To Our Readers

Welcome to a new issue of the electronic *Spenser Review*. This issue includes news from the 2009 MLA meeting. Audience members at the Spenser Roundtable there requested print versions of the fascinating presentations there and we are here able to offer a brief accounting of the remarks made there. Now that we are coming out electronically, we have more room for such special features, so please feel free to make proposals or send ideas for future news of Spenser-related events.

As we go to press, we have learned of the death of Berkeley emerita Professor Janet Adelman, who gave the Hugh MacLean lecture for the International Spenser Society a few short years ago. Many of the Spenser community worked with Professor Adelman at Berkeley and all of us have benefited from her astute literary insights. The *Review* expresses condolences to Professor Adelman’s friends and family on behalf of the Spenser community.
Book Reviews and Notices

40.16


Reviewed by Jennifer C. Vaught

In their edition of The Faerie Queene. Book VI and the Mutabilitie Cantos Andrew Hadfield and Abraham Stoll provide an expertly introduced and thoroughly annotated volume aimed at a wide audience, from undergraduate readers in a survey course to advanced graduate students in a seminar. The scholarly edition also includes Letter to Ralegh, a short essay entitled “The Life of Edmund Spenser,” a useful glossary, index of characters, and up-to-date list of critical works for further reading.

Hadfield’s and Stoll’s edition is the concluding volume of a series from Hackett Publishing that includes Book I of FQ (edited by Carol V. Kaske), Book II (edited by Erik Gray), III and IV (edited by Dorothy Stephens), and Book V (edited by Abraham Stoll, General Editor). Volumes prior to the one under discussion here are examined fully in the Spenser Review in Fall 2006 (37.3) and in Fall 2007 (38.3). As illustrated by Hadfield’s and Stoll’s commentator edition, this complete series of individual books of FQ and Mutabilitie offers a reader-friendly, inexpensive alternative to selections of Spenser’s works commonly found in anthologies. For teachers of undergraduate and graduate courses who wish to include entire books of the epic romance unavailable in Spenser texts such as the Norton Critical Edition of Edmund Spenser’s Poetry but whose purposes do not necessitate A.C. Hamilton’s entire FQ, volumes from this Hackett Publishing series (General Editor, Abraham Stoll) are well-worthy of consideration for adoption in a variety of courses.

Hadfield begins his critically adept Introduction that includes a variety of useful subtopics by stating that Book VI is “problematic, embittered, and fascinating.” He contends that the allegorical quests the knights undertake throughout FQ become progressively “more complex” and that Calidore’s quest to capture the Blatant Beast is the most “problematic” of all because it “concludes...as if the process were actually futile” (vii). Hadfield largely attributes the futility of Calidore’s quest to the failure to establish social order in Book V, at the end of which the Blatant Beast first appears and attacks Artegall. He links the court of Gloriana’s recalling of Artegall from his quest to reform the Salvage Islands to Spenser’s involvement with Lord Grey de Wilton’s ultimately unsuccessful effort to colonize Ireland. Hadfield similarly reads Calidore’s quest through this postcolonial, Irish lens. He argues that in Book VI the continued lack of social order, threats of rudeness and violence, and the abuses of language contribute to the ambiguous definitions of courtesy in this legend. Hadfield’s and Stoll’s glosses and textual annotations illustrate the full range of meanings for this word from politeness to outright deception. Despite the persistent, linguistic threats posed by the Blatant Beast in the Legend of Courtesy, Spenser’s continued enjoyment of language games remains clear. Throughout this volume the editors call attention to his sense of humor, discussing wry, comical moments in the text, figurative winks by the poet, instances of irony, and even Spenser’s “dirty jokes” (36).

Hadfield’s Introduction deals effectively with the theme of pastoral and the significance of the Graces in Book VI, providing an apt overview of critical disagreement about the meanings of Calidore’s pastoral sojourn with Meliboee, Pastorella, and the other shepherds. Yet he tends to dissolve the ambiguity surrounding the interaction of Meliboee and Calidore too quickly and definitely. He concludes that Meliboee is telling Calidore to resume his quest for the Blatant Beast when he states that “fittest is, that all contented rest / With that they hold,” a line that he glosses as knights should remain knights (ix.29.8-9).

Though this may be the case, I wonder if the definitiveness of Meliboee’s advice is at all qualified by the fact that he, too, experienced a change of career in the past. After selling himself “for yearely hire” at court for “ten yeares” and growing discontented with the “vainenesse” there, he returned to his pastoral roots as a shepherd, an indirect endorsement of Calidore’s own disillusionment with the court, if not support of his desire for pastoral relaxation (ix.24.7; ix.25.3). Hadfield’s convincing discussion of the intertwining of art and politics in the episode of the dance of the Graces on Mount Acidale culminates with his point that the conflict between Colin Clout and Calidore about his disruption of the vision serves as a reminder of the dangerous separation of poetry and court life. Although
Hadfield rightly argues that the poet interjects his own voice into the final stanzas of Book VI and despairs audibly over the escaped Blatant Beast’s assault on language. I remain skeptical that Calidore’s quest as a whole is necessarily “rendered meaningless” by the Beast’s escape (xviii). His encounter with the dancing Graces on Mount Acidale, fleeting figures who reveal that true courtesy is a divine gift, remains meaningful despite the threats this Beast continues to pose by the end of Book VI.

The detailed glosses and annotations to Hadfield’s and Stoll’s edition, which are clear and easy to understand, provide a breadth of information and commentary. The notes explain the meanings of characters’ names and their analogous relationship to one another and illuminate parallels between Book VI and earlier books of FQ. They also link Book VI to the romance tradition, the grail legend, the Bible, mythology, Chaucer, Petrarchan poetry and the blazon, and to other works by Spenser such as the Amoretti and A View of the Present State of Ireland. The annotations situate readers effectively in terms of English history, including views of usury, interest in travel books, and fascination with cannibals and other savage peoples that intensified with the proliferation of fictional accounts about those living in the Americas and in Ireland. In keeping with Hadfield’s introductory commentary on Spenser’s own situation in Ireland and his doubt about establishing “peaceful order” there as aid to Lord Grey de Wilton (xxii), his and Stoll’s notes for Mutabilitie Cantos focus specifically on references to Spenser’s house and Irish toponymy and discuss Mutabilitie’s “revolutionary politics” that seek “to break down barriers and abolish rank and order” (208). In the concluding essay “The Life of Edmund Spenser” the editors present him as a man who sought “to win court favor” while simultaneously maintaining “skepticism toward court life” (228). They remark that in 1598 the Tyrone Rebellion in Ireland forced Spenser and his family to flee from Kilcolman just before the estate was burned, an incident emphasizing the fragility of social order for Englishmen attempting to govern there (229).

Despite the few quibbles and queries noted above, teachers and readers of Spenser will no doubt be ignited by Hadfield’s introductory commentary on Spenser’s own situation in Ireland and his doubt about establishing “peaceful order” there as aid to Lord Grey de Wilton (xxii), his and Stoll’s notes for Mutabilitie Cantos focus specifically on references to Spenser’s house and Irish toponymy and discuss Mutabilitie’s “revolutionary politics” that seek “to break down barriers and abolish rank and order” (208). In the concluding essay “The Life of Edmund Spenser” the editors present him as a man who sought “to win court favor” while simultaneously maintaining “skepticism toward court life” (228). They remark that in 1598 the Tyrone Rebellion in Ireland forced Spenser and his family to flee from Kilcolman just before the estate was burned, an incident emphasizing the fragility of social order for Englishmen attempting to govern there (229).

The editing of the letters is superb. A fifty page general introduction sets them in historical and social context, giving a masterly overview of English policy in Ireland and the consequent problems that Grey faced, detailing what Spenser’s position as his chief secretary entailed and considering how his service to him and his later service to the Council of Munster affected his writing. Each document is prefaced with an analytic introduction, identifying the circumstances

Edmund Spenser: Selected Letters and Other Papers, ed.

Reviewed by William Oram

The title of this fine book is somewhat misleading. Spenser did not compose these letters, nor are they always in his hand. The edition presents letters and copies of letters sent or forwarded by Arthur, Lord Grey in 1580–2 when he was Lord Deputy of Ireland, to his official English correspondents—Sir Francis Walsingham, the Privy Council, Lord Burleigh, and the Queen. Spenser, Gray’s principal secretary, copied out most of them and always wrote out their superscriptions, directing them to their recipients. With a few exceptions, he can be assumed to have known their contents and to have experienced many of the events that they recount.

