

## **Excess and Defect: Spenser and Medieval Cosmology in *A Thousand Acres***

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Most of the critical attention given to Jane Smiley's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *A Thousand Acres* has been devoted to tracing the obvious parallels with and the more subtle deviations from its Shakespearean paradigm. Scholars agree that Smiley's novel is an effort to develop the point-of-view of King Lear's two wayward daughters--Goneril and Regan. Within the canon of Shakespearean characters, Lear's oldest daughters are among the most two dimensional, the author clearly settling for virtual abstractions of unredeemed wickedness, ambition, and disobedience, which is a problem when one considers the weight of responsibility placed on them for the subsequent tragedy (Keppel 105). Thus, when Jane Smiley began *A Thousand Acres*, she may have looked away from the Shakespearean text for details with which to develop her principal characters--Ginny and Rose.

This paper will trace the influence of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene, Book II: The Legend of Temperance* on the character development in *A Thousand Acres*. Although *Book II, Canto x* contains a brief account of King Lear and his daughters, the preponderance of relevant material will be drawn from the story of Medina's Castle in *Canto ii*, where Medma (the mean) and her two sisters Perissa (excess) and Elissa (defect) combat for a dwelling left to them by their father. The three allegorical qualities represented by the daughters are evocative of Ginny, Rose, and Caroline in Smiley's novel. The constant combat between Perissa and Elissa and their mutual hostility toward Medina is illustrated in Smiley's novel with the ill-will created by the inheritance, the lawsuit, and the romantic rivalry over Jess. However, as with her Shakespearean appropriations, Smiley is not a slave to the precedent text. She makes deliberate and meaningful alterations in her Spenserian acquisitions for the benefit of her narrative. There is no exact

correspondence between characters in *The Legend of the Temperance* and *A Thousand Acres*. Instead, Smiley has appropriated structuring devices for characterization and setting and has borrowed personality traits for the development of her Iowa farmers.

The episode of Medina's Castle in the second book of *The Faerie Queene* constitutes the initial opportunity for Guyon, the knight of temperance, to defame his nature through opposition. In Spenser's epic, "temperance" is the balancing and moderating of oppositions, the synthesizing of the thesis and the antithesis. This dialectical structure is what Guyon encounters when he visits Medina's castle. The three sisters are the daughters of one man and three separate mothers. The dwelling has been left to them upon their father's death. However, their natures are so contrary that they cannot peacefully abide within a single residence. The eldest and youngest sisters, Elissa and Perissa, are constantly at war with each other, pausing in their struggle only to contend with the middle child Medina.

Elissa, whose name means "defect" and who signifies moral deficiency or inadequacy, is the traditional melancholic who does not partake of merriment or any "base entertainment." She is perpetually discontent, frowning upon, threatening, and scolding her suitor Huddibras, who is her fit companion. Huddibras, whose name means "foolhardiness," is a "malcontent," a conservative temperament tormented by the immodesty and excess of others, particularly of Perissa and her paramour Sans-Loy. Perissa represents the excessive indulgence in worldly pleasures. She is immodest in her attire, in her consumption of food and drink, and particularly in her amorous pursuits. Perissa's lover is "lawlessness"--Sans-Loy, who encourages in her looseness and who is himself inclined toward immodesty. Medina is the mean between the two extreme temperaments of her sisters, remaining "sober," gracious, and moderate. The latter sister has no lover but is

championed appropriately by Guyon when he visits the castle (*II.ii.* 35-37).

The above abbreviated description of the second canto of *Book II* reveals some obvious parallels to the structure and content of Smiley's novel. First, the personality traits of the central characters can be detected in the qualities of Smiley's Cook family; second, the matching of sister with a spouse who mirrors and facilitates her nature is also one of Smiley's techniques; and third, the dialectical structure of the morality play, of the "psychomachia," organizes both poem and novel.

Ginny Cook, from whose point-of-view the novel is narrated, reveals qualities indicative of Spenser's Elissa. While Ginny can hardly be characterized a melancholiac, there is a reserve and sobriety about her that sets her apart from her sisters. She, by her nature, remains unruffled in the face of difficulties, slow to anger, and genuinely understanding of others' point-of-view. When her father divides his farm and begins behaving erratically, she refuses to become alarmed, offering explanations for his behavior that are indulgent and dismissive. When Caroline expresses alarm at her father's unexpected visit to the city, Ginny explains that he is a "grown man with a driver's license." The same even temper is revealed in her relationship with her husband. She and Ty always had the ability to disagree without fighting. Even in the moments preceding their separation, they were calmly discussing their future.

