

## Resurrection as Blasphemy in Canto 5 of Edmund Spenser's "The Legend of Holiness"

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" ... and so, who are  
you, after all?  
—I am part of the power  
which forever wills evil  
and forever works good."

(Goethe's *Faust*, as used as epigraph to  
Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*)<sup>1</sup>

Journeys to and from the netherworld are common occurrences in "The Legend of Holiness," Book 1 of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. From Archimago awaking Proserpina and Gorgon as he calls out of "deepe darkness dredd / Legions of Sprights" in canto 1 (FQ 1.1.37-38) to Redcrosse reenacting Christ's death and resurrection in the dragon fight of canto 11, the world of the living is in constant contact with the realm of the dead. As has been well-documented in Spenser scholarship, this interaction is fraught with literary echoes. Matthew Fike's *Spenser's Underworld in the 1590 Faerie Queene* (2003) is just a recent example of scholarship that elaborates on the connections between Spenser's epic and both Christian and classical descents, in particular Christ's harrowing of hell and Aeneas's and Theseus's journeys to the underworld, to name some prominent models.<sup>2</sup>

However, my contribution is neither a study of sources, nor of the historical setting. Instead I am offering a reading of a problematic section of "The Legend of Holiness," the second half of canto 5, in which Duessa meets with Night and then descends into the underworld to "save" Sansjoy (as the Argument to the canto puts it). I shall argue that Duessa's act of salvation is blasphemous and (conse-

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quently) ineffectual. The starting point for my reading is a useful suggestion by Elizabeth Jane Bellamy, Patrick Cheney and Michael Schoenfeldt. In the introduction to their excellent collection of articles, *Imagining Death in Spenser and Milton*, they point out that “Spenser seems attracted to narratives in which characters miraculously survive death” (5). While death is everywhere present in *The Faerie Queene*, the epic, they argue, is defined rather by “Spenser’s notorious dragoness Errorr,” making the “Spenserian narrative [...] errorr’s thriving terrain, where the finality of death is often deferred indefinitely” (4-5). That certainly seems to be the case in the story at hand. Duessa’s attempt to find healing, and thus life, for the dying Sansjoy leaves the Saracen in a limbo: ever recovering from his wounds he is denied closure by never again being mentioned in the epic. A relevant question is whether he is in fact dead or alive. After all, to find healing Duessa does not bring him *up* from the kingdom of death, but *down* into hell, a realm from which, as Spenser clearly states, no one “back returned without heauenly grace” (FQ 1.5.31). The consequences of Bellamy, Cheney and Schoenfeldt’s pronouncement that “the finality of death is often deferred indefinitely” seems to be that Errorr, for all her power and deviousness, may in fact be biting her own tail (or, to use Spenser’s own image, is having her own “scattered brood” suck up her lifeblood [FQ 1.1.25]).

Like the powers of evil in both Goethe and Bulgakov, Errorr, for all her textual havoc, may in fact be willing evil but working good. The contention of this paper is that Duessa and her “mother” Night, even as they bring linguistic confusion and stage a blasphemous mock-imitation of Christ’s harrowing of hell, may be suffering the same fate. Blasphemy, like “*Errorrs endlesse traine*” (FQ 1.1.18)—which includes both Archimago and Duessa—is “textual” and “linguistic” (Nitisor 70). That linguistic profanation can be felt in the semantic confusion of canto 5, first felt as a threat to the salvific status of Redcrosse, the putative hero of the whole book.

The closer one studies canto 5 the stranger it gets. According to the canto’s Argument, it seems a straightforward enough story:

*The faithfull knight in equall field  
 subdewes his faithlesse foe,  
 Whom false Duessa saues, and for  
 his cure to hell does goe.*

The four lines of the Argument divide the canto into its two main components: the daytime joust between Redcrosse and Sansjoy that occupies stanzas 1 to 19, and a second nighttime part, stanzas 20 to 44, that describes Duessa attempting to find a cure for Sansjoy, defeated but miraculously protected from Redcrosse's coup de grace by a "darkesome clowd" (FQ 1.5.13). The rising and setting of the sun balance the two main parts of the canto. In stanza two "*Phoebus* fresh [...] hurld his glistring beams through gloomy ayre," thereby waking Redcrosse, who puts on his "sunbright armes" (FQ 1.5.2). In the "euentyde" of stanza 19, Duessa leaves the wounded Redcrosse to seek out Night, "That *Phoebus* chearefull face durst neuer vew" (FQ 1.5.20). The canto concludes with the return of "*Phoebus* pure" (FQ 1.5.44), and with "The false *Duessa* leauing noyous Night, / Returnd to stately pallace of Dame *Pryde*," if only to find Redcrosse gone.

