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Virtus Without Telos: The Ethics of Vulnerability in Early Modern England

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*VIRTUS WITHOUT
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Holly A. Crocker

The Pain of Reformation: Spenser, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Masculinity by Joseph Campana. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012. Pp. 296. \$55.00 cloth.

The Pain of Reformation posits masculinity as an ethical condition, not just a social role, in Edmund Spenser's 1590 *Faerie Queene*. This shift in inquiry highlights heroic masculinity's propensity for violence and domination, and suggests the tensions inherent to a poem that purports "to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline," as the "Letter of the Authors" famously avers. Rather than a didactic project that depends on creating an invulnerable masculine subject from the imposition of codified discipline, the 1590 *Faerie Queene* emerges as poem concerned with vulnerability, including a fundamental openness to bodily experience. In Joseph Campana's deft analysis, vulnerability becomes "the source of a new understanding of masculinity and ethics, which might be united in the term *virtue*" (8). This book does not just attend to vulnerability as the underside of violence in Spenser's expansive narrative. Instead, Campana argues that "the 1590 *Faerie Queene* is in fact an allegory of vulnerability, one that disarms and reforms masculinity as a project of ethics" (204). Violence becomes subject to critique, and the programmatic *habitus* of traditional virtue is superseded by a reformed model of masculinity attuned to pain and suffering as well as pleasure and joy.

Sensation, not governance, organizes this new masculinity.

While Campana acknowledges that a powerful Protestant ethos runs through Spenser's poem, he connects this militant form of self-mastery to the trauma of violence suffered in the wake of England's break with Rome. The violence of the Reformation suggests that an impervious moral identity is only a meager defense against, and therefore an insufficient solution to, the experience of pain wrought by decades of religious upheaval. Spenser instead elaborates what Campana calls a "sympathetic sociality" (168 *passim*), which might mend the harms of a community rent by generations of suffering. An ethics founded on an acknowledgment of shared vulnerability reforms the heroic masculine subject and provides new grounds for ethical action that acknowledges the bodily experiences of all those involved.

As exemplars of this reformation, the knights of the 1590 *Faerie Queene* are caught in a bind between inviolable heroism and vulnerable compassion. Campana identifies this aporia as characteristic of sixteenth-century poetry, so that Spenser's effort to create an aesthetics that expresses the flesh's sensitivities as a new foundation for ethical action is rendered through the struggles of the Knights of Holiness, Temperance, and Chastity. To reformulate masculinity as an ethical condition—one that re-members classical *virtus*—is

to create a new model of virtue responsive to the Reformation's manifold harms. Rather than predicating ethical life on prescriptive norms or moralistic rules, virtue, as Campana analyzes it across Spenser's 1590 narrative, emerges from shared relations of affect, energy, and sensation. Rethinking Spenser's ethical project makes a profound difference to the ways we might read the Legends of Holiness, Temperance, and Chastity.

In charting Redcrosse Knight's difficulties in book 1, Campana acknowledges the appeal of a dematerializing moral regime that asserts control over pain, violence, and suffering. Yet, even if we recognize the defensive reassurance that the fantasy of rational control over insensate matter might hold, a series of unsettling encounters in the Legend of Holiness works to undermine this model of masculine virtue. Chapter 1, "Reading Bleeding Trees: The Poetics of Other People's Pain," focuses on the Redcrosse Knight's inability to respond to the suffering of others, and questions "how we witness and respond to violence" even when that violence is supposedly sanctioned as part of the purifying process of ethical reform (73). Campana connects the episode in which Redcrosse Knight encounters a bleeding tree with the iconoclastic violence of England's early decades of religious Reformation, and argues that the Knight of Holiness's inability

to bear compassionate witness to the imprisoned Fradubio's pain presents the problem of "suffering matter" (19) after Christ's passion was culturally displaced in the Protestant imaginary.

When Fradubio's pain is made tangible through the bleeding flesh of the tree, it unsettles a traditional model of heroic virtue by capturing "the shock of masculinity faced with a materiality that is neither docile nor silent" (57). If the House of Holiness incorporates the Redcrosse Knight into Protestant theology with its programmatic discipline, that body, Campana's analysis demonstrates, is stripped of all flesh. Instead, the body becomes "emblematic" in a way that bares the losses that a martial Christianity imposes on the subjects it fashions. Cut off from sympathy and suffering, Redcrosse Knight defeats the dragon and uncovers the "virtuous violence" (72) that iconoclastic righteousness seeks to justify. Spenser pursues the underside of this zealous discipline in chapter 2, "Spenser's Dark Materials: Representation in the Shadow of Christ." In so doing, Campana offers a powerful explanation for one of the poem's enduring enigmas: the poem's dazzling visuality, including book 1's ocular fascination with a series of powerfully rendered monsters.