Her brief affair with Jess eliminates any association between Ginny and Elissa's prudishness and disdain for pleasure, although she does admit that she has never slept with any man besides Ty and Jess, which by contemporary standards may constitute restraint. Instead of a contempt for sexual pleasure, Ginny's defect is far more subtle. Her life is characterized by absence and emptiness, particularly an absence of passion. The narrative can even be understood as Ginny's progressive irritation and hardening. At the beginning of the novel, she seems virtually incapable of anger. The first time

that she speaks harshly to her father, she admits to feeling exhilarated. The most dramatic manifestation of this apathy is revealed in her method of coping with her molestation by her father. She has repressed the painful childhood memory, and even when reminded of the incident by her sister, she is initially incredulous. Ginny's defect of passion has its symbolic manifestation in her inability to carry a pregnancy to term. Her spartan lifestyle following her move to Des Moines aligns her more clearly with Elissa's defects. She rents a small apartment, works as a waitress and even swears off the company of men:

Solitude is part of my inheritance, too. Men are friendly to me at the restaurant, and sometimes they ask me to a movie.... The men who ask me out are simple and strange, defeated by their own solitude. It is easier, and more seductive, to leave those doors closed. (369)

Ginny is aptly matched with Ty who is equally passionless. Like Spenser's Huddibras, Ty is reproachful of any show of excess. He disapproves when Ginny chastises her father for driving drunk and wrecking his truck. Ty explains that the way to handle Larry is "to sort of hunker down and let it blow over. In one ear and out the other" (143). In his view, the daughters should not "take issue with their father," but should "let a lot of things slide" (104). He quietly acquiesces when Larry calls Ginny a "barren whore" (181), and then patiently searches for the old man when he wanders off into the storm. When Ginny faces her ex-husband at the conclusion of the novel, she asks if he knew what Larry would say to her in the midst of the storm and if he silently agreed. The question, in effect, explores whether Ty knew about her affair with Jess. Ty hints at some knowledge of her transgression when he tells her, "I think you've shown off plenty this summer, frankly" (329). Whereas one cannot blame an individual for objecting to her spouse's infidelity, Ty's response seems to have less to do with jealousy than with a natural distaste for

extravagance. After all, the remark is ostensibly a response to Ginny's suggestion that they occupy a house too large for them. When the estranged couple face off at the conclusion of the novel, Ty admits that he "hated all that mess" (341), and he repudiates Rose for her new affluence and arrogance. In his opinion, she is going "around like some queen" (340). His formal repudiation of passion and excess is revealed in his dubious response to the incest and molestation story. Rather than expressing outrage, he prefers to keep "private things private" (340). Ty's foolhardiness is evident in his decision to side with the plaintiffs in the Larry and Caroline's lawsuit to win back the farm. The decision was illogical, particularly since the suit was financially detrimental to the farm that he professed to defend.

The placidity and simplemindedness of Ty and Ginny is foiled by the complexity of Rose and her husband Pete, who share a volatile relationship characterized by an "excess." Ginny describes them as "generally more stirred up and dissatisfied" (12). Like Spenser's Perissa who is unchecked in her extravagance, Rose is unyielding in her resentment and irritation, and she is self-assured in her judgement (unlike Ginny who is tortured by doubt). Following the storm incident, Rose complains that Ginny is too slow to judge, adding "you sound so mild. Aren't you furious?" (187). Ginny, on the other hand, is in awe of her sister's resolution; even in monopoly, Rose plays without "fear or caution" (140-41). The novel is very clear that Rose's obstinate anger stems from her molestation by her father. Unlike Ginny whose efforts to cope with the experience involved sublimation of her injuries, Rose is obsessed with the violation, vowing to be angry until she dies (354). She is proud that she never forgave her father and considers that resolution her only accomplishment in life:

So all I have is the knowledge that I saw! That I saw without being afraid and without turning away, and that I didn't forgive the unforgivable. (155-56).

Rose's obstinance is realized in her ability to seize what she wants without fear of harming others. Her mother once remarked that Rose was the "most jealous child she ever knew" (303). Rose embarks on an affair with Jess, knowing that her sister is already involved with him. She even informs Ginny of the relationship without apology or guilt. Pete's death is a consequence of her having told him about the affair: his response was to get drunk and drive his truck into a ditch. Following the resolution of the lawsuit, Rose is still so angry at Larry that she gloats loudly in the hallway despite the fact that the man is deranged and incapable of understanding his predicament.