They give an extraordinarily rich picture of how Grey perceived—or how he wanted his recipients to perceive—the events that he faced: the destruction of the Papal forces at Smerwick; his attempts to deal almost constant disturbances and rebellions, including those of the Desmonds in the South and Turlough Luineach O’Neill to the North; the bouts of sickness that decimated the English forces in Wicklow and Askeaton; and the plight of English soldiers dismissed by royal order to starve in the streets. To his patron, Sir Francis Walsingham, he repeatedly voices his frustration at the Queen’s direction to offer general pardons to all but the ringleaders of rebellions, his increasingly desperate need for soldiers and funds, and eventually his intense desire for recall. In addition, the editors print two later letters in Spenser’s hand from Sir John Norris (30 March 1585) when he was Lord President of Munster and Sir Thomas Norris (1 July 1588) after he had succeeded to that post, as well as several papers concerned with Spenser’s Kilcolman plantation, including his 1599 bill of complaint against Lord Roche. The effect of the whole is to give one a vivid, gritty sense of Ireland as Grey saw it.

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in which it originates and the way that it confronts them, and
followed by extensive notes on the language, the places and
the minor personnel in the text (An indispensable appendix
includes seventy-nine condensed biographies, up to a page
in length, of the major players). There are two good maps, a
chronology of the English in Ireland from 1509-1603, a short
glossary of technical terms, and even a page displaying the
cipher that Grey often used for sensitive matters in his letters
to Walsingham. Throughout editors use their mastery of other
archival material to illuminate these documents. Their editing
is never merely a display of learning: it tells you what you want
to know.

The introductions to the individual letters are particularly
good on strategies directing Grey's words and actions. Take
the editors' treatment of Grey's letter of August 12, 1581 to
the Privy Council, in which he details how he forced Turlough
Luineach to sign a treaty he was unlikely to honor:

Not only did Grey seize an unprecedented opportunity
to catch Turlough Luineach on the back foot, by
pinching him between Malby's forces...on the west and
his own from the south, thus forcing him to subscribe to
a set of articles...but Grey perfectly orchestrated his own
commission from London, timing his journey carefully
in order to be able to claim ignorance, on his return, of
the instructions he had meanwhile been sent from
Westminster. ...Of course Grey did not expect Turlough
Luineach to keep the peace to which he had agreed—as he
wrote to Walsingham just before leaving for Ulster...he
knew his course was safe because his negotiations, even if
temporarily successful, would eventually prove
fruitless—but the aim at the Blackwater was not to secure
peace, but to create the defensible pretext for open war
with Turlough Luineach that Grey desired.

(109)

Here Grey pins his Irish opponent on the one hand while
eliciting his Queen's commands on the other—and creates a
treaty to set up an excuse for future war. This care to see what
Grey is *doing* in the letter as well as what the letter is saying is
entirely characteristic of the edition.

The editors also illuminate the "culture of violence" (xxiii)
characterizing the actions of both sides in the conflict, the
habitual callousness about human cost. They write that it
was not only his fear about return through hostile territory
that made Grey execute all but a few of the prisoners taken at
Smerwick but his wish to make himself feared: "As Spenser
would later attest, [Grey's] primary concern was to make of
the foreign garrison an exemplary and terrifying spectacle—
both to the Spanish and Italian soldiers who escaped and to
the Irish who hoped for future continental support" (xxii).
Lord Grey's own account of this incident, which describes
vividly the setbacks of the march to Smerwick, the investing of
the fort and its eventual surrender, never bothers to justify the
summary execution of six hundred men:

Morning come I presented my companies in battaile
before the Forte: the Coronell comes forth with x or
xij of his chief intemen, trayleng their ensigns rolled
up, & presented them unto mee with theyr lives & the
Forte: I sent straight certain gentlemen in to see their
wepons and armures layed downe & to gard the muni
tion & victaile there lefte for spoile: Then putt I in certyn
bandes, who straight fell to execution. There were 600
slayne; munition & vitteile great store, though much
wasted through the disorder of the Soldier, which in the
furie could not be helped. Those that I gave lyfe unto,
I have bestowed upon the Captaines & gentlemen, whose
service hath well deserved.

(19)

Clearly Grey felt no need to justify his actions; his enemies
had given themselves into his hands "for lyfe or death" (18)
and he chose the latter. "There were six hundred slain" begins a
sentence concerned entirely with the magnitude of the
victory; it would fit without change into the Old Testament
Book of Judges. "So hath it pleased the Lord of hostes to
deliver your enemies into [your] Highnes handes" (19) as Grey
later puts it. What he does need to justify to a suspicious
Queen is his allowing his gentlemen the ransom of the few
remaining prisoners.

The section of the general introduction discussing
Spenser's position as a secretary suggests the extraordinary
weight of correspondence that he must have faced daily. On
the basis of the fraction that remains the editors suggest that
he "might have produced or supervised the production of
as many as 3,500 to 4,000 folios during his service for Grey
alone" (xxxi). It's a wonder, given the weight of secretarial
work during 1580-89, that the first installment of *The Faerie
Queene* was ready for publication in 1590. My one quibble is
that the more general account of an Elizabethan secretary's
position, with analogies drawn to the grotesque fictional
secretary in Gascoigne's *Adventures of Master F.s* seems have
little bearing on what we can see of the actual relation
between Spenser and Lord Grey. The editors point out that in
the 1580s and '90s the intimate relation of secretary and
master, idealized in many contemporary accounts of the
position, came under strain as the sheer volume of
correspondence necessitated a stable of secretaries and a more
impersonal collaboration (xlii-xliii). But the evidence amassed
here suggests that Grey and Spenser must have been close.

Despite some instances in which Grey seems to have folded
a letter before Spenser could see it (xlvi-xlix), they conclude
that Spenser's position was one of "trust, authority and
meticulous oversight, pointing to a strong view of his access
to and participation in the central business of the Dublin and
Munster administrations” (xxxii). In December 1581 Grey
rewarded him with the lease of the manner and abbey of
Enniscorthy in Wexford, and long afterward in *A Vewe of the
Present State of Ireland* Spenser would defend his former
master with a characteristically stubborn loyalty.

In sum, this is a landmark edition. Its exemplary
learning and intelligence make it a pleasure—and an
education—to read.
Spenser Society Executive Committee Meeting

December 28, 2009
12:00-1:30 p.m.
Sole Food Restaurant, Loews Philadelphia Hotel, 1200 Market St., Philadelphia

MINUTES:

1. Minutes of the December 2008 meeting approved.

2. New Vice President and President nominated and voted on by the membership at the Society luncheon on December 29: David Lee Miller, Vice President, and Kenneth Gross, President.

3. New members of the Executive Committee for 2010 and beyond. Our current membership and the years of their 3-year membership as of 2009 are:

   Judith H. Anderson (3rd year; Indiana University)
   Joseph Campana (3rd year; Rice University)
   Hannibal Hamlin (2nd year; Ohio State University)
   David Landreth (1st year; UC Berkeley)
   David Lee Miller (1st year; University of South Carolina)
   Melissa Sanchez (2nd year; University of Pennsylvania)
   Philip Schwyzer (1st year; University of Exeter)
   Christopher Warley (2nd year, University of Toronto)
   Jessica Wolfe (3rd year; University of North Carolina).

   Cora Fox (Arizona State University), Graham Hammill (SUNY Buffal), Julian Lethbridge (University of Tübingen), and Beth Quitslund (Ohio University) were nominated to replace outgoing members Judith Anderson, Joseph Campana, Jessica Wolfe, and David Lee Miller. All were confirmed by the executive committee, and by the membership the next day.

4. Secretary-Treasurer’s Report by Rhonda Lemke Sanford showed a beginning of the year balance of $17,000 and end of year balance of $17,035. The major source of income is society dues; the major expense is the Spenser Review. We have 378 members.

5. Annual review of health and implementation of graduate-student grants for participation in MLA sessions. We currently have $776.00 in the fund, and discussed extending privileges to any graduate student giving a Spenser paper at the MLA. Discussion at the annual meeting included other suggestions (including presentations at other conferences), all of which will be considered on case by case basis by members of the executive committee.

