



This Rough Magic

A Peer-Reviewed, Academic, Online Journal

Dedicated to the Teaching of Medieval and Renaissance Literature



'Let others sing of knights and paladins':

Teaching the Sonnet alongside *The Faerie Queene* with Samuel Daniel's *Delia* 46

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Reviewed Work(s):

Source: *This Rough Magic*, Vol. 4, No. 2, (December 2013), pp. 24-33.

Published by: www.thisroughmagic.org

Stable URL: <http://www.thisroughmagic.org/tootalian%20article.html>

**'Let others sing of knights and paladins': Teaching the Sonnet alongside
The Faerie Queene with Samuel Daniel's *Delia* 46**

by Jacob Tootalian

One of the virtues of an undergraduate survey course is the opportunity to explore a variety of literary genres. This variety allows students a glimpse of the many methods and effects that constitute poetic meaning, especially where texts gesture at their own representational strategies. Metapoetic moments expose the way that a text imagines its own process of expression, sometimes comparing itself to other kinds of texts. I want to draw attention to a poem that I have found to be a useful supplement to the syllabus of a Renaissance or early British literature survey, one that explicitly bridges between two poetic genres that students often encounter in such courses. Samuel Daniel's *Delia* 46 is a standard English sonnet that makes reference to Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. Daniel gives more than a mere allusive nod. His speaker describes the form of Spenser's romantic epic in the effort to distinguish it from the expressive work of a sonnet. The result is fourteen lines that invite readers to consider the relationship between these genres, giving us the chance to think conscientiously about the structures and functions of different kinds of poetry:

Let others sing of knights and paladins,
In aged accents, and untimely words,
Paint shadows in imaginary lines,
Which well the reach of their high wits records;
But I must sing of thee and those fair eyes
Authentic shall my verse in time to come,
When yet th' unborn shall say, "Lo, where she lies,
Whose beauty made him speak that else was dumb."
These are the arks, the trophies I erect,
That fortify thy name against old age;
And these thy sacred virtues must protect
Against the dark and time's consuming rage.
Though th' error of my youth they shall discover,
Suffice they show I lived and was thy lover. (Daniel 54)

Evincing the generic differences between Spenser's epic and a sonnet like this one, Daniel opens up a conversation about the idea of time and its relationship to poetic meaning.

Daniel's sonnet sequence, along with his narrative poems and his literary-critical tract *A Defense of Rhyme*, received more attention in the classrooms of the past. His presence persists, albeit marginally, in anthologies like the Norton (Greenblatt 1014-1015). Alongside the more often read sonnets of Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare, Spenser himself, and, more recently, Wroth, the Norton presents three of Daniel's sonnets.^[1] Sonnet 46 is not among them, as it does not fit neatly within the edition's thematic category of "Love and Desire," nor does it appear in other major anthologies.^[2] Some critics have denigrated *Delia* as a sequence that strings together a series of commonplaces, a charge that C.S. Lewis answered by pointing to Daniel's technical craftsmanship, asserting that the collection of sonnets "offers no ideas, no psychology,

and of course no story; it is simply a masterpiece of phrasing and melody" (Lewis 491). Other critics have made claims for Daniel's thematic innovations.^[3] Whether or not *Delia*, in its own right, would make a significant contribution to an undergraduate survey, sonnet 46 prompts an important discussion about the different ways that Renaissance poems seek to express meaning and the diverse demands they place upon their readers.

Such a discussion can benefit from a reconsideration of genre as a concept. Many students think of genre in terms of mere categorization, so it can be productive to redefine it as the epistemological orientation of a text. I like to begin such conversations with Rosalie Colie's assertion that genre-systems offer "a set of interpretations, of 'frames' or 'fixes' on the world" (Colie 8). When we make a claim about a text's genre, we are identifying the kinds of questions it is asking and how it is articulating those questions. As a poem that is thinking about distinct kinds of poetry, *Delia* 46 can help students focus on the nature of generic difference, and on the instability that lies therein. The sonnet works well when connected with moments in *The Faerie Queene* in which Spenser explores his larger poetic design, like the *Letter to Raleigh* and the proem to Book 1. Moreover, the depiction of Busirane as a sadistic sonneteer, in Cantos 11 and 12 of Book 3, also provides a provocative foil to the speaker in *Delia* and the other lyric voices of the sonnet tradition. Further discussion might even compare Daniel's sonnet with Spenser's own approach to the genre in the *Amoretti*. These connections allow

students to explore differing conceptualizations of the same genres, helping them trace out the shape of these forms, even as they come to understand the unstable nature of generic conditions.