Rose conforms to Perissa's excess in more rigorous ways. Perissa's luxury is realized in Rose's demeanor. Following Ginny's departure for the city, Ty reports that Rose moved into the big house, the same that was too large for Ty and his wife, and adds, she thinks "she's going to be a land baroness" (341). The association of Rose with fertility further reinforces the resemblance, since Perissa's excesses include carnality. Rose's fecundity, represented by her children, is set off against Ginny's barrenness and is the source of tension between the sisters, just as Elissa's sexual reservations are differentiated from Perissa's liberality. Rose's unrepentant carnality may also be manifest in her admission that she was not raped by her father, but seduced, that she was flattered by his attention and surrendered to his advances willingly.

Pete is the appropriate spouse for Rose since he shares many of the same qualities. He is an easy analogue to lawlessness. Spenser describes San-by as

The most unruly, and the boldest boy, That ever  
warlike weapons managed, And to all lawless  
lust encouraged. (ll.ii. 18)

Although he is the most irascible character in the novel, Pete can, nevertheless, be very charming and entertaining. His face is a constant presence in the novel, and much of his anger is directed at his father-in-law

whom he blames for virtually every problem in his marriage. He had periodically beaten his wife until he accidentally broke her arm, at which time he ceased his abuse of her and directed his anger at Larry. When Rose told him of her molestation at her father's hands, Pete vowed to kill Larry, a vow that was merely bravado, but when she informs him of her affair with Jess, he uses a gun to terrorize the Clarke household where Larry is staying. Once again, his fury is mostly bluster; he leaves when the blinded Harold Clarke identifies him by name and threatens to call the police. Pete is capable of actual violence against people besides his wife, however. He is responsible for the farm accident that results in Harold Clarke's blindness. He loosens the hose on the fertilizer and empties the water container so that when Harold is sprayed in the face with toxic chemicals, there is no water to flush the poison from his eyes. Even Pete's own death may be self-inflicted violence. The novel leaves open the possibility that he drove into the ditch intentionally, but, regardless, he is certainly recklessly driving while intoxicated. The same boyish wantonness and abandon that composes Pete's negative qualities, also contributes to his more charming traits. A former rock musician, he entertains the others with stories of his satimialian escapades on the road, telling with pride how he was picked up by a hippie couple who made him high, tied him up, and then molested him. His narrative borders on insensitive toward his wife when he talks explicitly of oral sex; however, as we have seen, Rose can be equally insensitive. Pete's volatile temperament contrasts sharply with Ty's quiet sobriety. Pete is dangerous, irrational, and exciting, while Ty is safe, reasonable, and dull.

The Medieval/Renaissance appreciation of the mean between extremes does not find a place in *A Thousand Acres*. While Caroline does share personality traits with both her sisters, her middle place is not idealized by the author. The text suggests that her moderation results from an ignorance of the circumstances of Rose and Ginny's adolescence--namely the incestuous molestation.

Like Rose, Caroline is fearless, confident and angry, yet like Ginny she is reserved. Both of the older sisters marvel at her ability to stand up to their father without fear (125), and yet they also observe how patient and solicitous she can be when she is caring for him. Caroline's attitude toward Larry has always been a "strange alternation between loyalty and scheming" (117). Her moderation is governed by a rationality that results from her training as a lawyer. She looks "for the rights and wrongs of every argument" (33). When Caroline angers Larry for balking at his offer of the farm, Ginny summarizes her behavior, stating that she had "spoken as a lawyer when she should have spoken as a daughter" (21). Her natural reticence identifies her with moderation and separates her from her sisters. Spenser's Medina governs and moderates the excess of her sisters:

Between them both the faire Medina sate  
 With sober grace, and goodly carriage:  
 With equal measures she did moderate  
 The strong extremities of their outrage;  
 That forward paire she ever would assuage,  
 When they would strive dew reason to exceed;  
 But that same froward twaine would accourage,  
 And of her plenty adde unto their need:  
 So kept she them in order, and her selfe in need.  
 (II.ii.38)

Like Medina, Caroline's behavior frequently balances and counters that of her sisters:

She just can't stand to be one of us, that's the key. Haven't you ever noticed? When we go along, she balks. When we resist, she's sweet as pie (60).

The animosity between Perissa and Elissa is only assuaged when they pause to gang up on Medina; similarly, prior to the court date, Ginny and Rose have already turned on each other. Rose has betrayed Ginny with Jess, and Ginny has nurtured a plot to kill Rose, yet they are united briefly in their opposition to Caroline's lawsuit. The narrative suggests that Caroline's



moderation is the result of ignorance. Larry Cook's violation of his eldest daughters is not an event about which one can be reasonable and non-committal. The youngest daughter can only support her father while completely ignorant of his past. When Ginny and Caroline meet at the dissolution of the farm, Caroline fights to maintain her naive view of Cook family relations:

You're going to tell me something terrible about Daddy, or Mommy, or Grandpa Cook or somebody. You're going to wreck my childhood for me. I can see it in your face. You're dying to do it, just like Rose was. She used to call me, but I wouldn't talk to her! (362)

Curiously, Caroline senses that there is some terrible secret in her family's past, but unlike Rose who saw and did not turn away and Ginny who relegated the memory to the unconscious, Caroline willfully chooses not to examine the past in order to preserve her own balance.

