

# STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURES

Edited by Koray Melikođlu

Paola Baseotto

**“Disdeining life, desiring leaue to die”**

Spenser and the Psychology of Despair

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For Roberto, my “sweetest sweet” (*Faerie Queene* 3.4.39.8)



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A great debt of gratitude is to my brother Franco.

## Note on texts

- Quotations from *The Faerie Queene* are from the 1977 edition by A. C. Hamilton. Longman Annotated English Poets. London and New York: Longman, 1977.
- Quotations from all other Spenserian works are from *The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition*. Ed. E. A. Greenlaw, F. M. Padelford, C. G. Osgood, et al. 10 vols. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1932-1949.
- I have also used the following annotated editions of *The Faerie Queene*, the *Mutabilitie Cantos* and the shorter poems:
  - *The Faerie Queene*. Ed. A. C. Hamilton. London: Longman, 2001
  - *The Mutabilitie Cantos*. Ed. Sheldon P. Zitner. London: Nelson, 1968
  - *The Shorter Poems*. Ed. Richard McCabe. London: Penguin, 1999
  - *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*. Ed. William A. Oram, Einar Bjorvand, Ronald Bond, Thomas H. Cain, Alexander Dunlop, Richard Schell. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989
  - *Complaints*. Ed. William L. Renwick. London: Scholartis, 1928.
- Quotations from the Bible are from the Geneva version in the edition of 1597. London: Christopher Barker.
- Quotations from William Shakespeare are from *The Complete Works*. Ed. Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.

## Preface

Death is everywhere in Spenser's works, from the *ubi sunt* theme of his first printed work in the *Theatre of Worldlings* to the anticipation of "that Sabaoths sight" in the last fragmentary words of *The Faerie Queene*. On one occasion only he appears in person, in the Garden of Adonis in Book 3 of *The Faerie Queene*, a composite figure of Time and the Angel of Death, with scythe and "flaggy winges," cutting down and by so doing renewing, the endless forms of life. Paola Baseotto's important study of death and its significance across the full range of Spenser's work allows us to see this ambiguous figure of death in the Garden of Adonis as both typical and unusual. While the ambiguity of death as a force of good and ill, and its intimate linking with life through time are shown in this study to be thoroughly characteristic, the technique of personification, casting death as an object detached from human agency proves highly unusual.

Baseotto's study stresses death's ubiquity as a concept in Spenser's works, always present in intimate relation to life, whether in the recurring, disturbing, figures of "deathwishers," characters who seem to belong as much to the dead as the living, or as a perspective, challenging both characters and readers, to reassess their own apprehension of death and the way in which it shapes our lives. Baseotto's analyses of Spenser's "deathwishers" and "living dead," whether Redcrosse confronting his alter ego Despair, the ghastly Maleger, the Frankenstein-like bodily resurrection of Sansjoy, or the figure of Alcyon trapped in his grief in *Daphnaida*, focus our attention on some of the most compelling and distinctive images in Spenser's work, illuminating our understanding of their power and significance through a combination of detailed attention to language and context, and a thoroughly informed understanding of contemporaneous religious ideas and attitudes.

Spenser proves to be theologically both orthodox and unusual, focussing less on the spiritual and moral dangers of fear of death than

those of fear of life. Baseotto stresses the unusual sympathy of Spenser's writing for those weary of life, even such "living dead" as the grotesque and despairing Malbecco, feeding endlessly on his own fears. For Baseotto, Death is absolutely central to understanding Spenser's moral teaching: only the right apprehension of death can produce the freedom to live life well. Through close and sensitive study of Spenser's writing from *The Shepheardes Calender*, through *The Faerie Queene*, to such little discussed poems as *The Ruines of Time* and *Daphnaida* in *Complaints*, Baseotto establishes the centrality, the subtlety and the distinctiveness of Spenser's figuring of death. Her study offers us a new and illuminating understanding of an aspect of Spenser's writing that is fundamental, but which has been strangely neglected in recent decades.