6. Spenser Review Editor’s Report by Sheila Cavanagh. Cavanagh reported that the transition to online has been slow, but that people love online format. Discussion of cost for online publication and Emory’s continued support of the journal.

7. Proposal to eliminate the premium for dues for international memberships was approved by the executive committee, and approved by the membership at the luncheon. Because we no longer have to mail the Review internationally, dues will be leveled out for all members: $28 for full time faculty and $18 for students/retired faculty/independent scholars.

8. The state and hosting of the Spenser Society’s web page. The website hosted at Cambridge University is now completely updated, many thanks to Andrew Zurcher.

9. Discussion of topics for the Society’s 2011 MLA Convention session in Los Angeles. (Note: the next MLA is January 2011; there is no 2010 MLA.) Beginning in 2011, we have just one guaranteed session of our own; we can propose two additional sessions, as long as one of them is co-hosted with another allied or affiliate organization. As arranged last year, the 2011 proposed session is a joint session with the Marlowe Society of America. Our designated session to be chaired by Jeff Dolven, will be “Spenser: The Poet’s Poet.”

10. Report on Spenser Society activities at RSA in Los Angeles (2009) and SCSC in Geneva (2009). Melissa Sanchez will take over RSA planning. Shall we engage in a permanent presence at SCSC, given that our MLA activities will be curtailed?

11. The 2009 MacCaffrey Award for best book is to be awarded to Judith Anderson; the committee to select the
2010 prize for best article published in 2008 or 2009 will be chaired by David Lee Miller, with David Landreth and Hannibal Hamlin to serve on the committee.


The next meeting will be in Los Angeles in 2011.

Respectfully submitted,
Rhonda Lemke Sanford
Secretary-Treasurer, International Spenser Society
The following papers were given at the 2009 MLA Conference, December 27-30, in Philadelphia, PA.

PAPERS

40.19

“Mutability, Materialism, Mortality”
Judith H. Anderson
Indiana U

Lately, two issues in the Mutabilitie Cantos have interested me. One is the relation of Spenser’s figure Mutabilitie to the biblical Fall. The other is the bearing of the Cantos on death, and more exactly, on Spenser’s engagement with materialism, the death of the soul—alternatively, in the Averroist tradition, of only the individual soul—along with the body. Both issues relate to Spenser’s engagement with materialism.1

Mutabilitie’s ambition, destruction, and responsibility for death associate her with the Fall. Yet her name also suggests something larger and variously other than the Fall. Should we want a single word or phrase to gloss her significance, we might try the one Spenser provides at the outset of the Cantos, namely, “Change,” or “the euer-whirling wheele / Of Change” (VI.i.1-2), imagery associated with fortune, in all its challenge to a universe of law and order. The name Mutabilitie comes only in line four and only as a synonym for Change. She does not exist as a character before lines five through nine, at which point her form, emerging dramatically and sequentially, is conspicuous as a staged poetic construction rather than a prefigured entity.

Sin and Death are not sufficient names for Spenser’s Mutabilitie. She is neither a mirror of the Fall nor a metonymic encoding of it. Her figure and story draw on diverse renderings of change—Ovid, Lucretius, and Boethius, for example—and do so without just figuring any one. In fact, the Fall looks more like an expression of Mutabilitie than is she of the Fall: she represents a concept of which the Fall is an historical expression. She is the larger term, and the Fall is a manifestation of her in the Cantos bearing her name, yet not an exclusive or full manifestation. This is how Spenserian allegory works.

Spenser’s Mutabilitie is also out of sync with the Fall: she is beautiful, and the damage she does to the world precedes her rebellion against the gods. Moreover, she damages a world in which Bellona, the goddess of war, and the infernal Hecate are already empowered. In fact, they are her role models. In Mutabilitie’s closing argument, as in Nature’s, Change, now along with Time, again becomes one of her ex-changeable names. Mutabilitie observes the reign of “CHANGE” over all creatures, “For, who sees not, that Time on all doth pray? / But Times do change and moue continually. . . . Wherefore,” she asks, “this lower world who can deny / But to be subiect still to Mutabilitie?” The shift in Mutabilitie’s rhetorical questions from the personified Time to the de-personified Times, from singular concept to plural occurrences, anticipates Nature’s warning to Mutabilitie that she seeks her own decay by desiring supremacy. In effect she seeks her own disappearance as a figure, a concept, and a distinguishable phenomenon. Of course, the judicial figure of Nature herself then vanishes, as if dissolving her own hypostasis into the words of her verdict, the conspicuously judicious, all-containing truth she has spoken. Her departure is the final irony that accompanies and qualifies the affirmation in her judgment.

When Mutabilitie presents her claim to Nature, the implication of mortalism also enters Spenser’s Cantos. Mutabilitie moves associatively from Earth/earth to animals and human beings—that is to us:

And men themselues doe change continually,
From youth to eld, from wealth to povertie,
From good to bad, from bad to worst of all.
Ne doe their bodies only flit and fly:
But eke their minds (which they immortall call)
Still change and vary thoughts, as new occasions fall.

Crossing here from the physical into the economic and moral, Mutabilitie reassumes her identity with Fortune and,
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The Mutabilitie Cantos

From the beginning, Mutabilitie has represented a chaos force from below, one variously related to the inescapable Mammon, to the “huge eternal Chaos, which supplyes / The substanares of natures fruitfull progenyes” in the Garden of Adonis, to the ambivalent, egalitarian Giant of materialism in Book V, and to her own half-brother Maleger, resurgent, resilient, monstrous son of the Earth. If indeed Earth is the “great mother of vs all,” Mutabilitie’s consanguinity extends even further. She would sweep into her inheritance any pattern, form, or order that attempts to transcend a purely material world. Mens, the intellective mind—not just ratio, abstracting reason, though including this—is the object of her challenge, which is all the more alarming for its almost casual, matter-of-fact delivery at the end of a stanza. In Mutabilitie’s assertion, all intellectual thought becomes relative to occasion, to temporal, material causation: “But eke their minds (which they immortall call) / Still change and vary thoughts, as new occasions fall.” Occasion is time, fortune, happenstance, expediency, and now Mutabilitie, or so she intimates. Occasion becomes the latest of Mutabilitie’s shifting identities, her shifting sameness. Thus seen, Mutabilitie indeed makes her claim to Nature.

Mutabilitie’s claim recalls Book II, where the hag Occasion is fettered by Guyon. Her fettering is at once an attempt to stop time and to exclude a personified abstraction from the movement of narrative, and it leads only to impasse. Occasion, hag though she is, represents the material, the many, and the spontaneous. In time, her arrest ironically becomes itself an occasion of strife. Temporarily, it also suspends Guyon’s quest. Temperance has its very root in tempus, or “time.”

In closing, I want to align Mutabilitie’s earth-born challenges with Lodowyck Briskett’s depiction in A Discourse of Civill Life of his friend Spenser’s interest in the relation of mind to matter as it bears on the immortality or mortality of mens, the intellective power, and thus on mortalism. Five times in Bryskett’s dialogue, “Maister Spenser” urges questions that exhibit his concern about the soul’s immortality. He challenges Bryskett’s conclusion that the intellective soul is immortal and impassible by arguing that it is acted upon by fantasy and by sensation. He repeatedly presses at the relation of the intellective soul to the body and more generally to matter. His final question, which Bryskett pronounces heresy, is whether there are two souls in human beings, “the one sensitive and mortall, and the other Intellective and Divine.” Such a view would endorse a pronounced dualism—duo esse, shades of Duessa or of a free-floating idealism without basis in matter. Whatever the relation of the Spenserian poet to the role Bryskett assigns “Maister Spenser,”

the Discourse is a pertinent contemporary document that suggests dramatically what is at stake in Mutabilitie’s claim that the mind is subject to whatever “new occasions fall.”

40.20

“A Seminar on the Thing: Mutabilitie”
Gordon Teskey
Harvard U

We are celebrating the four-hundredth anniversary of the publication, in 1609, of Spenser’s Mutabilitie. But at this time of year, in late December 1599, a decade before it was published, Mutabilitie was still a new piece of writing, and Spenser was back in London, after the destruction of Kilcolman. He had only two weeks to live. I wish to observe that fact on this occasion. It has nothing to do with my paper. And everything.

