“Out of Spenser and the Common Tongue”: James Reaney’s “A Suit of Nettles” (1958)

Germaine Warkentin

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James Reaney may be the best poet you never heard of. We all know enough about Milton, Stevens, and Merrill to engage in the conversation of this session, but apart from the Canadians here and a few Americans aware of my interest, I can guarantee that Reaney, who died in 2008, is a name unknown to you. In Canada I would not have to say this. Between 1950 and 1970 Reaney wrote prodigiously outside of the modernist framework then dominating Canadian poetry, and endured being unfashionable – too learned, too mythopoeic, too fixated on his home territory around London and Stratford Ontario. There was no cultural "Arcadianism" like that of the 1580s behind A Suit of Nettles. But Reaney was a playwright as well, busy developing a major career in the Canadian theatre, the masterpiece of which is his encyclopedic trilogy (1974-75) on the Black Donnellys, a legendary 19th century family who were at murderous odds with their Southern Ontario neighbours. It was the achievement of his plays that led more recent audiences back to the poems. I confess an interest – in 1972 I edited Reaney's poems in a volume that helped turn the tide. Reaney was an amazing man: the most learned Canadian poet before Anne Carson, a civic icon in and around London and Stratford, a deeply responsible member of the professoriate at the University of Western Ontario, and a licensed mischief.

All Reaney's characteristic features come together in the sequence of twelve poems known as A Suit of Nettles, which won the Governor-General's Award for Poetry in 1958, and in various editions has remained in print for at least half of the 52 years since its publication; it was recently re-issued. A Suit of Nettles is based on Spenser's Shepherd's Calendar, though with a difference: its twelve eclogues, a brilliant display of Reaney's virtuoso poetic technique, are set in an Ontario farmyard, and the figures who converse in its eclogues – Branwell, Dorcas, Mopsus, Effie and Fanny, Valancy, Scrutumnus – are all barnyard geese. What do they talk about? Love and its frustrations, poetic inspiration and the lack of it, pedagogy, literary criticism (Scrutumnus, not much disguised, is F.R. Leavis), Canadian history, and the turning year, which will bring most of them to the farmyard kitchen and the Christmas oven.
First, that virtuosity, in a brief rain of quotations:

_The ending of the invocation to the Muse of Satire:_

Here, lady, almost blind with seeing too much,  
Here is the land with spires and chimneys prickly ...  
Has no one seen the country where your cure has cursed?  
It is a land with upturned privies with occupants inside them  
Crawling out through new tops like astonished moths  
Bursting from their unusual, foul cocoons.

_The January eclogue introducing the geese:_

With the other geese within the goosehouse  
There lived, I know not how, various kinds  
Of geese: some like a cat, some like a mouse  
Some like a groundhog, and some like lions,  
And some like two straight parallel lines.

_The September eclogue when (hee! hee!) farmhouse boy and girl hastily marry:_

By parents strong pegged young Peter and Ann  
Were wedded in welter by waspish minister

_In the same eclogue, the drunken preacher's sermon on the Last Supper:_

What did those white souls eat while their Lord talked:  
I don't know, indeed I don't, maybe sandwiches.  
And He said haughtily head up to the twelve,  
“I'll ask you assafoetidae’ again I will,  
Isn't there one, one disciple with the spunk to betray me?”

And finally the opening lines of “February,” which I must quote entire to this group, for reasons which will be evident – one of the most beautiful things Reaney ever wrote:

The sun begets, the moon bears, tides away  
Rush into coastal caves: “Men do bear not”  
(_The Courtier_) “their children for a day,”  
But women longer, for a nine-moon trot;  
The young cub forms like a dim loose star-knot  
In the lioness as down the sun sets,  
Night wobbles in, and spirit goslings sought  
To dance this month through the small small eyelets
Of birth before birth, death before death pinned
Resolved & tight in each large goose egg's centre inned.

Which brings us of course to Spenser.