Elizabeth Heale

University of Reading

## Introduction

A look at the bibliography of Spenser scholarship found in *The Spenser Review* gives an idea of the emphases of Spenserian studies in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Spenser's active commitment in practical politics in Ireland has been the subject of considerable interest. Gender-conscious studies have engaged with the complex and often contradictory Spenserian representations of the private and public roles of female characters. The ambiguities of Spenserian treatments of his Queen, of her policies, and of the weaknesses inherent in her private body are also receiving the attention they deserve. In recent years there has also been a relative flurry of interest in Spenser's use of British history and the epic medium in his effort to revisit and re-create a British mythical past, and announce future glories. A subject that in my view receives great emphasis throughout Spenser's work, and deserves thorough discussion, that of death, has so far received little attention.<sup>2</sup> While some aspects of death in relation to single episodes or works have been discussed, no attempt has been made to look across the entire canon to trace common patterns that recur in Spenser's texts, nor has the poetic and ideological relevance of the theme of death in all his writing been discussed.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Spenser Review*, especially 31.3 (Autumn 2000) and 33.3 (Autumn 2002). *The Spenser Review* offers yearly updates on the bibliography of Spenser studies.

<sup>2</sup> As Bellamy, Cheney, and Schoenfeldt point out, "a MLA database search on Spenser and death turns up very little" (93). Amazingly, the *Spenser Encyclopedia*, that valuable companion to Spenser scholarship, has no specific entry on death. Indeed, the topic of death is central in Renaissance studies. The list of excellent social and cultural histories of death is very long and includes influential works by Ariès, Cressy, Dollimore, Gittings, Gordon and Marshall, Houlbrooke, Neill, Stein and Watson.

<sup>3</sup> Apart from a discussion of themes related to death in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, *Epithalamion* and *Prothalamion* in "Anatomizing death," the three essays on Spenser and the three essays on Spenser and Milton in the most recent treatment of the topic of death in Spenser, *Imagining Death in*

Death is omnipresent in the Spenserian canon, both in its visible manifestations and as an invisible principle that shapes attitudes to life and its significance. In Spenser's work death is multi-faceted, represented as good, but also as cruel, as a blessing to some, to others a curse. Nearly every violent way of dying is dramatized, from death in war, to suicide, to murder, and every meaning of death is examined, from death as punishment of the wicked, to death as new birth. Among the themes explored in relation to death are justice and vengeance, the contrasting perspectives of earth and heaven, mutability, and decay.

It is my contention, however, that what makes the motif of death in Spenser's works distinctive is not merely its pervasiveness or the remarkable variety of ways in which it is treated. It is rather the way in which death becomes a crucial test of the moral and spiritual condition of his characters. The entire Spenserian canon, not just his major poem, seems to me aimed at fashioning readers in "vertuous and gentle discipline" (*Faerie Queene*, "A Letter of the Authors") and central to the definition of virtue, I suggest, is an approved psychological and spiritual understanding of the significance of death.

Spenser's use of the term 'discipline' is rich in meanings and implications. While 'discipline' in Spenser's work is, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, certainly also understood as "mental and moral training," it is above all an "instruction having for its aim to form the pupil to proper conduct and action" (3.a). It points to the spiritual, ethical and social responsibilities of the individual faced with the complexities of earthly experience. The gentleman Spenser's work aims at fashioning, in fact, is clearly no contemplative, no hermit or wise man watching worldly affairs from an ivory tower. Repeatedly, the heroes of Spenser's works are those who take an active part in worldly business, who find their place within the natural cycle, and learn to accept but not precipitate the limits of human life. Submission to the various "disciplines" of death is a yardstick for virtuous living

in this world. We see this in depictions of violent death where the legitimacy and restraint of violence are presented as crucial when inflicting death on others. We see it in relation to suicide, and more generally in the desire to free the self from the suffering and imperfection of life caused by bereavement and sin. In such circumstances, to seek death by the wrong means or with the wrong attitude is to transform death as access to new life, into the death of the soul. I argue that death is such a crucial concept in Spenser's work because as well as being, as I have suggested, a litmus test of virtue, it is liminal between this fleshly world and the spiritual world. In a sense, death is the "veil" that all Spenser's writing strives to be, belonging to this world but pointing to the truths of the next. Death breaks down the veil of language and of fleshly perceptions, but in doing so it precipitates us into silence. We can only imagine what lies beyond it through fictions and imaginations which still partake of language and fleshly perceptions.