I have been thinking of Mutabilitie as a seminar on the thing, and I might begin with an observation that may be too symmetrical to be accurate. But it points up the nature of our question, What is a thing? or What is a poetic thing, a Spenserian thing? The question for the ancient Greek scientists was this: “given that there are things, how can there be change?” The question for Spenser, and indeed for the entire Christian tradition, is, “given that change is universal, how can there be things?” The very word, thing, chimes frequently at the poem’s climax and conclusion: “all things tost and turned by transverse” (VII.vii.56); “all things stedfastnes doe hate” (58); “In all things else she bears the greatest sway” (viii.1); “love of things so vaine to cast away” (vii.1); “stedfast rest of all things firmly stayd” (vii.2). The very status of Mutabilitie raises these questions about the thing, since we hardly know whether to refer to this text in the singular or the plural, as Mutabilitie or as The Mutabilitie Cantos, and whether this text is a thing to itself or part of a larger poetic thing, The Faerie Queene.

The intellectual background to the poem is indicated by its title. All things flow, as the weeping philosopher says, and continually turn into other things by the force of ‘change’ or ________, each thing undermined by ________ or ‘lack.’ Metabole was translated into Latin as mutabilitas, as in Augustine’s Confessions, where no doubt Spenser saw it. Spenser may also have heard the commonplace phrase, lubrica mutabilitias, ‘slippery change,’ which is used by Gregory the Great, commenting on Job 14:2, in which man is compared to a flower and to a shadow, which “never remains in the same state.” Lubricious Mutabilitie! Lubricated Mutabilitie! I think of her as a great moving mucus membrane, absorbing everything, like the voracious, cocaine-soaked adenoid gland

beyond this, with random change. Here she delivers her greatest challenge.

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in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. But *Mutabilitie* is a membrane, a witty partition more than a thing, a division, and a slippery one. She is a thing and she is not.

I would say that there are four species of thing in *Mutabilitie*. You may think there are more, but four seems about right to me, and I'm pretty sure it's the smallest number to which the classes of things in this poem can be reduced. I name them first by their examples: the bull, the mouse, the hill, the girl; that is, the thing in myth, the thing in science, the thing in phenomenology—or, shall we say, in experience?—and the thing in poetry, or vision. I shall briefly identify the first three and say more about this last, the thing in poetry or vision, exemplified by the girl or nymph, Molanna. But to anticipate: for Spenser, the thing in poetry or vision is the product of what Yves Bonnefoy beautifully calls "the metaphysical imaginary," which "re-inflames our desire to exist" (Bonnefoy 19).

The thing in myth is exemplified by Jove disguised as a bull when he raped Europa: "the same which led / Europa flotting through th'Argolick Buds" (vii. 33). He is lubricious and slippery, wet with the waves "through which he waded for his love's delight"—that is, his delight taken in her, not her delight in him. The bull is also part of the astrological sign corresponding with the month of April. He is thus a set period of time, although every period of time is slippery and slides into the next. We might also observe that it appears to be in the nature of mythic beings to degenerate from purely narrative being into physical things, as the gods of antiquity turned into the planets and their victims into stars.

The thing in science is exemplified by the mouse (if by "wicked beast" a mouse is meant) caught in the housewife's trap, "som snare or gin," her experimental apparatus (vi. 48). I think of the Large Hadron Collider and its hunt for that elusive particle, the Higgs Boson. If it exists—and theory predicts it—the Higgs Boson does so without us, but it does not exist fully for us, in science, until we trap it in our apparatus, until we have physical, sensuous proof.

The thing in experience is exemplified by Arlo Hill, first because a hill only is a hill from a certain distance, neither too near nor too far, although Spenser was at just the right distance and looked at Galtymore every day, as Melville, in the room where he wrote *Moby Dick*, looked out the window towards Greylock Mountain, thinking it very like a whale. Unlike the Higgs Boson, you cannot prove a hill to exist, as you can't, depending on your point of view. But Molanna isn't a thing, she's a girl, a nymph. She isn't the product of a point of view; she appears to us as existing in her own right, and we therefore see her as a vision. We do not make her; we cannot trap her; we catch sight of her.

What is interesting about this catching sight is that it occurs as a step through and beyond our seeing natural phenomena as things. Molanna starts out in our attention as a stream, one not so different from a mountain or any other thing in category three, and in the stanza to follow we never stop seeing her this way, as a phenomenological thing, the experience of seeing a stream. Yet as we fix our attention on this leaping, springing, tumbling, flowing watercourse, this stream rushing downhill and strewn with blossoms from the flowers on its banks, we catch sight of a girl, one who is about to have a part in the story that is about to be told. For the moment, however, her intention is to take her time emerging into view:

For first she springs out of two marble rocks
On which a grove of oaks high mounted grows,
That as a girlond seems to deck the locks
Of some faire Bride, brought forth with pompous showes
Out of her bowre, that many flowers strowes:
So through the flowry dale she tumbling down
Through many woods and shady coverts flows
That on each side her silver channel crown
Till to the plaine she come, whose valleys she doth drowne.

It may be impossible for you to step into the same stream twice, but Molanna just is that stream all the time—and she is also a girl, who takes steps. The point of the Heraclitean maxim is not to mystify the thing but to demystify it: you can step into the same stream twice, and also you can't, depending...
on your concept of the thing. Heraclitus’s maxim illustrates
the provisional nature of things in category three. But the
poetic or visionary thing goes beyond this and seems to exist
in its own right, reassuring us of our own existence, which also
seems provisional, until Molanna comes along.

In poetry, the thing isn’t a myth; it isn’t a scientific fact
or a scientific theory; and it isn’t an artifact of how we see the
world. The thing in poetry is a vision. Is it possible to go
further, and to say that for poetry all things are a vision, or that
poetry can give us back the world we are losing every day?

The most famous stanza of the poem, Nature’s
judgment, would have us think so. In the face of universal
decay and change, in the face of Mutabilitie, this sonorous
stanza affirms that all things, “turning to themselves at length
again / Do work their own perfection so by fate.” The
ambulance of Neoplatonism is rushed to the scene of the
cosmic emergency. Note that Nature’s judgment is not there
for the sake of poetry and vision, for the sake of Molanna, or
Belpheobe; it is there for the sake of phenomenological things,
such as my birdcage, or your dish-drainer, or the sick elm in
the yard. Do we really want them back? Are they not all,
finally and irrevocably, trash? Would it not be good to be rid
of them at last, these experiential, phenomenological things?
Wouldn’t being rid of the paraphernalia, the things we have

to carry alongside us in life, leave more room for the higher
things of vision? Nature’s judgment is severely qualified.

Three of the four remaining stanzas in Mutabilitie cast doubt
on Nature’s claim to metaphysical closure, that is, to the claim
by which the phenomenological coincides with the
metaphysical, so that everything that is for us is—my birdcage,
your dish drainer, the sick elm in the yard, all lifted up to the
stars and crowding the heavens, like space junk. When I say
that three of the four remaining stanzas cast doubt on Nature’s
judgment, I am not excepting the final stanza of the poem
from that statement. These stanzas should cast doubt on
Nature’s raising up everything to the status of poetic vision.
They should do so because Spenser is a poet.

It is of course true that poetry confers identity, firmness
and outline on the fleeting world of experience. But if we
try to use the visionary power of poetry to pursue the truth
too far, to make things more real than in truth they are, then
Nature’s words to Mutabilitie may be directed to poetry, too:
“Thy decay thou seekst by thy desire.” Even so, we cannot ever
rid ourselves of the metaphysical desire expressed in Nature’s
judgment. I repair my birdcage, you repair your dish drainer,
and not for reasons of economy, though that is how we explain
our actions to ourselves. We do it because we want the world
to last.

Consider the similarly rickety materials of the poetic art,
that birdcage of song: diction, meter, rhythm, rhyme,
enjambment, syntactical variation from the norm,
decaying and re-forming images, stanzas that fail to stand
but like Molanna tumble into one another and down into
the flowery vale, structures, as we call them, that aren’t really
structures but pulsing swellings in the onrushing steam, stories
that, like the streams Alpheus and Arethusa, flow in and out
of literature all the time, and of course visions, such as that of
Molanna emerging from those marble rocks, under the shade
of oaken boughs, high up on the mountainside. Out of that
obscurity she leaps into the light, a stream at first and then a
girl, a vision. It is in the very nature of those unstable and, as I
called them, rickety materials always to be longing to become
something other and better than themselves, such as the truth.
But even as those words, rhythms, and images strive to do so,
they continually return to their mutable, slippery selves. Our
lot is cast with lubrica mutabilitas, lubricious mutability,
slippery unthingliness, the mucus membrane that keeps us
alive for a time—but for a purpose that is other than itself.

