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With Passion’s Triumph over Reason, Christopher Tilmouth has written one of the more engaging Early Modern studies in recent memory. In an impressive display of erudition combined with incisive and often savvy readings of a number of literary and philosophical texts, Tilmouth sets out to trace the “history of the moral imagination” from about 1580 to 1680. He casts his net very broadly in his often very persuasive explanations of how Classical and Christian traditions together with the exigencies of the historical moment produced a variety of responses to what many writers (especially at the beginning of the time span under investigation) saw as the “problem” of human passions. In Tilmouth’s own helpful summary, “This is a book about governance and the passions, a history of philosophical, theological, and above all literary constructions of the idea of self-control (and indeed self-indulgence)” (1).

While a number of philosophers and religious writers play an important part, of the classical writers pride of place is given to Aristotle (often as transmitted by Aquinas), Augustine, and (in the second half) the Epicureans, while the early moderns are chiefly represented by Calvin, Montaigne and in particular Hobbes. The study is divided into two main parts, where the first, entitled “Governance and the Passions,” is
centered on the Aristotelian and Augustinian traditions and has Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare and John Milton as its literary focus, while the second, “The Rise and Fall of Libertinism,” begins with Thomas Hobbes, proceeds to the Restoration period and concludes with a lengthy discussion that centers on the writings (and life) of John Wilmot, the 2nd Earl of Rochester. Arguably there is an additional division within the first part, where Spenser in particular comes to represent “an austerely rationalist model of self-governance” (1) based on Socratic and Stoic sources, a model that envisions “a psychomachic [i.e., confrontational and combative] view of the mind, and a dismissive view of the passions and the body” (15), while Shakespeare and some Jacobean are seen to question the preeminence of reason and Herbert, Milton, and others to tap into Aristotelian and Augustinian traditions to contest or modify the Spenserian psychomachic model by assigning a more positive role for the passions. Indeed, throughout the rest of the study (e.g. on pages 76, 82, 99, 108, 115, 150, 197, 209, 236, 267, 322 and 348) Spenser serves as a whipping-boy to which later developments are contrasted, developments that Tilmouth clearly believes, in their different ways, contribute to “the story of passion's triumph over reason” (156).

This over-arching story line (together with a need to end with Rochester, whom Tilmouth obviously regards as a very important player) I suppose is the reason behind what might
otherwise be considered a somewhat arbitrary time-frame for the study, 1580 to 1680. There seems to be an unspoken assumption that something significant is occurring during this particular period that will help explain how “we,” as against those of the pre-modern ages, come to perceive the relationship between reason and the passions, what Tilmouth terms a “more lasting ideal of governance” (378). However, both the pre-1580 world and the ages thereafter are far from uniform in their views on these matters, and thus hard to reduce to simple “stories,” and if there are significant turning points, did not the most significant one come later? While the final Coda draws some thematic lines into the early 18th Century, the study conspicuously avoids mentioning the further developments, in particular the epistemological break that takes place as the Age of Reason gives way to the Romantic Age, an era defined by its new understanding of the human emotions, and one which perhaps more correctly than the earlier period can be labeled “passion’s triumph over reason.”

One of the many strengths of Tilmouth’s study is how, in the analysis of individual writers, he is able to show the complexity of what he calls the “two-way or circular exchange” (11) between philosophical and religious thinkers on the one hand and the literary authors who transformed and transmuted these traditions in the crucible of art on the other. There is rarely a single thread connecting two writers, but rather a web of interactive influences, a web that is also shaped by
the historical and cultural circumstances under which the writings are produced, such as the supercharged decades following the 1660 Restoration of the monarchy. This, however, also means that while the title of Tilmouth’s book may give the appearance of providing a linear progression of the development of the subject under study, its detailed analyses actually show that what are often contradictory influences cut across decades, centuries and, indeed, millennia, so that while there might be a macro-movement towards a greater acknowledgement of the value of human passions, on the micro-level there is often as much discontinuity and even retrogression as there is progression. And that is without factoring in the related question of Tilmouth’s choice of authors and issues: for example, if the backlash against the perceived excesses unleashed by the Civil War and the ensuing lapse of censorship had been included, a backlash that throughout the Age of Reason negatively contrasted affective terms such as “enthusiasm” with “reason” and “common sense,” a somewhat different, and less “triumphant” story could have been told. While anticipated by John Dryden and other Restoration writers, it was Jonathan Swift who by creating the figure of “Jack” most memorably castigated the “enthusiast” whose voice had been heard in many of the religious and political pamphlets (often with an eschatological and utopian slant) that had been published in the two decades from 1641 to 1660: "But when a man's fancy gets astride on his reason, when
imagination is at cuffs with the senses, and common understanding, as well as common sense, is kicked out of doors, the first proselyte he makes is himself” (“A Digression concerning Madness,” in The Tale of the Tub [Gulliver’s Travels and Other Writings, ed. Louis A. Landa, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960] 331). It becomes somewhat ironic when we are warned against “trying to impose too linear a structure” on Rochester’s career (372): Tilmouth would have been wise if he had, to a greater extent, applied the same strictures to his own thesis.

