

Lecture - 4
BOOK I, CANTO III

Canto iii follows Una, who continues to wander in search of her companion, the Redcrosse knight. Stopping to rest under a tree, she is suddenly confronted by a lion; the beast is about to attack her, but seeing her gentle beauty and sensing her innocence, he forgets his rage and instead follows her around as a protector and companion. Soon, Una comes upon a damsel carrying a pot of water; terrified at seeing the lion, the girl, who happens to be deaf and dumb, flees home to her mother, who is blind. Una follows the girl to her house and asks for a place to sleep; when the women inside will not open the door for her, the lion forces it open. During the night, a church robber, who commonly gives his plunder to Abessa (the daughter) and Corceca (the mother), stops by with his latest spoils. But when he enters, the lion attacks and tears him to pieces. In the morning, Una sets off again. Riding along, she suddenly thinks she sees her knight on a nearby hill. It is not actually Redcrosse but Archimago in disguise; however, Una is fooled and welcomes back her knight with tears of joy, and they now journey together. Soon, though, they happen upon the knight Sansloy, who is eager to avenge the death of his brother Sansfoy and who also takes Archimago to be Redcrosse. He charges, knocks down Archimago, and is about to kill him when the sorcerer's disguise falls off. Seeing that it is not in fact Redcrosse, Sansloy spares him and takes Una as his prize, killing the lion, which tries to save her.

Meanwhile, the real Redcrosse has been led by Duessa to a wonderful palace--the House of Pride. It is beautiful and lavish, with a wide entrance, but it is built weakly on a poor foundation. Redcrosse and Duessa are brought in and marvel at the richness. They are welcomed by the whole court but especially by Lucifera, the Queen of the palace. Full of pride, Lucifera shows off for the knight by calling her couch, which is pulled by six beasts upon which ride her six counsellors. They are: Idleness, Gluttony, Lechery, Avarice, Envy, and Wrath, their appearances appropriate to their names. The parade has just gone by when Sansjoy suddenly arrives, and seeing Redcrosse, challenges him to a duel to avenge the death of Sansfoy. Redcrosse is willing, but the Queen demands that they wait until the next morning.

When dawn breaks, the two knights ride out in front of the palace, and with the whole court watching, they begin their fight. They bloody each other, but Redcrosse proves the stronger--he is about to kill Sansjoy when the latter suddenly disappears in a black cloud. Redcrosse is then put to bed to heal his wounds, but Duessa, mourning the loss of Sansjoy, goes to awaken Night. Together they recover the body of Sansjoy and descend into Hell itself. There they find Aesculapius, a physician who was sent to Hell because he had the skill to bring men back to life, a power that Jove did not want mortals to enjoy. Duessa and Night persuade him to try and restore Sans joy's life. Meanwhile, Redcrosse's dwarf makes a horrible discovery: In the dungeons of the palace lie the bodies of thousands who were overcome by pride and could never leave this House. To avoid the same fate, Redcrosse realizes he must leave at once, and with the dwarf, he flees the house as dawn breaks.

Commentary

The lion, though it has no name, is also part of Spenser's allegory. As a part of brutish nature, it represents natural law, which may be violent at times but is sympathetic to Christian truth. According to Christian theology, natural law makes up part of God's divine law, and so the Christian is not an adversary of nature but acts in unison with it--thus, the lion naturally aids Una. However, it is no match for Sansloy ("without the law of god"), who operates outside the domain of divine law. The natural law, embodied in the lion and closely connected to Christian Truth, holds no sway over Sansloy. Not subject to the laws of nature or religion, he is capable of destroying the lion. The lion can, however, defeat the robber, who violates the natural law by stealing from others. (This also violates divine law, but Spenser would have held that man's own natural conscience forbids theft.) The two women who benefit from Kirkrapine ("church robber") represent monasticism; Abessa's name recalls "Abbess," the head of an abbey. Monasticism is a feature of the Catholic Church, and in Spenser's time, monasteries were often accused of taking donations to the poor for themselves. Abessa's deafness and dumbness, and Corceca's blindness, display Spenser's belief that monasteries (monks, friars, and nuns) are ignorant of the needs of the world as they live in seclusion.

The House of Pride is a collection of ancient and medieval thought about sin and evil. Christian theology holds that Pride is the greatest sin, from which all other vices come. Pride was the sin of Satan, which caused his fall from Heaven; thus, the Queen of Pride is associated with Lucifer by her name. The parade of the seven major vices, each with some prop or costume to indicate their nature (Pride holds a mirror, for she is vain), was a common feature of medieval morality plays--Spenser borrows it for this scene in Canto iv. The Queen, however, is not simply an allegory for Pride; she also has a political meaning. Spenser intentionally contrasts her with the true Queen, to whom the poem is dedicated: Queen Elizabeth. The poet notes that Lucifera "made her selfe a Queene, and crowned to be, / Yet rightfull kingdome she had none at all, / Ne heritage of native soveraintie / But did usurpe with wrong and tyrannie / Upon the scepter (l.iv.12)." This is in contrast to Elizabeth, who held her power lawfully, ruled with justice and "true religion," and was descended from a noble race (as Spenser will later establish).

Again, Spenser uses a variety of sources in constructing his imagery. The House of Pride, the poet writes, "Did on...weak foundation ever sit: / For on a sandie hill, that still did flit, / And fall away, it mounted was full hie (l.iv.5)." This recalls the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus says that those who do not follow His words "shall be likened to a foolish man who built his house on sand (Mt.7.26)." The house shall fall, as Redcrosse sees when he discovers the bodies of those ruined by pride. The details of the castle, though, such as the surrounding wall covered by gold foil (outward beauty hiding inner weakness) are borrowed from *Orlando Furioso*, by the Italian poet Ariosto, whom Spenser admired. Finally, in describing the descent into Hell by Duessa and Night, the poet borrows from Virgil, who in the *Aeneid* describes Aeneas' travel through Hell to meet his father. We must keep in mind that to a late medieval/early Renaissance audience, such borrowing from other authors without citation was not by any means considered plagiarism. In fact, it was taken to be the sign of a well-educated poet who could command different sources and integrate different styles. The medieval style was one of incorporation, not originality, and this carries on from Dante to Spenser to Milton.

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