Reading Mutabilitie, for example.

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ABSTRACTS

40.21
“Timing, Accident, Coincidence, and Design: The
Disingenuous Cunning of the Mutabilitie Cantos”
James Nohrnberg, U of Virginia

Making the claim that Mutabilitie are both the last instance
of FQ’s sixteenth-century redaction history and the first of its
seventeenth-century reception history, this paper again notes
that the Cantos’ two last lines hide the dedicatee’s Christian
name in plain sight, repeating it from the funeral urn of the
dedication itself, “in a final supplement to a supplement to a
supplement.” This paper then looks at the “matter” of the Two
Cantos from the point of view of the history of thought,
developing a contrast between Boethius/Aquinas, on “the
chain of fate,” on the one hand, and Calvin/Bacon—on
accident and necessity—on the other. “For Bacon accidents
enable new and rare discoveries; for Calvin there are plenty of
surprises, but no accidents.” Appealing to Nature’s God, the
Titaness petitions a higher court, and calls for a
reappraisal and expansion of the actual, elemental, material
stuff of mundane experience, in light of the erosion of the
dubious distinction between the sublunar and superlunary
world. Nature is thus seen as developing “a seventeenth-
century double in Mutabilitie, with the change from an
Aristotelean cosmos to a neo-Lucretian one.” “But
Mutabilitie’s form leaves us at sixes and sevens — literally.”
The paper thus turns to the very date/year of the Two Cantos’
publication, in relation to the dates/years of earlier and very
different installments of FQ as a clue to Two Cantos’ topical
and “Elizabethan” content (i.e., the menopause, “climacteric,”
and late—and, for Spenser himself, posthumous—eclipse
of the author’s Diana-esque queen). The form was read as a
supplement comprising a “whole fraction:” one internally
represented by its own fractions, Time’s included. Only God
lasts forever, but 400 years is a long time, ten times as long as
that since Nature came to an end again, forty years ago, with
man stepping on the moon.

**40.22**
“The Pervasive Influence: On Reading Lucretius in Spenser”
Gerard Passannante, U of Maryland, College Park

In a 1920 article that concerns the presence of Lucretian
 echoes in Mutabilitie, the critic, Edwin Greenlaw, writes
indirectly of the influence of Lucretius as a “difference in the
point of view in regard to this philosophy of change [that is]
something rather difficult to prove; it is a pervasive thing, not a
matter of concrete illustration.” My paper concerns the idea of
this elusive form of influence and what it means to talk about a
thing that is invisible and everywhere—an influence that by its
very nature seems to resist literary criticism. In attempting to
read the pervasiveness of Lucretius in Spenser, that is, to bring
it from the realm of feeling into the realm of the analytical, I
demonstrate first why the critic had so much difficulty pinning
it down, and secondly how this difficulty might be instructive
for re-thinking our idea of the poet’s “method” and the
problem of matter and form at the heart of the Cantos.

**OTHER PAPERS PRESENTED AT THE MLA**

**SPENSER AND CHARACTER**

Wednesday, 30 December
1:45–3:00 p.m., Liberty Ballroom Salon C, Philadelphia
Marriott
Program arranged by the International Spenser Society
Presiding: Andrew Escobedo, Ohio U, Athens

“Persuasion, Character, and FQ Book III”
Paul Hecht, Purdue U North Central

Consider this Spenserian moment in Jane Austen’s last
completed novel, Persuasion. Our hero-knight, Anne, has been
threading her way through Regency England fairly well until
she runs into the charming Mr. Elliot, who quickly
begins to court her, and makes substantial progress. But at last
his “character” is revealed to her, with written evidence, to be
“black! hollow and black!” The Mrs. Smith who aides in this
revelation is a sort of Una with Red Cross Knight and Despair,
or Palmer with Furor and Opportunity. This sense of character
plays out like Spenserian allegory in that it reveals seeming-
humans to be dimensionless figures, immutable abstractions
personified, or false Florimell-like characters, puffed up around
a hollow or daemonic core. But the further implication is that
all humans, though perhaps to varying extents, have
something immutable at their centers, which is named by this
thing “character.” That is both terrifying and cause for
celebration, and the twin sides of the concept glow most
decidedly, in Austen, with the undecidablity of Mutabilitie.

In this essay I explore the way a novel fascinated with the
various senses of “character” can be illuminated by Spenserian
thinking, such that among other things, one begins to see the
realistic glow of the English landscape in Austen start to take
on the hue of a Fairy Land that is populated with
creatures who might be less human than they appear. Austen’s
Spenserianism, I argue, reveals productive ways of thinking
about character in Spenser. By understanding the valences of
the term in a place where all those valences are acknowledged
and meditated upon, one can turn to Fairy Land more fully
equipped to avoid anachronism and misplaced imputation of
fullness where only flatness resides. As test cases, I focus on
what seems like the most un-Austenian kind of allegorical
movement, the metamorphosis of Malbecco, along with the
very few, but fascinating, instances of the word “character” in
FQ, at the unavoidable end of Book III.
“‘Straunge characters’ and Spenser’s Psyches”
Elizabeth D. Harvey, U of Toronto

In Book III of Spenser’s FQ, Busirane holds Amoret captive, bound fast to a “brasen pillour.” The “vile Enchaunter” sits in front of her, “Figuring straunge characters of his art, / With liuing bloud he those characters wrate, / Dreadfully dropping from her dying hart (III.xii.31). Spenser’s use of the word “character” twice in this passage would seem in the first instance to mean alphabetic letters, graphic symbols of writing. Or it might gesture to the etymological sense of the word, an instrument used to inscribe, engrave, or stamp a distinctive mark, a tool which could be cognate with the “deadly dart” that transfixes Amoret’s “trembling hart.” It is these “characters” that Britomart forces Busirane to “re-verse,” to read backwards, in order to undo the magical elements of the spell that would bind Amoret’s heart to his. In this paper, I explore how this literal sense of character as a graphic mark moves towards a fuller, more encompassing concept of character that begins to suggest some of the complex distinguishing features of human subjectivity. The spatialization of the body in this passage is crucial to this movement, for the qualifier “strange” evokes connotations of foreignness elicited by its Latin root, extraneus, external. To take the heart out of the body and to write in blood is to turn the body inside out, to expose, make foreign, and manipulate its hidden interior. It is this traffic between inside and outside, domestic and strange, figuration and ontology that my consideration of character aims to map. I explore the relationship between the marks of characters—names, distinguishing features, allegorical signs—and the inner qualities that begin to define our sense of “personhood” as a dialogue about early modern subjectivity, particularly as these issues are elicited by love and magic. I will focus in particular on Amoret and Busirane and the representation of the early modern heart as the seat of the passions, the progenitor of vital spirits, and for some thinkers, the putative house of the soul. I examine some early modern theories of the soul, which frequently saw the soul as an animating principle that figured the rational “character” of the human. That the discourse of character in this episode is bound up with magic and the cryptic suggest how intertwined questions of literary character are with Busirane’s dark art, the project of versing in characters the psyche and the heart’s interior.
In this paper I undertake to rescue Una—not from the clutches of Sansloy or a dragon, where I surely wouldn't be of much use, but from a critical consensus, or near-consensus, that seems to have settled around her. This consensus holds that Una is a Very Good Girl, and it has the unintended consequence of rendering her dull. Pitiably, admirable even, but still rather dull. I want to argue that Una may in fact be a bad girl, and thus interesting. Una is too often reduced either to allegorical furniture in Red Cross Knight's spiritual quest or to the somewhat pathetic victim of his inconstancy. To address the first of these: if Una is allegorical furniture, embodying either the invisible Church or the Christian Truth to which Red Cross Knight should aspire, then she is an odd sort of furniture in that she wanders off on her own for whole cantos at a time, unlike those other allegorical beings who exist only in their direct interactions with Spenser's titular heroes. And if she is the spurned object of Red Cross Knight, loyally seeking a knight who wishes only to avoid her, than I will merely point out that her posture in this respect rather resembles that of Archimago, likewise a dauntless pursuer of Red Cross Knight.