Focusing on the generic inclinations of these texts, we can see that both Spenser's romantic epic and the sonnet form seek to "frame" the idea of time. This thematic concern can be felt in the reading process itself. These kinds of poetry offer distinct temporal experiences, even where they employ similar poetic structures. For instance, a sonnet sequence, like *The Faerie Queene*, makes use of stanzaic form. Named after the Italian term for "little room," a stanza, as the spatial metaphor suggests, organizes verse into smaller units of poetic meaning. These segments of poetry are put to decidedly different use. The 14 lines of the standard sonnet constitute a lyric vignette, a quick snippet of poetic voice, which can be approached on its own or within the larger sweep of the sequence. The seeming self-containment of a sonnet invites serendipitous access; sonnets lend themselves to decontextualization, while still leaving open the possibility for links from sonnet to sonnet. The Spenserian stanza of *The Faerie Queene*, on the other hand, is a 9-line unit of narrative, which measures out the intricately plotted superstructure of the epic piece by piece. As Theresa Krier argues, *The Faerie Queene* compels us to "understand significance by taking in the sequence of the story and by familiarity with the genre's conventions—processes that take time" (Krier 81). The stanzas of *The Faerie Queene* require a commitment of time. They contribute to the

deliberate plod through canto after canto, forcing readers to contend with the linguistic and narrative challenges of the poem and, thereby, to reflect upon its developing allegorical implications. Students, all too often, are allured by the brevity and portability of the sonnet, while they remain intimidated and vexed by the labyrinthine sprawl of Spenser's unfinished epic. These reading processes are conditioned in part by distinct experiences of time.

Capitalizing upon these formal orientations toward time, *Delia* 46 confronts time thematically as a problem to be surmounted. To accomplish this feat, Daniel's sonnet takes ownership of love as its exclusive subject matter, denying the Spenserian epic's generic claims to it. The poem distinguishes its own use of amorous expression as a means to challenge the condition of mutability by casting *The Faerie Queene* as an escapist retreat into time. Spenser's romantic epic relates a chivalric past, a fabled history of Faerieland that is allegorically bound up with the history of the English nation, a history in need of recovery. Contrarily, Daniel's speaker proclaims his interest in something other than "knights and paladins." He suggests that Spenser's poem is chiefly concerned with the antique deeds of men of arms, violent action unconnected with the subtle affections of love. Yet, Daniel's opening line directly alters the claim that Spenser's epic makes in the proem to Book 1, where the speaker asserts that his task is to "sing of knights and ladies gentle deeds" (Spenser 1.proem.1). Omitting the reference to noblewomen, the sonnet erases the role that ladies play in the poem, ignoring the

amorous adventures of romance and reducing *The Faerie Queene* to an epic more invested in “fierce wars” than “faithful loves” (Spenser 1.proem.1). Without the love affairs of a fanciful past, Spenser’s poem would lose its instrument for representing the fleetingness and fidelity that marks the poetic consideration of time’s passage. Daniel’s sonnet claims the matters of love for itself, transporting passionate desire to the lyric present and leaving the clash of rusty arms to the bygone days of *The Faerie Queene*.

As Daniel’s sonnet seizes the expression of love as an authenticating gesture that works in opposition to the passage of time, Spenser’s epic actively delves into the abyss of antiquity both in its characteristic style and its allegorical mode. Daniel’s sonnet directly takes aim at these features of Spenser’s poetics. He rejects that most conspicuous affectation of the ancients, Spenser’s archaic diction, setting aside “aged accents” and “untimely words” as a kind of language unsuited to the task of a sonneteer. The sonnet articulates a similar attitude toward the allegorical mode of *The Faerie Queene*, leaving it to other poets to “Paint shadows in imaginary lines / Which well the reach of their high wits records.” He faintly praises how effectively this unnamed cohort of Spenserian poets has depicted the shadows of allegory, casting their representational strategy as a process of historiographical recording. Theirs is a history, not of things that happened, but of fantastical darkness. Daniel’s sonnet suggests the dubiousness of this poetic genre, claiming meaningful expression for itself. Though Spenser indeed identifies himself as a “Poet historical,” the allegory of *The Faerie*