The joust itself is presented in clear-cut moral terms, a matter of light against darkness. Stanza 1 portrays Redcrosse as a virtuous knight in shining armor:

The noble hart, that harbours vertuous thought,  
 And is with childe of glorious great intent,  
 Can neuer rest, vntill it forth haue brought  
 Th'eternall brood of glorie excellent:  
 [...]. (FQ 1.5.1)

Accordingly, it is twice repeated in stanzas 8 and 9 that "So th'one for wrong, the other striues for right." However, the word used to name virtue's offspring, the "brood of glory," had earlier in the book been used to describe Error's "scattered brood" (FQ 1.1.25). If the Spenserian narrative is "error's thriving terrain," then that is never more so than in this canto. The initial stanza just quoted exemplifies what Harry Berger, Jr.—in line with several earlier scholars—persuasively claims is a "specular intimacy between Archimago and the narrator.

The [Archimago] virus is most effective when it infiltrates the narrative voice [...]" (46).

In this instance, despite occurring in the clear daylight, the whole setup of the joust is deeply suspicious, as it takes place in the House of Pride and has Duessa as its prize. Within the House everything is open to error's attack, even Queen Elizabeth herself in the specular vision of the prideful "mayden Queene, that shone as *Titans* ray" (FQ 1.4.8). By implication, the very genre that Spenser is working within, the heroic epic, is tainted at the beginning of canto 5. When Redcrosse, ready for the fight, enters "the commune hall" of the House of Pride, he is met by minstrels, bards, "And many Chroniclers, that can record / Old loues, and warres for ladies doen by many a Lord" (FQ 1.5.3). It is surely no coincidence that these lines, describing the activity of misled poets that have entered the prideful House on the proverbial "broad high way" (FQ 1.4.2), provide a dark counterpoint to Spenser's Virgilian statement of purpose in the Proem to Book 1: "Fierce warres and faithful loues shall moralize my song."

This kind of reading could easily be taken to nihilistic heights, questioning the core values of Spenser's heroic epic. However, the confusion does not only attach itself to the poem's putative hero. The interpretative vortex seems to fall back on its duplicitous originators, affecting as much the characters associated with the House of Pride. As the supreme example, take the reason for Redcrosse's victory over Sansjoy. The Saracen, enraged by the sight of his dead brother's shield, is about to kill Redcrosse when Duessa intervenes:

Therewith vpon his crest he [Sansjoy] stroke him [Redcrosse] so,  
That twise he reeled, readie twise to fall;  
End of the doubtfull battaile deemed tho  
The lookers on, and lowd to him gan call  
The false Duessa, Thine the shield, and I, and all. (FQ 1.5.11)

In the notes to his edition of the poem, A. C. Hamilton glosses the "him" in the penultimate line of the stanza as follows: "the Red Cross Knight assumes that he, not Sansjoy, is addressed." From the way this note is phrased one can perhaps infer that Hamilton for his part as-

sumes that Sansjoy is the intended recipient, quite likely a common enough interpretation among most readers of the poem. Why would Duessa otherwise go to such length to "save" him for the rest of the canto? The stanza itself, however, gives us no clue since the "him" in line 8 may refer back to either of the pronouns in line five: "*he* stroke *him* so" (my emphasis). Certainly, when Duessa repeats the phrase once the battle is over—"The conquest yours, I yours, the shield, and glory yours" (FQ 1.5.14)—the recipient is clearly Redcrosse. The confusion, I believe, is intentional. Not only is the interpretation within the poem open-ended, as both combatants are able to take Duessa's encouragement to heart (even if Sansjoy does not appear to respond to it), but the narrator leaves the choice open to the readers of the poem as well. In fact, there is no conclusive evidence which of the two knights Duessa is actually addressing, or indeed, if she is rather hedging her bets. The adjective "false" that attaches to her name as she calls out can go more ways than one.