Let’s begin with Una at her most complex and interesting—indeed, at one of the most interesting and, to my mind, well-night inexplicable moments in Book I. Canto III finds Una and her lion taking shelter with Abessa and Corceca. That night, Kirkrapine arrives and demands entrance—with (for him) unfortunate results:

Thus long the dore with rage and threats he bet,
Yet of those fearefull women none durst rize,
The Lyon frayed them, him in to let:
He would no longer stay him to aduize,
But open breakes the dore in furious wize,
And entring is; when that disdainfull beast
Encountring fi erce, him suddaine doth surprize,
And seizing cruell claws on trembling brest,
Vnder his Lordly foot him proudly hath supprest.

Him booteth not resist, nor succour call,
His bleeding hart is in the vengers hand,
Who streight him rent in thousand peeces small,
And quite dismembred hath: the thirstie land
Drunke vp his life; his corse left on the strand.
His fearefull friends weare out the wofull night,
Ne dare to weepe, nor seeme to vnderstand
The heauie hap, which on them is alight,
Affraid, least to themselves the like mishappn might.

Now when broad day the world discouered has,
Vp Vna rose, vp rose the Lyon eke,
And on their former iourney forward pas,
In wayes vnknowne, her wandring knight to seeke,
With paines farre passing that long wandring Greeke,
That for his loue refused deitie;
Such were the labours of this Lady meeke,
Still seeking him, that from her still did flie,
Then furthest from her hope, when most she weened nie.

Let us temporarily put aside allegorical considerations and consider this moment purely from a narrative perspective. During the night, Una’s lion has loudly dismembered the admittedly somewhat discourteous Kirkrapine. Loudly enough, certainly, that Abessa and Corecca spend the remainder of the night cowering in terror. Yet Una, who occupies the same one-room shack with these two, seems oddly unaware that anything has occurred. Even to exit the cottage presumably requires stepping over the exsanguinated sack of bone and guts that was once Kirkrapine. Yet oddly, Una doesn’t seem to register that anything at all has happened. Departing, she offers Abessa and Corecca, her
hosts for the evening, not so much as a contrite “I'm so sorry my pet lion dismembered your friend!”

Of course, it is only fair to admit that the violence committed here is not directly Una's but the lion's. Yet I'm not sure this matters much, because the lion becomes to some degree a psychic projection of Una. Thus, when she first wishes to enter Corceca's cottage, the lion intuits her wishes and rips the locked door open. (It isn't clear to me, by the way, who repairs the door in time for Kirkrapine to barge his way in later.)

Now at this point allegory rushes to our aid. Kirkrapine is a church robber, as his very name announces, and thus deserves his cruel punishment, we think. But Una doesn't know his name—indeed, she knows nothing about him, and she shows surprisingly little curiosity about the victim of her lion's murderous rage. Her state upon leaving the cottage hovers somewhere between blithe indifference and hysterical blindness. I am tempted to call it ethical syncope—a momentary blacking out of her moral apparatus, akin to the more literal form of fainting she is habitually given to at moments of stress. Faced with evidence of horrifying slaughter committed in her name against an unknown victim, she simply decides not to see it. In this respect she seems to embody the very moral failing—blindness of heart—that her allegorical hostess Corceca represents. Nor should this surprise us. When a Spenserian hero arrives at a particular locale, we generally understand the place to embody his or her spiritual condition at that moment. Thus, for instance, Red Cross Knight finds himself at Lucifer's palace because he has already fallen prey to the sin of pride. Arrival is a sign of one's moral state. But for some reason, we are hesitant to apply the same protocols of reading to Una. If we did, we would have to assume that Una arrives at Abessa and Corceca's cottage because of some subterranean connection with them. She comes to this place because, at a spiritual level, she is already there.

One question that arises here is why Una tends to be exempted from the protocols of reading we have been taught to apply to all other Spenserian characters. I suspect that a kind of misplaced courtliness is at work here—a sense that it would be as wrong for us to doubt Una's essential goodness as it was wrong for Red Cross Knight to doubt it back at Archimago's house. We just don't want to attribute murkiness of motive to this adorably wronged character. But as with most forms of courtliness, this one conceals a subliminal sexism. We feel compelled to save Una from her own complexity, to maintain her (in fantasy) as the perfectly admirable and victimized woman we want her to be. And the result is that we have to suspend our own critical apparatuses at crucial moments in order to sustain this fantasy. If Una undergoes a moment of ethical syncope when she exits Corceca's cottage, we as readers undergo a moment of interpretive syncope at the same time, our analytical faculties momentarily blacking out in order to avoid an unacceptable form of knowledge. We too are threatened with blindness of heart—and of mind—at this juncture.

I don't want to leave this fascinating episode before taking note of the simile in stanza 21 comparing Una to Odysseus, that “long-wandering Greek.” Guileful in Homer and positively repugnant in the Greek tragic playwrights, Odysseus provides a potentially troubling point of ethical reference. True, Spenser's simile celebrates Odysseus' virtuous desire to return home to Penelope from Calypso's pleasurable isle. But Odysseus has nevertheless been unfaithful with Calypso, so the simile offers a rather vexing parallel for the supposedly chaste Una. Moreover, it seems to me that the whole Corceca episode bears distant resemblances to Odysseus' adventure at Polyphemus' cave, where neither antagonist displays a particularly strong grasp of host-guest etiquette. What are we to make of this comparison to Homer's wily, philandering hero?

I want to turn now to three early instances in Book I when Una speaks, because each instance shows her saying something either disturbing to the reader or potentially harmful to Red Cross Knight, or both. The first instance occurs at stanzas 12 and 13, when Red Cross Knight and Una, having gotten lost in the Wandering Wood, arrive at Error's cave. Una wisely cautions Red Cross Knight to be careful. But when he responds that it would be shameful to retreat, Una in turn replies “Yea but (quoth she) the peril of this place / I better wot then you, though now too late, /To wish you backe returne with foule disgrace.” And she then announces plainly that “This is the wandring wood, this Errors den” (1.1.13.1-3, 6). What exactly does Una mean when she claims to know the peril of this place better than Red Cross Knight does? Why is Una familiar at all with Error's cave? And if she does know this place, why has she allowed herself and Red Cross Knight to arrive here? What she says in effect is: “I know how dangerous this place is, but since you're here already, it's too late to go back.” I can't help finding something slightly ominous and uncanny about Una's claim to understand the dangers of Error's cave before the monster has even put in an appearance. And I likewise can't help wondering what Spenser's original readers, unequipped with critical annotations as they wended their way through the opening canto of Book I, would have made of this as-yet unnamed maiden accompanying Red Cross Knight on his quest.

Una speaks again in stanza 27, right after Red Cross Knight has defeated the Dragon Error:

His Lady seeing all, that chaunced, from farre
Approcht in haste to greet his victorie,
And saide, Faire knight, borne under happie starre,
Who see your vanquisht foe before you lye:
Well worthy be you of that Armory,
Wherein ye have great glory wonne this day,
And prouud your strenght on a strong enimie,
Your first adventure: many such I pray;
And henceforth euer wish, that like succeed it may.

(I.i.27)

Una's words of encouragement are doubtless comforting to Red Cross Knight but for that very reason unhelpful. In the now standard reading of this episode, Red Cross Knight's first victory is really his first defeat, since the ease with which he dispatches Error causes him to rely disastrously on his own martial valor, even as the allegorical obviousness of Error blinds him to the subtler forms of error he will soon encounter. This being the case, Una's happy pronouncement that he is "well worthy of that Armory/Wherein ye have great glory won this day" can only feed Red Cross Knight's dangerous sense of heroic self-sufficiency, thus setting him up for his imminent fall at the hands of Archimago. I am not claiming that Una acts with evil intent here—though I am also not claiming that she does not—but her gushing praise has a damaging effect nevertheless.