Queene takes history not as its object but as its tool (Spenser 716). The archaic diction, the fabled past, even the representations of England's own history, these are further dimensions of Spenser's complex poetic instrument as he seeks, in his words, "to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline" (Spenser 715). Daniel's uncharitable treatment of *The Faerie Queene* misconstrues the function of poetry to be, in all cases, one of revelation. Indeed, the sonnet's critique of Spenser's epic is the premise from which it aims to unveil its meaning through a poetics of authentic expression. However, *The Faerie Queene* is a poem that expresses through concealment. Spenser defines allegory as a "darke conceit," conveying "good discipline" in a form that is "cloudily enwrapped in Allegoricall deuises" (Spenser 714, 716). He cultivates the darkness of history and of allegory to immerse his readers in the shadowy layers of poetic meaning wherein they can strive for understanding. Time is a virtue in this process, for Spenser and his readers alike.

In Daniel's sonnet, though, time is the enemy. His speaker's professed duty is "to speak of thee," to represent his beloved Delia in the face of the temporal force that afflicts all things. She is the inaccessible and abstract woman, a familiar device of the Petrarchan tradition, and he is the unworthy poet whose lines promise to preserve her. The speaker articulates this function of his poetry, asserting that "those faire eyes / Authentic shall my verse in time to come." He uses "Authentic" as a verbal action to convey the memorializing effect of his art. Resisting the mutability of the present, the

sonnet's speaker nonetheless speaks to the future, to a "time to come" when a readership of "th' unborn" will hear his verse and respond to it. He insists that his lines will serve as "arks" or "trophies," monuments to "fortify thy name against old age." Yet, this eternizing conceit serves the artist more than the object of his art. Arthur Marotti argues that the sonnet form metaphorically transforms "self-esteem and ambition into love" (398). When the speaker imagines his audience in the after ages reflecting on "where she lies," they are only able to identify Delia as she "Whose beauty made him speak that else was dumb." The sonnet dramatizes the speaker's own willful act of expression, the process of overcoming silence through the labor of utterance. Even as he expounds upon his poetry as a means of immortalizing Delia, the closing couplet of the sonnet turns back to himself. While he concedes that his lines may expose his youthful indiscretions, "Suffice they show I lived and was thy lover." The authenticity of Daniel's verse vindicates his speaker's own self-assertion. Under threat of erasure, it is the act of volition that Daniel's sonnet works to "protect / Against the dark and time's consuming rage." Where the concealment of history and allegory serve Spenser's poetic ends, Daniel's sonnet seeks to rescue his own art from the darkness of time's passage.

Rejecting the poetic strategies of *The Faerie Queene*, sonnet 46 of Samuel Daniel's *Delia* forces readers to confront the diverse methods and effects of poetic representation. It traces out the blurry boundaries between poetic genres, allowing students to explore

a wide variety of critical questions, some that I have gestured at already: How do the structural features of a poem affect the meanings that it expresses? How does genre play a part in the process of interpretation? How do we approach the mixture of poetic genres in an individual text? What role does gender play in poetic genre? What is the relationship between love and violence and how do they impact different forms of poetry? What are the features of “authentic” expression? What are its virtues or its limitations? What is the relationship between poetry and history or memory? How does time affect interpretation and how does poetry attempt to manage time? These are the kinds of questions that a survey course lends itself to, especially when *The Faerie Queene* or the sonnet are under consideration. *Delia* 46 makes these questions all the more pressing.

Endnotes

[1] The ninth edition of the Norton contains sonnets 9, 32, and 33 of *Delia*.

[2] Sonnets 6, 28, and 33 of *Delia* appear in the second edition of *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature*, p. 126. Daniel’s work does not appear in the fourth edition of *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*.

[3] William Kerrigan has suggested that Daniel’s publication of *Delia* with “The Complaint of Rosamond” pioneered an intertextual poetic structure—the so-called “Delian structure”—whereby a sonnet sequence is followed by a poem that comments upon the themes developed in the earlier lyrics. Joseph Kau argues that Daniel was the first to offer a significant treatment of the immortalizing effect of poetry in a sonnet.

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