It would be easy to assume that all the evil characters in the book are united, and that since Duessa enters the scene together with Sansjoy's brother Sansfoi, she and the three Saracen brothers form a well-rehearsed team. We do find out later in the canto that they are in fact related through Night, who is "the mother [...] / Of falshood, and root of *Duessaes* race" (FQ 1.5.27) as well as the aunt of the three brothers (FQ 1.5.22). Yet their relationship to each other is far from straightforward. Duessa, for example, does not reveal her true identity to the brothers any more than to Redcrosse, but maintains the false alibi of "Fidessa" throughout her encounters with all the males, from Fradubio and Redcrosse to the Sans brothers. As we shall see, she even hides her true identity for most of her conversation with her own "mother," Night. Duessa is not beyond lying to any of them. For example, in stanza 47 of canto 4 she is not telling Sansjoy the truth about her past relationships with his brother, or with Redcrosse; indeed, she seems more than happy to exchange lovers depending on their luck in the jousts. Whether she is more "true" to any one of them is a moot question.

This brings us back to the Argument for the canto, and the epistemological status of the “false” in its third line: “Whom false Duessa saues, and for / his cure to hell does goe.” Without its adjective, the statement is quite extraordinary, even moving, with Duessa described as a Christ- or Theseus-figure as she “saves” and finds a “cure” for Sansjoy through a descent into hell. This reading is further strengthened by Spenser using the phrase “so fowle forlorne” in 1.5.23 and 1.8.39 to describe both Sansjoy’s and Redcrosse’s plights before being “harrowed” by Duessa and Prince Arthur respectively. Yet what are we to do with the “false” that accompanies Duessa’s name? That she is false to Redcrosse we know, but is she performing a false harrowing of hell, a blasphemous inversion of the literary sources, and of the rescue operations enacted in the book: Redcrosse saving Una’s parents from the dragon, and Prince Arthur and Una saving Redcrosse from Orgoglio’s dungeon and Despaire’s cave? More provocatively, is she thereby as “false” to Sansjoy as to Redcrosse, performing an ineffectual mock rescue that leaves the Saracen in eternal limbo while she, seemingly forgetting him, returns to make love to Redcrosse (as she does in canto 7)? May she even in some sense be “false” to herself in that she is drawn into a vortex of her own and Archimago’s making, from which she cannot extricate herself?

In my reading, the vortex of Duessa’s falsehood has its center in the middle section, stanzas 14 to 27 of canto 5, forming a bridge between the two main parts of the Argument, the joust and the descent into hell. In this section Duessa, after dealing with Redcrosse, seeks the help of Night. At least since Judith Anderson’s influential article, “Redcrosse and the Descent into Hell,” it has been customary to interpret the vortex as Redcrosse’s dark dream,<sup>3</sup> a “sickness within, a despair of which Redcrosse will not be fully conscious until he meets the actual figure of Despair in canto ix” (Anderson 482). Anderson does a great job at tracing the futile attempts at recovery from this despair when Sansjoy as a stand-in for Redcrosse is brought to Aesculapius, and at interpreting the story of Hippolytus in psychological terms, with Redcrosse taking “all the major roles” (488). What I would

like to do here, however, is to exchange a strictly psychological reading for a more epistemological and existential one.

To do so I want to focus not on the descent itself, but on what leads up to it, the meeting between Duessa and Night. What is striking about their first encounter is how Duessa confuses not only Night (the character), but the canto's neat moral dichotomy of night and day. As with *Lucifera*, the virgin queen of the House of Pride "that shone as *Titans ray*" (FQ 1.4.8), Duessa's light is pure deceit:

Who when she [i.e., Night] saw Duessa sunny bright,  
 Adorn'd with gold and iewels shining cleare,  
 She greatly grew amazed at the sight,  
 And th'vnacquainted light began to feare:  
 And would haue backe retyred to her caue,  
 Vntill the witches speech she gan to heare,  
 Saying, Yet O thou dreaded Dame, I craue  
 Abyde, till I haue told the message, which I haue. (FQ 1.5.21)

Most telling is the fact that Night, despite being Duessa's kin, for six stanzas does not even recognize her "daughter." She finally has to ask the shining apparition, "But what art thou, that telst of Nephews kilt?" (FQ 1.5.26).