Una's next utterance occurs a mere five stanzas later. By this point she and Red Cross Knight have encountered Archimago in disguise. When Red Cross Knight asks the apparently harmless old man if he knows of any adventures to pursue, the enchanter replies that he can tell Red Cross Knight of a strange man who is laying waste to the countryside. Indeed, he can lead Red Cross Knight to him—but the fellow lives far off. At this point Una pipes up:

Now (saide the Ladie) draweth toward night,
And well I wote, that of your later fi ght
Ye all forwearied be: for what so strong,
And well I wote, that of your later fi ght
Who see your vanquisht foe before you lye:
Well worthy be you of that Armory,
Wherein ye have great glory wonne this day,
And prouud your strenght on a strong enimie,
Your first adventure: many such I pray;
And henceforth euer wish, that like succeed it may.

(I.i.32.4-I.i.33.9)

Here I wish once again to invoke that mythical fi rst reader of The Fairie Queene, unaided by annotations that would identify Una and Archimago. Such a reader might be forgiven not only for thinking Archimago merely a courteous stranger at this point, but even for thinking that Una and Archimago collude in convincing Red Cross Knight to spend the evening at the latter's home. Such a reader might even fi nd formal confi rmation of this in line four of stanza 33: "Right well Sir knight ye haue advised bin"—a line which at fi rst seems to be uttered by Una as part of her speech. That is, until the next line begins "quoth then that aged man," at which point the reader is informed retroactively that the previous line was actually spoken by Archimago. In fact, the longer I look at this exchange, the less sure I am of where Una stops speaking and Archimago begins. I think her last statement is line 3 of stanza 33, but I can't be completely sure that Archimago doesn't begin speaking at the very start of stanza 33. In either case, this momentary uncertainty of attribution, which blurs the dividing line between Una's and Archimago's speech, points to a deeper difficulty in distinguishing Una's motives from those of the wicked enchanter. Even if Una utters her speech in complete innocence, it once again has a very unfortunate eff ect, coaxing Red Cross Knight into spending the night with Archimago.5

Exactly how many innocent yet harmful things must Una be allowed to say before we begin to doubt that her presence in the poem is entirely benefi cent?

Now I should here admit that these intimations of possible evil in Una occur mostly in the Book's initial cantos, and that they aren't born out by the rest of the story. Una single-handedly rescues Red Cross Knight from the clutches of Despair and proves a loyal companion to the very end, when the two are wed. Perhaps we should then attribute the uncertainties I've been tracing to the epistemological muck that envelops the early cantos of Book I and confuses us in our attempts to distinguish friend from foe. Is Una's evil merely a mirage on the part of the initially disoriented reader? Maybe so. But I fi nd things to disturb me even in that fi nal canto.

There, in the midst of the pre-wedding festivities, a messenger appears and delivers a letter, purportedly written by Fidessa, claiming that Red Cross Knight is not free to marry Una because he has already betrothed himself to her. When questioned about this by Una's father, Red Cross Knight responds with a distressingly weaselly speech in which he doesn't exactly deny the claims made against him, but doesn't admit to them either. Rather he disclaims ethical responsibility by insisting that, whatever happened, Duessa's magic would have inveigled any mere mortal.

It is distressing enough to hear the victorious and (supposedly) ethically cleansed Red Cross Knight engage in this kind of self-serving pettifoggery. Surely we are not meant to believe that Duessa's sorcery somehow relieves our knight of all moral responsibility for his philandering. But it is equally distressing to see Una then step in and derail the entire inquiry by pointing out—correctly but irrelevantly—but this supposed messenger is really Archimago in disguise. I say "irrelevantly,"
because neither the identity of the messenger nor that of the supposed victim has any bearing whatever on the truth status of the claims being made against Red Cross Knight. We thus find Una once again in her old role of enabling Red Cross Knight’s moral lapses.6 While in exposing Archimago she seems to foil his plot, at a deeper level it could be said that she nevertheless serves his purposes in abetting the ethical confusion that somehow persists in Red Cross Knight.

So in what sense is Una “evil”? She is never revealed to be a villain, in the manner of Archimago or Duessa. Which is to say that an evil interiority, initially hidden from view, is never exposed to the light of day. Indeed, I haven’t adduced anything to convince us that Una possesses an evil interiority of this sort. Rather, she seems to have a knack for perfectly innocent acts and sayings that somehow have bad effects. Here I am tempted to invoke the Leninist notion of “objective guilt” recently revived by Slavoj Žižek. As he paraphrases this claim: “your intentions may be good and your desire to help people sincere, but, nonetheless, objectively, what you claim means, in this precise moment of the struggle, a support for the reactionary forces...”7 In the same way, Una’s intentions may be good and her desire to help people sincere, but her actions nevertheless often objectively serve the purposes of evil, regardless of her subjective state. Though on the other hand, I’m also trying to claim that we can’t really know about that subjective state either, and that we tend therefore to project an a priori sort of goodness onto Una that a careful reading of the poem can’t necessarily sustain. In this sense, I am at least provisionally endorsing the Stalinist turn on “objective guilt” also described by Žižek: “while Lenin remained at this level, claiming the access to the ‘objective meaning’ of the events, Stalin made a fateful step further and re-subjectivized this objective meaning. In the Stalinist universe, there are, paradoxically, ultimately no dupes, everyone knows the ‘objective meaning’ of his/her acts, so that, instead of the illusory consciousness, we get direct hypocrisy and deceit: the ‘objective meaning’ of your acts is what you REALLY WANTED, and your good intentions are merely a hypocritical mask.”8 I’m not conducting a Stalinist show trial, of course, but I am suggesting that Spenser’s moral cosmos, obsessed as it is with “direct hypocrisy and deceit,” may allow for a similar re-subjectivizing of Una’s objective guilt—the difference being that it all remains constitutively fuzzy and inferential, in good Spenserian fashion, and not “clear” as in a Stalinist trial.

I think we can bring Una’s ethical status into better perspective by returning to the concept of the “ethical syncope” I raised earlier, in which Una’s evil is not a positive choice but rather a kind of momentary blacking out of her moral consciousness. Evil is here a mere absence or void rather than a positive presence. It does not achieve the status of being but rather points to something absent from Una’s being. I am phrasing the problem this way in order to invoke St. Augustine’s notion of evil as privation. For Augustine, evil is not a counter-principle to God, an adversarial party subverting the goodness of creation from within, but merely the effect of distance from, or privation of, the full being with which God’s goodness invests creation.9 Evil is thus an emptiness at once ethical and ontological. It seems to me that this Augustinian notion does a better job of describing Una’s evil than does any positive account of evil intent on her part.

At the same time, though, Augustine’s notion is better adapted to describing evils suffered than evils perpetrated. Blindness, for instance, can easily be understood as the privation of sight. Augustine likewise sees the choice to commit evil acts as a turning away from the good, but the theory of privation has a harder time explaining how the will toward evil originates. In other words, Augustine’s concept of lack or privation can help describe evil actions but it cannot obviously explain or account for them in any causal sense, as if the will to commit evil resulted from some pre-existing lack in the self. If there is some connection between evil as privation and an evil disposition, then, Spenser will have to think it through or invent it.

It might be fair to ask, first of all, whether the notion of evil as privation has any purchase in Spenser at all. I think that it does, and that Book I illustrates it in particularly vivid form. The paradigm here might be Orgoglio, the muscle-bound giant who turns out to be a kind of inflated bladder. Once pricked he collapses into nothingness. Duessa, when stripped of her gorgeous apparel, is likewise less than human rather than superhuman. Evil in Book I is more often than not a grand show concealing emptiness. Privation likewise afflicts the Sans brothers, defined by their lack of joy, faith, and law; and Abessa, whose name may suggest not only “abess” but also the Latin ab-esse.10 (Her ecclesiastical absenteeism ends up being doubled by Una’s ethical “absence” with respect to Kirkrapine’s murder.) Even the ambiguous satyrs are defined by their pagan lack of access to revealed truth.

Una, too, is a character shaped largely by privation, though first in the sense of evils suffered rather than evils done. Her condition is more or less defined by mourning, first for her parents, then both for her parents and Red Cross Knight. It is as if Una collects new forms of lack in the course of her journey. One possible path in this case from evils suffered to an actively evil will might be to convert loss into a secret source of enjoyment—to luxuriate in, or fetishize, privation itself. We needn’t bother ourselves trying to imagine what this would look like in Spenser, since he depicts it for us directly as the practices of Catholic monasticism. It is thus once again no accident that Una, dressed rather like a nun from the very start of the poem, finds herself wandering into
the precincts of Abessa and Corceca. They are her specific temptation, the secretly pleasurable sin that may conceal itself beneath her mourning.

