Toward a Reevaluation of the Bower of Bliss: The Taxonomy of Luxury in *The Faerie Queene*, Book Two

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I

Blandum etiam malum Luxuria, quam accusare aliquanto facilius est quam vitare, operi nostro inserature, non quidem ut ullum honorem recipiat, sed ut se ipsam recognoscens ad paenitentiam impelli posit.¹

Many readings of Spenser's book of Temperance have alluded to its language of luxury, but the book's taxonomy of luxury and its antithetical positioning of luxuria to temperantia have remained unexamined.² Moreover, prior readings of the Bower of Bliss have assumed that the meaning and significance of luxury were understood, when the concept in early modern thought has yet to be comprehensively explored. Luxury is an unusually fluid, and often misunderstood concept, possessed of its own expansive language; necessarily this has major implications for our understanding of the dynamics of the Bower of Bliss, of the structuring of book 2, and perhaps of the positioning of the vices throughout *The Faerie Queene*. The widespread reluctance to examine what scholarship has bordered on acknowledging for some time originates with the fundamental difficulty of defining luxury—a sprawling concept, and one forever shifting in relation to our perceptions of what ails a given society at any time. Since the lack of substantial scholarly investigation into the meanings of luxury in the early modern period not only makes examining the concept's significance in *The Faerie Queene* more challenging, but also requires more historicist glossing of the concept, this article does not speak conclusively about the meaning/s of luxury in Spenser's allegory. Rather, it suggests the need for *The Faerie Queene*—particularly the second book with its Bower of Bliss episode—to be reassessed in relation to the taxonomy and iconography of luxury.

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In many ways a contradiction, the concept of luxury has been variously defined as lasciviousness, super-abundance, a regular indulgence in what is costly, refined enjoyment, and something that adds comfort or pleasure exceeding what is “necessary” in life (OED). Suggestive of both excess and distinction, modern usage retains a conceptual and figurative fluidity that was more pronounced in early modern times. Yet, it almost entirely erases now the fear of luxury as sinful and subversive that was prevalent in classical no less than in early modern culture. In antiquity, as John Sekora has rightly observed, luxury (luxuria) threatened the classical “Apollonian ideal of sophrosyne” (temperance) because it constituted “a retreat from order, a violation of harmony” and was generally blamed for the “introduction of chaos into the cosmos” (29). The concept evoked a range of evolving threats to social stability; indeed, “the men who defined [luxury] did so in order to describe the unspeakable, to classify the abhorrent, to name the vile... it identified all they were not” (Sekora 50-1). In the writings of the early Christian fathers, the classical idea of luxuria as a violation of harmony is partially incorporated into the idea that cupiditas (inordinate desire) is the root of evil. Cupiditas, at times interchangeable with concupiscencia in the writings of Augustine and then Calvin (and a term that gave way to the English concupiscence), characterizes a love that turns away from God and toward worldly pleasures: a love, therefore, which must be eternally insatiable because it seeks satisfaction and completion in temporal things. While luxuria denoted a debilitating indulgence, which classical writers perceived to be a threat to civilization, it was newly moralized to denote the inordinate consumption of worldly things (most often but not exclusively, carnal pleasures) during the early Christian period. Early modern concepts of luxury inherited a complex combination of classical and medieval ideas about otherness: On the one hand, the term evoked associations of wantonness, destructive extravagance, and wasted masculinity; on the other, it evoked a range of objects and pleasures that were desired by cupiditas. In both classical and Christian thinking, however, the insatiable consumption through which luxuria became visible resulted in a deformity of mind or body or both; it was as if he who strove to satisfy cupiditas was enslaved by luxuria, which left him unmanned, reduced, and defiled.

Guyon demonstrates his temperance in the second book of The Faerie Queene by resisting enslavement by luxuria, resisting, that is, the call of the concupiscent appetite to luxuria. Temperance is the refusal to consume what cupiditas desires; therefore it should be understood not