This is the one major complaint I have about the study. While the close readings of individual works are almost always enlightening, and sometimes brilliant, the frame “story” forced upon the material can sometimes lead to summary pronouncements that seem strained or in a few cases outright wrong. This is more of a problem during the first half of the study, for as he approaches the Restoration Tilmouth comes into his own. I thoroughly enjoyed, and learned a vast amount from, his perceptive discussions of Milton and Rochester in particular. This might simply be a result of Tilmouth knowing the nuts and bolts of that period better than some of the earlier ones (it is also towards the end of the study that the historical context is used most expertly), yet I also think his use of Spenser stems from the structural needs of his thesis. The setup of the study demanded that a major author play the role of the “rational” and “psychomachic” writer, and
Spenser is assigned the part even though he does not really fit the bill. He was a very complex writer not easily pinned down to a single creed, and I for one cannot agree with blanket statements such as Tilmouth’s claim that he had “a dismissive view of the passions and the body” (15). Such a statement must ignore, among other passages, the extremely physical description of the Garden of Adonis in The Faerie Queene 3.6.30-52, a location significantly referred to in FQ 2.10.71 right before the destruction of its antithesis, The Bower of Bliss, a passage that plays a central role in Tilmouth’s reading of Spenser’s attitudes to the body and the passions. We still need to heed C. S. Lewis’s warning in The Allegory of Love not to do offense to the poem by committing “a blasphemy against Life and fertility” ([Oxford: OUP, 1977], 316).

Another central tenet of Tilmouth’s that I believe is equally doubtful is that “the rule of reason per se, of Spenser’s psychomachic mission, is never challenged in” The Faerie Queene (73), or that Spenser provides “primarily a humanist and rationalist vision of self-governance” (72). To give just one example, when Tilmouth describes Red Crosse’s fight with Sansfoy in Book One of The Faerie Queene, I take his own words as a tacit acknowledgment that Spenser does question the psychomachic ideal: “Red Crosse is the cause of this very encounter, having created the Sansfoy—the faithlessness—within himself which he now meets” (39). The
jousting of a self-governed hero that should be the hallmark of the psychomachic model is here replaced by a hero torn asunder by a “fractured self” (again, Tilmouth’s own words on page 39). This is far from the “rational autonomy—the proposition that the agent has the capacity to govern himself unaided” (72) that Tilmouth sees as the defining mark of Spenser’s poem (even if he acknowledges that it might not be completely applicable to Book One).

What I want to suggest is that Spenser, rather than being a “rational” humanist, in fact fits equally well within a school of thought that Tilmouth gets to in a later section of his study (157-68): the Augustinian tradition that emphasizes the “Pauline spirit-flesh dichotomy” (157) of a torn self, a tradition also transmitted by reformers and humanists such as Luther, Melanchthon and Calvin, and therefore one to which Spenser certainly would have been exposed. It is not quite clear why Augustine is not introduced until after the sections on Spenser (and Shakespeare), but the Church Father is a good example of a writer whose writings were readily available throughout the time period covered by Tilmouth’s study. While this is never spelled out, one reason for the delayed introduction might be that the earliest English translations of those Augustinian works that Tilmouth cites (The Confessions and The City of God in particular) were published only in the Jacobean period, but that of course ignores the fact that a writer like Spenser could and did read
Augustine in Latin (on Spenser’s use of the Church Father, see, for example, W. J. Torrance Kirby’s entry on “Spenser” in the forthcoming Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine). A strong case could be made that Spenser as much as Herbert and Milton worked within an Augustinian understanding of the self, and of the passions.

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