The present study organizes itself as a discovery and exploration of significant areas of "a largely undiscovered country, from whose bourn few travelers return," viz, the theme of death in Spenser's work.<sup>4</sup> My close readings of relevant texts throughout the entire Spenserian canon in the context of traditional and contemporary theological, medical, and moral discourses of death, allow me, I believe, to differentiate unusual emphases from commonplace ideas and to gauge the singularity or the orthodoxy of Spenserian treatments of death. In fact, I will argue that Spenser's perspectives are often strikingly distinctive.

If violent death is a conspicuous motif especially in the *Faerie Queene* and in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, both in the epic and in the rest of the Spenserian canon, however, death is omnipresent in less physical but no less powerful forms. It is there both as a destructive and as a creative force that through its agents, time and mu-

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<sup>4</sup> I use Patrick Cheney's evocative description of the topic of death in Spenser's writings ("Dido to Daphne" 143).

tability, brings at the same time individual loss and universal gain, by causing the annihilation of individuals and making the continuation of life possible. My aim in the present study is an exploration of Spenser's view of death as not merely the end of life, but something intertwined with its very core. I shall try and show how death is a central issue in Spenser's texts and I shall argue that his distinctive emphasis falls on the motif of the loss of will to live. In fact, Spenser's work, a work pervaded by melancholy and bitter reflections on the toil and suffering inherent in the human condition, abounds in fictions of characters who invoke death as a deliverance from life.

Death pervades Spenser's texts not as a horrible and frightful presence as in most contemporary writings, but as a mirage, a temptation, an alternative to engagement. The theme of death in Spenser's work is closely intertwined with the Spenserian motif par excellence, that of the quest. His narratives of death emphasize the difficulties of any quest, that of the just man, that of the Christian knight, that of the individual immersed in the flux of change. In texts that promote the virtues of dutiful endurance, there is a repeated dramatization of the temptation to disengage in order to shun the frustration of finding that earthly harvest is but "a weedye crop of care" (*Shepherd's Calender*, "December" 122) and be spared further suffering since "griefe / Well seemes t'exceede the powre of patience" (*FQ* 3.11.14).

While Spenser shares the contemporary preoccupation with mortality as a postlapsarian force conditioning the whole span and all aspects of life, what is distinctive in his own approach to this major concern is his emphasis on the link between mortality and human suffering. Whereas Elizabethan churchmen, philosophers and poets focused mainly on the function of mortality, the first describing it as a constant reminder of the fallenness of both humanity and the world and a warning against immoderate attachment to ephemera, the second highlighting the crucial role mortality plays together with the other laws of nature within an ordered universe, and the last underlining how mortality makes earthly goods seem more desirable in their regrettable tran-



science, Spenser focuses mainly on the effects of mortality on people, their psychology and view of life. He concentrates on the consequences in terms of suffering of the perception of death's omnipresence in life. Hence the melancholy arising from the awareness of universal ephemerality, the sense of disillusion and exhaustion following abortive quests and the toilsome erection of material and immaterial monuments that fall to pieces, the inconsolable grief of the bereaved, and an ever frustrated longing for stability and permanence, are recurrent and conspicuous motifs in Spenser's work.

Spenser creates fictions in which various characters are confronted with various types of losses: loss of loved ones, patrons, possessions, positions, hope, confidence in one's power to create anything permanent. In such circumstances, many Spenserian characters react by manifesting a loss of will to live that is very much a desire to be spared future losses. In fact, numerous narratives in Spenser centre on their protagonists' disheartenment and weariness with, and even loathing of, life. These narratives that feature characters who declare themselves unwilling to live, who bear impatiently a suffering that Spenser everywhere represents as the rule and not the exception in this life, and who entreat death to come and obliterate a life they see as a living death, are noteworthy both for their recurrence and dramatic quality.