Jess Clarke's sexual exploits with both of the elder Cook sisters might at first seem to eliminate him as any representation of Guyon's temperance, and yet he is in many ways associated with moderation. He balances the extremities of Pete and Ty, thus creating an idealized romantic object that rehabilitates Cook sisters' dissatisfaction with their husbands. Jess demonstrates Pete's fury by his willingness to defend the Cook sisters against Harold's insults. However, like Ty, he seems to be even-tempered, slow to anger and frustration most of the time. Jess shares Pete's proneness to sexual exploration, yet like Ty, he treats women with courtesy and deference. Jess' temperance is more easily observed in his lifestyle. He refused to fight in the Vietnam War, a resolution for which his father never forgave him. He has a commitment to organic farming because he objects to the reckless use of pesticides, which he believes are poisoning the population. Moreover, he never drinks and is a vegetarian because he does not like the way meat is produced in this country. He has studied Buddhism, and while he knows that he cannot achieve the Eastern

serenity through simple living, he can, nevertheless, strive for “inner peace” (37). Like Guyon, who seeks to impose his own moderation on others, Jess’ philosophy influences those around him. He boasts that he has almost talked Harold into farming organically. He has convinced Ginny that she must stop drying up the well water if she ever wants to have a child, and he transforms Rose and her children into vegetarians. Rose, however, tries to break her sister’s continued fascination with Jess at the end of the novel by telling her that his rituals and ideas became tedious very quickly:

There were all these routines. No more than three eggs a week, always poached and served on browned but never burned wheat toast. Steel-cut oatmeal from some organic store in San Francisco. Ginseng tea three times a day. Meditation at sunrise. (351)

Perhaps her most complete repudiation of Jess’ lifestyle is her instructions that Ginny should make fried chicken for the children when she gets home. Reinforcing the comparison between the men in the novel, Rose counters Ginny’s assertion that he was a “kind man” by stating, “Ty was a kinder. You couldn’t stand that” (351). The assertion that Jess was kind would certainly set him apart from Pete who beat his wife and, after her radical mastectomy, would not allow her to go shirtless in his presence.

The dialectical structure of the characterizations within the novel is reminiscent of the Morality play with its dramatization of antithetical influences on a central figure. Most prominent is the opposing perspectives on Larry Cook’s behavior offered by his two eldest daughters, one who gluts herself on anger and resentment over her father’s abuse and the other who has repressed the memory and strives for understanding and reconciliation. Early in the novel, Rose and Ginny could be characterized respectively as punishment and compassion, as hatred and love. Curiously, neither hatred nor love win out at the conclusion of the narrative: Rose vows to be angry

until she dies, but she never makes her father acknowledge his crimes nor convinces those who respect him that he is a child molester, and Ginny reflects upon the failure of her love --“My love, which I always had believed could transcend the physical, had failed too...” (307) -- but she is equally incapable of remaining angry at those who have injured her. The same dialectic is mirrored in the husbands’ attitudes toward their father-in-law. Pete knows of the abuse and wants to kill Larry, while Ty is ignorant of the family’s past and is incredulous after he is informed. Just as the morality play is concerned with the salvation of the central figure (i.e. Everyman or Mankind), *A Thousand Acres* addresses the judgement of Larry Cook by his daughters. However, the father who had committed an unforgivable crime against his two eldest daughters escapes even from the knowledge of judgment by lapsing in to madness. Not only is he never able to recognize the injuries he inflicted upon his daughters, he believes that Caroline is Rose and that they still love each other.