How can an ethical poetics aligned with martial Christian

iconoclasm lavish so much energy on allegorical creatures that excite and sometimes overwhelm the senses? Moralizing self-cultivation fails to defend against the revolutions of Error or the horrors of the dragon. Malevolent figures including Duessa, Archimago, and Orgoglio, moreover, present poetry's elemental materiality, its potential to evoke physical presence even in a religious milieu where Christ's body has receded into the folds of textual representation. As Campana eloquently argues, "Lurking behind terrible demons and evil specters of the Legend of Holiness is a fundamental materiality in which Spenser locates a vitality that animates subjective, sensuous experience and the poetry that colors and conveys that experience" (78). This is not dead, mechanized matter, though Campana elaborates differences between monster and machine to address the lively material presence that is banished by a routinized ordering of wayward or monstrous bodies. Mechanization reduces matter's generative vitality to its barest technical functions. When the Redcrosse Knight stumbles, or is overcome with monstrosity's generative materiality, Spenser investigates what it might mean to found an ethical masculinity that preserves the many fragilities of physicality. In other words, "Redcrosse's virtue is not his struggle against the flesh, but his struggle to *be* flesh

and not an empty allegorical body” (104).

Campana’s investigation of the Legend of Temperance continues to consider poetry’s materiality by contemplating the intensities of the body enfolded. Instead of treating temperance as simple privation, part 2 elaborates an alternative conception that focuses on the body’s energies and affects. By so doing, Campana argues that Spenser offers “a thorough critique of an ideology of temperance embodied by Guyon and the Palmer, who model the moderation of affect and the expropriation of energy by which heroic subjects are alienated from their own bodies and dedicated, quite violently, to the cause of virtue” (131). Chapter 3, “On Not Defending Poetry: Spenser, Suffering, and the Energy of Affect,” connects the body’s vitality to a poetics that resists moral clarity in favor of ethical resonance. A focus on the body’s energy—its enervation and its excess—allows Spenser to avoid the poetic gesture, practiced so famously by Philip Sidney, that defends poetry by associating it with the clarifying ethical force required to cultivate a heroic subject. As Campana suggests, “For [Spenser], the value of poetry derives neither from its moral and mimetic properties nor from its ability to reflect or refer to social experience but, rather, from its capacity to convey the vitality of bodies endowed with pain, affect,

a vulnerability to change, and a capacity for motion” (114).

The body’s economy, its flows of vitality that run to overflow or depletion, is the source of Guyon’s struggle in book 2 of the 1590 *Faerie Queene*. Guyon’s witness to Amavia’s death, along with his experience in the cave of Mammon, demonstrate the dangers of extreme deprivation. Whereas the dying Amavia should affirm affect’s power to connect bodies through shared experiences of intensity, the unfeeling response of Guyon and the Palmer critiques the impulse to deny oneself a sympathetic sociality in the interests of constructing a moral exemplum with crisp narrative contours. A different form of ethical impoverishment is at work in the much-studied cave of Mammon episode: after Guyon denies himself all forms of sustenance for three days, he very famously collapses after he leaves the cave. Though he seeks to practice a martial form of Temperance that disciplines the body’s affective intensities, his response to his experience affirms affect’s ability to overflow the strict boundaries one might seek to set for it: in other words, the very act of extreme deprivation becomes an occasion for affect’s acute excitation. In both instances, inattention to the body’s economy of energy—particularly the way its expenditure and accumulation of vitality might affect its ethical capacities—produces

an immoderate and therefore intemperate physical response.

Chapter 4, “Boy Toys and Liquid Joys: Pleasure and Power in the Bower of Bliss,” turns to the pleasures of bodily intensity that Temperance might traditionally have been imagined to squelch. In continuing the previous chapter’s focus on the body’s economy, however, Campana argues the “pleasurable liquidity . . . that appears with increasing prominence in the Legend of Temperance” is central to Spenser’s reformulation of heroic masculinity as disarmed, vulnerable, and open to the vicissitudes of corporeal experience (130). Similar to his treatment of monsters in part 1, Campana asks why Spenser spends so much poetic energy on masculine pleasure if book 2 of the 1590 *Faerie Queene* is unflinching in its pursuit of a totalizing moral program of moderating discipline. Here we see that pleasure “renders the masculine heroic body vulnerable to experience” (137). As a consequence, all those pleased male bodies in the Legend of Temperance—which are frequently treated as abject or marginal—are central to an ethics that includes all varieties of lived corporeality. If temperance does not amount to denial, then we should question the ready association of figures such as Mordant with effeminate powerlessness. These “boy toys” might clarify the dangers of bodily enervation, but

Guyon’s destruction of the Bower of Bliss divides him from pleasures that might be ethically enriching. Such violent energies are at odds with the poem’s purpose, which, Campana powerfully argues, “is to defeat varieties of alienation that render pleasure or pain a form of stupefaction, which disables the body’s vulnerability to the experiential and ethical dimensions available in common corporeality” (158).