While the writings of Elizabethan moralists and philosophers abound in suggestions about how to live well and how to view life from the perspective of its end, and while literary works are often pervaded by a sense of regret for life's brevity, from the Spenserian texts there emerges an apprehension of life's excessive duration and death's delay. Indeed, whereas horror and fear of death, together with a rich store of rational and theological arguments aimed at dispelling such fears, are at the centre of the classical and Christian discourses of death that shape Renaissance views (see Part I below), in Spenser's work the emphasis lies elsewhere. It is life, not death that appears to many of his characters as a frightful and painful trial, and therefore it

is often fascination with death, rather than attachment to life, that they find nearly irresistible.

While the Christian framework of Spenser's narratives points to a view of death as a blessing, as the door into eternity and the source of new life, his characters often crave death as a welcome destroyer. The impulse to discard one's sinful and suffering self together with the world that disappoints one's expectations is represented as a pervasive temptation throughout Spenser's canon. Living in "liues despight" (*FQ* 2.1.36), loathing their vulnerable and corruptible selves, many Spenserian characters feel imprisoned in a living death or deathless life. Unlike the protagonists of the *artes moriendi*, Spenser's characters are often on the point of yielding to despair while they strive to endure the pangs not of death, but of life. For them, it is life that is the painful thing to face, not death. Indeed, the crucial fight against despair in Spenser is fought not in the face of death, but in the face of life. In this light, an *ars vivendi*, rather than an *ars moriendi* is what is needed and this, I argue, Spenser offers in his narratives of death.

Undoubtedly, Spenser's texts are particularly eloquent on the theme of human vulnerability to, and resentment of, the limitations and suffering inherent in the condition of living in a mutable world. If his treatment of the themes of mutability, decay, and transitoriness is extremely effective, but still utterly conventional, he sounds a more distinctive note when he dramatizes the psychology of despair. He creates fictions that compare fleshly and spiritual views of and responses to life and death. In his narratives the merely earthbound perspective renders the suffering and loss inherent in mortal life meaningless and purposeless. When his characters lose sight of the perspectives of faith, they fall prey to despair, failing to grasp the significance of events within the context of God's providential scheme.

Spenser's narratives suggest that if impatience and despair are understandable responses to the tribulations of mortal life, they ultimately arise from a very limited view of the true dimension and direction of earthly life. The more people look for fulfilment, permanence

and stability in the here and now, the more they expose themselves to disillusionments that easily arouse despair. In *Faerie Queene* 1.10 Contemplation shows Redcrosse that toil and suffering, being part of the burden fallen mortals have to bear on their way to heaven, are inescapable on earth. Protests against one's share in the common lot of mortals or attempts at penetrating the mystery of human suffering are therefore irrational, impious and vain. In the *Mutabilitie Cantos* faith in the final transfiguration of all that is mortal and mutable is the only bulwark against despair. The "new man" is one who stops looking for a solution to the mystery of human suffering and looks forward to its annihilation in the afterlife when permanence will take the place of impermanence, bliss of sorrow, true life of living death.

The underlying motif that links a great number of Spenserian narratives of death is the simultaneous implicit censure of fleshly views that emerges from the Christian context of his work, and a pervasive sympathy for the plight of those who hold such views. If the suffering of those in Spenser's work who disconsolately complain about "this worlds vainnesse and lifes wretchednesse" (*Daphnaida* 34) is often described with emotion and sympathy, their blindness and earthliness are nevertheless exposed, as the context makes it clear that as Christians they should not expect happiness and fulfilment from this life. Their death-desire is contrasted with an intense, holy longing for the continuation of life after death. The hateful sight of ruins disappears only when the "Sabaoths sight" (*FQ* 7.8.2) transfigures it.