In her address to the 1992 National Book Critics Circle, Smiley indicated that the true subject of *A Thousand Acres* is the indictment of the farming practices adopted by the Cook family and their neighbors, which, in her view, are “leading us toward environmental disaster” (Bakerman 129). These methods include the use of pesticides and other toxic chemicals to increase production of the crop. While the farm should be a representation of nature and health, it is instead a toxic wasteland that destroys those who work it. This imagery is common to the medieval morality tradition, where the world is portrayed as a wasteland filled with temptations, a place where virtues and vices war for the soul of humanity. This motif is particularly apparent in *The Castle of Perseverance*, where Humanum Genus, fortified inside a tower, is assaulted by the seven deadly sins. Spenser also appropriates this tradition in *Book II*, Cantos ix-xi, where the temperate human body is represented as a castle besieged by the sin and disease. In Spenser’s

narrative, the body's only defense against these destructive forces is temperance and grace, embodied in Guyon and Arthur's brief residence in the castle. Thus, it is luxury and over-indulgence that bring temptation and destruction. The use of noxious fertilizers and pesticides to increase the farm's output signifies the Cook family's ambition, and cancer, madness and barrenness are the price of their immodest ventures. Larry Cook's unprincipled pursuit of a thousand acres involved sacrifices exceeding the mere expenditure of time and energy. The family body is literally under assault by carcinogens. Thus the decay and destruction of the family can be traced directly to Larry's poisonous aspirations (Bakerman 135). The mother died young of breast cancer, probably resulting from exposure to pernicious chemicals, and her early death paved the way for Larry's sexual abuse of his own daughters. Rose too has been treated for breast cancer at the beginning of the novel and succumbs to it by the end. Her radical mastectomy has contributed to her alienation from her husband, the same that results in her affair with Jess Clark and estrangement from her sister. Ginny's barrenness is attributed to her drinking polluted well water, and disappointment over her multiple miscarriages probably drives her too into the arms of Jess and concludes with her own separation and divorce. Larry's madness may be the consequence of his own exposure to chemicals, and his ill-advised plan to divide his farm is attributed to the same mental decay that is accelerated once he retires. Ginny fears that the poisons have even infiltrated the Cooks' DNA (369). The poison earth motif is extended to include the entire community. Ginny remarks that there is not a family in the area unaffected by toxic chemicals, and Harold's blinding by the virulent fertilizer Anhydrous Ammonia is an appropriate example. The novel offers an alternative to the painful farming practices. Jess Clark's organic farming points the way out of the chemical wasteland, but it is also inefficient and impractical, contributing to the farm's insolvency.

Moreover, Jess himself does not have the resolution to see the project through. He abandons Rose and her children when he perceives impending domestic conflict.

The geocentric world view popularly associated with the Middle Ages and the Early Modern era is represented in Smiley's novel. Ginny remembers her childhood perceptions of the farm:

From that bump, the earth was unquestionably flat, the sky unquestionably domed, and it seemed to me when I was a child in school, learning about Columbus, that in spite of what my teacher said, ancient cultures might have been on to something. No globe or map fully convinced me that Zebulon County was not the center of the universe. (3)

The centrality of Zebulon County in the childhood impression of the universe is related to the monarchical structure of farm and family. Indeed, Zebulon County resembles feudalism with Larry Cook as principal ruler. He attained his thousand acres through hostile appropriations of his neighbors' farms. Moreover, Ginny observes the fealty of the local farmers who will not attempt any new agricultural techniques without first consulting Larry. The fate of the farm at the conclusion of the novel resembles the decline of monarchy and the rise of the nation state in the early modern period: the farm is swallowed up and the buildings bulldozed by the gigantic Heartland Corporation.

The monarchical trope is extended into the interaction of the characters. The father's kingly stature in the children's perceptions contributes to the family's tragedy. Ginny regrets that her mother died before she implanted in her children a sense of their father's failing, before she had humanized him sufficiently in the children's eyes that they could understand him, and indeed a great deal of the narrative is consumed by their efforts to decipher their erratic father's behavior. Even after the family's dissolution is complete, Ginny still

cannot adequately account her father: "Daddy, who is what he is and cannot be labeled" (369).

Smiley's appropriation of the Early Modern and Medieval philosophical and aesthetic traditions, nevertheless, produces some very contemporary conclusions. Smiley identifies the origin of *A Thousand Acres* as her response to Akira Kurosawa's *Ran*, a transformation of the Shakespearean narrative into a Medieval Japanese epic. Smiley was particularly moved by the suggestion that Kurosawa's Hidetora made his children what they are (Bakerman 133). From here, she extrapolated the story of abuse that redirects the audiences' sympathy from Lear to his daughters. The narrative signals the shift from a world view that regarded the father as the center of domestic authority to the post-Freudian milieu in which the parent is the origin of all the child's psycho-pathologies. The presence of Medieval and Early Modern motifs within the text acts as a foil for the expression of contemporary values. Larry, unlike Mankind of the Morality tradition, cannot obtain grace or even knowledge of his crimes. Sexual restraint and fidelity are not necessarily the principal virtues by which a person's character or even her moderation is assessed, and the mean between two extremes is not always the desirable position. Moderation can sometimes resemble a failure of will and commitment, and compassion can entice one to condone or forget the unforgivable.

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