Part 3 of Campana’s excellent study pursues “common corporeality” in book 3 of the 1590 *Faerie Queene* by addressing Spenser’s endeavor to develop a “sympathetic sociality” in the Legend of Chastity. This productive emphasis on shared vulnerability emerges mainly through the friendships of female characters. And, while Campana continues to argue for the reformation of the heroic masculine subject, his analysis of Britomart’s emergence as the exemplar of an ethical vulnerability shows that Spenser’s reworking of *virtus* is more comprehensive than his project “to fashion a gentleman” might explicitly allow. Chapter 5, “Vulnerable Subjects: Amoret’s Agony, Britomart’s Battle for Chastity,” traces the Knight of Chastity’s transformation from unfeeling to sympathetic witness of others’ suffering. By realizing that those in pain need sympathy more than rescue, Britomart gains an access to corporeal experience that ultimately reformulates

heroic masculinity. When she seeks *to be* (rather than *to possess*) her beloved, vulnerability comes to define her experience in ways that open her to others. She might ignore Florimell's pain early in her quest, but later she becomes the paragon of a vulnerable masculinity whose heroism is predicated on mutuality. Britomart's relationship with Amoret becomes "a bond based on affection and sympathy" (200), which remakes both partners through their collaborative renegotiation of the roles of *rescuer* and *lady* that populate traditional romance narratives. Their bond disarms Britomart, and makes way for the kinds of "compassionate companionship" that Spenser imagines elsewhere in book 3 (203).

In chapter 6, "Damaged Gods: Adonis and the Pain of Allegory," Campana addresses how Spenser imagines another important bond between women, but here the collaboration between Venus and Diana produces vulnerable masculinity as the most idealized figure of the "new man" in late-sixteenth-century England. By replacing the martial Mars with the vulnerable Adonis, Spenser revises traditional gender hierarchies in a fashion that expands both masculinity and femininity. Masculinity is no longer sullied by an association between vulnerability and effeminacy; likewise, femininity is no longer tainted by a connection between materiality and passivity. If flesh

is lively, vulnerability may also be recognized as a source of strength. This strength emerges from collaboration and from a recognition that bodies are always mutually enriching or damaging. In assessing the recalibration of gender that the Garden of Adonis achieves, Campana concludes his discussion of book 3 by returning to the form of suffering that launches his analysis of Spenser's Legend of Holiness early on:

Born from a bleeding tree, Adonis embodies, too, a vision of matter endowed with life. If suffering, the quickening experience of pain, served as a reminder of all that was suppressed in the machine of the Protestant allegorizing of the flesh, Spenser's damaged divinities, especially Adonis, introduce that vulnerability into the texture of allegory by disarming this disembodied hierarchical violence. (223)

By figuring heroic masculinity as implicitly vulnerable, Spenser reimagines virtue as corporeal and collaborative.

Campana's argument is tightly drawn, so much so that he uses his conclusion to imagine other avenues of inquiry. In looking forward to Spenser's return to *The Faerie Queene* in its later instantiations, Campana focuses on the potential

of shame as the impulse unifying the Legends of Friendship, Justice, and Courtesy. In so doing, Campana observes shame's duality: "Spenser wielded rather effectively the forces of shame in the interest of maintaining a sense of order, but he also keenly observed shame as a form of *social vulnerability* (231, original emphasis). The extended legends that comprise the 1596 *Faerie Queene* make the ethical vulnerability their protagonists come to experience manifestly social. As a consequence, the networks of collaboration become more extensive, and shame gives private vulnerability a socially recognizable iteration. A focus on shame has an explicit politics that Campana links to Spenser's relationship to Ireland. Because "Shame names the social pain of thwarted attachment," it gives shape to those affects, energies, and affiliations that arise "from the failure to sustain an ethics of vulnerability" (236). When social attachments fail, when they become suffused with aggression and violence, shame continues to express the vulnerability that might lead to a reparative reassessment of communal connections. While tracing future lines of argument, Campana affirms the innovation and importance of his present project.

The Pain of Reformation is a thrilling book. It is firmly founded upon established arguments in Spenser studies, but it takes those

accepted positions—about religion, violence, and gender—and shifts the grounds of understanding. Some readers might be unpersuaded that Spenser means to critique his knights for assuming a militant Protestant masculinity. Nonetheless, the Knights of Holiness and Temperance are customarily viewed as failures, at least in the early stages of each quest. Britomart's success as a virtuous exemplar, too, is simply another variation on a long-accepted characteristic of the 1590 *Faerie Queene*. What Campana's study achieves, I would suggest, is *virtus* without *telos*: when vulnerability becomes central to rethinking ethical relations, virtue is always in process, since the body's affects and energies, pleasures and pains, never reach a point of stasis until the point of death. There is no achieving virtue as a finished product; even Britomart's quest relies on the contingencies of corporeality. With this reworking of virtue as a continual struggle rooted in the body's sensory capacities, Campana recasts the 1590 *Faerie Queene* as a series of episodes in a much larger and longer ethical quest. By so doing, Campana affirms Spenser's moral seriousness and formal inventiveness; he does so, importantly, by opening space for an ambitious rethinking of virtue and gender in the ongoing wake of England's religious Reformation. This book is relevant, then, not just

to Spenserians, but to all scholars interested in investigating the difference that vulnerability might make to poetry's influence over lived corporeal experience in early modern England.

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