Reaney wrote *A Suit of Nettles* at breakneck speed in 1956-57 on sabbatical from the University of Manitoba. Bringing his wife Colleen Thibaudeau (also a fine poet) and two small boys to Toronto, he was desperately trying to take all his courses for the PhD, and write his thesis, and *write A Suit of Nettles* all in two packed years, and he did it – courses, thesis, and poem sequence. The thesis was supervised by Northrop Frye, and was called “The Influence of Spenser on Yeats.” Critics of *A Suit of Nettles* (including myself) have generally assigned its mythopoeic richness to the influence of Frye, who was just then publishing *Anatomy of Criticism*. Certainly Reaney’s writing at that point took a sharp turn away from the narcissistic minor “symbolisme” of his earliest book *The Red Heart* (1949) towards the encyclopedic power of all his later writing. He never ceased to honour Frye, but his own learning (he had begun as a classicist) gave him a very rich instrument on which to play that tune. And at the University of Toronto in the 1940s and 50s he was surrounded by distinguished Spenserians and Miltonists, Frye of course, but also people like ASP Woodhouse and Arthur Barker. Thinking about Spenser was one of the things Toronto did to you in those days.

And thus the thesis, which has much to say about Spenser, though oddly little on *The Shepherd’s Calendar*. In it Reaney argues that the early Yeats failed to understand Spenser; in the preface to his anthology of Spenser (1906) Yeats depicted Spenser as “torn between … the aestheticism of the Bower of Bliss and the morality of the Seven Deadly Sins.” But as Yeats developed, “he no longer regards [him] … as having an imperfect, divided genius but as a poet who has successfully fused the two worlds of aesthetics and morality into an imaginative synthesis.” Like Reaney himself five decades later, in his own poetry Yeats had “exhausted the possibilities of the ornamental and sensuous.” The catalyst for a solution was his friendship with Lady Gregory, who “gave his imagination its moral and practical turn.” Yeats’ very Spenserian “The Shepherd and the Goatherd” draws on the interplay between Spenser’s *Astrophel* and *The Doleful Lay of Clorinda* for a vision balancing the two opposing states of consciousness, and seeks equilibrium by as Yeats puts it, “measuring out the road that the soul treads / When it has vanished from our natural eyes.”

Reaney too seeks this equilibrium, as the fine reflection on mutability in his December eclogue, on your handout, shows. He does so by challenging us to bridge the seeming gap between the Spenserian model of the pastoral eclogue and the Ontario barnyard. He found his bridge in Yeats, who he writes “delighted in grotesque contrasts; the sharper and the more vinegary they are, the better they express his system. One thinks of the very filthy swineherd in ‘A Full Moon in March’ set over against the very haughty
Queen. But the comic, filthy swineherd is an extremely sacred person. I think that Yeats must have been attracted by the gaiety of the contrast.”

Reaney didn’t write a *Faerie Queene* to succeed his pastoral eclogues. Instead he wrote a major dramatic cycle, the trilogy of Donnelly plays, in which the encyclopedism Spenser empowered in him took a very different form. Once Reaney, using his thinking about Yeats’ relationship with Spenser, had worked out for himself a concept of equilibrium, he was free to employ virtually any genre to give it voice. Yeats gives him access to “the gaiety of the contrast,” and we get the puzzled Ontarians peeping out of their overturned privies. But Spenser gives him the structure, one so solid it could even provide him at the end of “December” with the ouroboros of the yellow-beaked Winnipeg streetcar, signalling the fuller meaning of his exile from the east. By 1960 he was home again in Ontario, himself a “poet’s poet,” energizing for the next forty years an entire poetic and theatrical community.

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**Endnotes**

1. *Asafoetida*: a herb that smells disgusting when raw but is not offensive when cooked.

2. Richard Stingle, to whom *A Suit of Nettles* is dedicated, confirms that Reaney had said nothing about plans for such a work before he left Winnipeg (R.M. Stingle, personal communication, 8 November 2010). Alvin Lee, the Beowulf scholar who was Reaney’s contemporary in graduate school and later wrote a book about him in the Twayne series, confirms that courses, exams, thesis, and suite of poems were all completed in a manic two years (Alvin Lee, personal communication, 20 November 2010).


4. Reaney actually says this with respect to Leicester’s influence on Sidney, as reflected in an image from *The Ruins of Time* of the unclean fox taking over the noble badger’s den that turns up a number of times in Yeats.


*The following pages were also included in Professor Warkentin’s presentation:*

James Reaney (1926–2008); the "December" eclogue, from *A Suit of Nettles* (1958)

Teachable moments from Reaney’s use of Spenser