Of course, the attempt to attribute lack, much less a sin, to Una seems to be contradicted by her very name, which implies an unimpeachable integrity. Allegorically, Una is the “one” true faith or una fides, which is complete in itself and thus shuns admixture with other faiths, a completeness represented by her chastity. But even Una’s name is complicated. In Latin, una can be an adverbial form meaning “in one” or “together,” “unanimously.” As an adverb, una indicates not something complete unto itself but rather something that forms a unified whole precisely by combining or mixing with something else. The character Una is similarly incomplete; she must conjoin with Red Cross Knight in order to free her parents, and falls into mourning when left alone. She is deficient without him, as he is without her. Likewise, as we have seen, Una displays a characteristically Spenserian tendency to assimilate to her surroundings, as when she becomes blind of heart at Corceca’s house or when she reluctantly indulges the pagan idolatry of the satyrs.

Whether adjective or adverb, the Latin una is a modifier, not a substantive. It must attach itself to a grammatical entity, for it can designate only a quality or attribute, not a thing or person. Una’s name therefore points to the way in which her chaste and integral unity is shadowed by a promiscuous unity. That is, the unity that stands apart from others is accompanied by a tendency to unify with them, and thus to drift into strange propinquitues with evil. This is not a “positive” evil on Una’s part, but a lack-in-being that afflicts her, and turns her into a kind of clinging vine. When Archimago conjures up dreams of a promiscuous Una in Red Cross Knight, then, he may not only be playing on the knight’s perverse wishes and fears but revealing a hidden dimension that really pertains to Una.

When I use the phrase “lack-in-being” to describe Una, I am invoking the standard English translation of Jacques Lacan’s term manque-a-etre—a phrase which, it seems to me, he must be adapting from Augustine. In the broadest sense, Lacanian “lack-in-being” designates the way in which the subject’s accession to language is simultaneously an alienation in language, which hollows out our real or bodily being and cancels the jouissance of our primordial connection to the maternal body.11 While this Lacanian concept is not intrinsically or necessarily gendered, it does open up some issues of gender that may be pertinent, and allows us to ask: to what extent is Una’s “lack-in-being” connected with the fact that she is a female character? To put it bluntly: is what Una “lacks” the phallus, and is this the source of her evil? This question now seems painfully old-fashioned even to me, and I don’t intend to answer it. But I would at least like to flesh it out a bit. Here we may turn from Lacan back to Freud, who in his 1925 essay, “Some Psychic Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes,” poses the relation between castration and female ethics in brutally direct form:

In girls the motive for the demolition of the Oedipus complex is lacking. Castration has already had its effect, which was to force the child into the situation of the Oedipus complex. Thus the Oedipus complex escapes the fate which it meets with in boys: it may be slowly abandoned or dealt with by repression, or its effects may persist far into women’s normal mental life. I cannot evade the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men. Their super-ego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men. Character-traits which critics of every epoch have brought up against women—that they show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgements by feelings of affection or hostility—all these would be amply accounted for by the modification in the formation of their super-egos which we have inferred above.12

For Freud, what determines the ethical character of women is not the lack of a phallus—at least not directly—but rather the lack of a castration complex. Because women are “already” castrated, Freud theorizes, the threat of future castration does not hang over their heads (or other bodily parts) as it does for men. Deprived of this capacity for punishment, the female superego is thus less inexorable in its demands, and women are consequently less strict in their moral outlook than men. I adduce Freud’s views here not in order to offer a psychoanalytic reading of Una’s “lack” but rather to show how St. Augustine’s intertwining of ethical and ontological privation can be given a gendered turn. If Freud has any explanatory value, it is simply as an inheritor of a long tradition in which Spenser also participates.

For me, the more interesting possibility is that Una’s ethical “lack-in-being” results not from her status as a female character but from her status as a fictional one. The fact is that Una doesn’t just lack a particular body part—she lacks a body altogether, since she is merely a literary construct. But Lacan’s claim that our lack-in-being results from our alienation in language is really just a way of saying that, at some level, we are all literary characters, composed of signifiers to which no real core of being corresponds. Allegorical personages of the type that Spenser creates, being conspicuously “hollow” from a characterological perspective, may be particularly well suited to depicting this dilemma. And the state of being “merely literary” may have an ethical dimension insofar as “lack” is a
synonym for “want.” To want in the sense of lacking is the condition for wanting in the sense of desiring. Una’s status as modifier lacking a substantive installs that promiscuous tendency toward connection or mixture that renders her as likely to couple with Archimago as with Red Cross Knight.

For Una, oneness is never an actual state but only an aspiration. But this is of course a generalized affliction for the characters of romance. Arthur, for instance, is left with only an empty place in the grass and an equally empty space in his heart after his dream of the Faerie Queene ends. The fullness of that dream paradoxically scoops him out, thus supplying the lack or desire that fuels his quest. If Spenser installs a hermeneutic of suspicion centered on Una, this may be simply to deny us the saving illusion that there are any exceptions to the rule. And if we are hesitant to face the possibility of Una’s evil, this may simply be because we are equally hesitant to face our own. We would all like to be the exception, the one whose ethical solidity shows up the hollowness of the others by contrast. The last thing we want to feel, therefore, is that we are at one with a threatening or disappointing Una. Whence arises our literary critical sin with respect to Una: the desire to convert her into a kind of allegorical museum-piece, the good but rather dull girl with which I began. I will end by offering a Spenserian name for this literary-critical sin: idolatry. 13 Perhaps the episode of Una among the satyrs could thus be retitled “Una among her Readers.” It seems to me, at least, that the salvage nation’s reaction to her is not so very distant from ours:

They in compassion of her tender youth,
And wonder of her beauty soverayne,
Are wonne with pity and unwonted ruth,
And all prostrate upon the lowly playne,
Doe kisse her feete, and fawne on her with countenance fayne.

(I.vi.12.5-9)

The satyrs are not wrong to note these attractive qualities in Una; but they are wrong to deify her on account of them. Being beautiful and pitiful does not a goddess make. (That their religious veneration is subtended by animal lust should also give us pause.) The satyrs simply can’t hear, or at least can’t understand, Una’s insistence that she is no god after all but merely human, all too human. Although our knees do not bend backward, it seems to me that some readers of PQ are still too quick to bow down before Una. We might therefore try to do a better job of attending to the demurrals that emanate from Una’s own lips—some intentional, but the more telling ones not so. What she is telling us is not that she is evil but that, like every other character in Book I, she has her evil—and a very interesting flavor of evil it is.

Notes

1. I wish to thank the audience at the 2009 meeting of the International Spenser Society for their helpful and probing questions after the talk. I especially wish to thank Katherine Eggert and Judith H. Anderson who continued the conversation by e-mail, and provided invaluable references and suggestions.

2. The consensus position is well represented by Richard A. Levin, “The Legend of Redcross Knight and Una, or of the Love of a Good Woman,” Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900 31:1 (Winter 1991), 1-24. A rare note of criticism is sounded in Dorothy Stephens, The Limits of Eroticism in Post-Petrarchan Narrative (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), which notes that “Una’s very innocence of intrigue leaves her unprepared to recognize its subtler shapes” (115). But even here it is an excess of goodness (as it were) that gets Una into trouble. There is a line of criticism that explores the theological instabilities caused by Una’s gender, but this is not the same as the kind of ethical criticism I will engage in here. See chapter two of Claire McEachern, The Poetics of English Nationhood, 1590-1612 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 34-82, and the response by Harry Berger in “Sexual and Religious Politics in Book I of Spenser’s Faerie Queene,” English Literary Renaissance (2004), 201-242.


4. See Katherine Walls, “Abessa and the Lion: The Faerie Queene 1.3.1-12” Spenser Studies 5 (1985), 17: “At first, Una and the lion are a dramatically contrasting pair, but gradually they become indistinguishable.”

5. Judith H. Anderson points out to me that Una’s observations are timely in a good way, since this is night after all and Red Cross Knight does indeed need rest. This is true, but it would have been better if she hadn’t made the point just now, in the presence of Archimago.


8. ibid.

9. See Augustine, On the Nature of the Good, iii-xxiii; Enchiridion, xi-xv; and On the Morals of the Manicheans, ii-viii. For a useful corrective to common misunderstandings of Augustine’s position—as well as a critique of its philosophical


