page I begin the tendency to jump between the older and modern spelling of "plain"—if I'm not quoting Spenser directly it shouldn't end in an e

**Page 25:** in the second sentence of the last paragraph the fourth word should read "service"

**Page 26:** twelve lines from the bottom, the word should be "model" not "mode"

**Page 29:** in the twelfth line and the third line of the last paragraph the brackets should close immediately after the superscript number

**Page 31:** the eighth line from the bottom should begin a new para, the fourth line from bottom should read "north of England"

**Page 32:** omit the first comma of line thirteen