When Night finds out that the bright figure "that do seeme not I, *Duessa* ame, [...] the daughter of Deceipt and Shame," she first acknowledges her own confusion:

In that fayre face  
 The false resemblaunce of Deceipt, I wist  
 Did closely lurke; yet so true-seeming grace  
 It carried, that I scarce in darksome place  
 Could it discerne, though I the mother bee  
 Of falshood, and roote of *Duessaes* race.  
 O welcome child, whom I haue longd to see,  
 And now haue seene vnwares. (FQ 1.5.27)

The power of negation has certainly reached its zenith when even the "resemblaunce of Deceipt" is "false." This, in my reading, is the very center of a vortex whose spirals stretch from the introduction of Er-

rouer and Archimago in canto 1, and the division “into double parts” through Duessa in canto 2, all the way to Despaire’s cave in canto 9. The House of Pride of cantos 4 and 5 gives the vortex a local habitation and a name, but it is stanza 27, the midpoint of canto 5, itself the midpoint of the first nine cantos, that pinpoints its epistemological and ontological center, the place where even the mother of falsehood and “root of *Duessaes* race” acknowledges that she has been deceived.

Here also the blasphemy has its center. In words that echo Anna’s (and Simeon’s) Messianic delight at seeing the newborn Savior in chapter 3 of the Gospel of Luke, Night acknowledges the “child, whom I haue longd to see” (FQ 1.5.27). This recognition situates her and Duessa’s rescue operation to save Sansjoy even more strongly as a confused parody of the main themes of the Legend of Holiness, centered in the practice and teaching of the House of Holiness in canto 9, and symbolically reenacted by a reformed Redcrosse in the book’s final two cantos. The vortex of course has its antithesis in Una, yet throughout the Book her truth is veiled and, with the single exception of canto 10, constantly threatened and thwarted. Only within the House of Holiness is the confusion gone as all the book’s false images have their true counterparts. Indeed such is its power that it confounds the very center of the vortex by revealing a way out even in the midst of its obfuscating power.

That both Night and her “daughter” Duessa are deceived by their own deceit can be seen in the preceding two stanzas, 25 and 26 of canto 5. Night, oblivious to the deeper truth of her statements, in words that seem to foreshadow both Goethe and Bulgakov, delineates her revenge on Redcrosse for killing the Saracen brothers:

The sonnes of Day he [i.e., Jove] faouureth, I see,  
And by my ruines thinkes to make them great:  
To make one great by others losse, is bad excheat.

Yet shall they not escape so freely all;  
For some shall pay the price of others guilt:  
And he the man that made *Sansfoy* to fall,  
Shall with his owne blood price, that he hath spilt.



As Hamilton points out in his notes, the "some" of line two of stanza 26 include both Christ and Arthur, to which I would also add Redcrosse himself.

Duessa's descent to the underworld that follows, for all its pathos and all its blasphemy is as ineffectual as Night's pronouncements on payment and guilt. As critics have long established, while the joust between Redcrosse and Sansjoy may have blurred the moral boundaries between the two, making the Saracen a specular image of Redcrosse's spiritual downfall, their healing (or lack thereof) again differentiates them. Where Redcrosse is brought by Una to the House of Holiness for both his body and soul to be healed through the ministrations of "seuen Bead-men" (FQ 1.10.36), Sansjoy is brought down to hell and left there in the limbo of materialist medicine, as Douglas Trevor explains in his essay "Sadness in *The Faerie Queene*." The Saracen's state is not unlike that of "thrisy *Tantalus* hong by the chin" (FQ 1.5.35), whose fate Spenser sums up in canto 7 of Book Two: "He daily dyde, yet neuer throughly dyen couth" (FQ 2.7.58; see Krier 53).

I want to end by returning to Bellamy, Cheney and Schoenfeldt. In their introduction to *Imagining Death* they link Milton's description of Death as a psychological state to Spenser's Despair (19). I would like to add the further, perhaps obvious link to Sansjoy, whose fate is not unlike the plight of the sick in the Lazar-house shown to Adam in Book 11 of Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

Immediately a place  
Before his eyes appeared, sad, noisome, dark,  
A lazar-house it seemed, wherein were laid  
Numbers of all diseased, [...]

Dire was the tossing, deep the groans, despair  
Tended the sick busiest from couch to couch;  
And over them triumphant death his dart  
Shook, but delayed to strike, though oft invoked  
With vows, as their chief good, and final hope. (PL 11.477-93)

Duessa's descent may appear a harrowing of hell, but leads in fact to a state worse than death. If Duessa, like Faust and Woland, "forever

wills evil and forever works good," the opposite is also true: to her own kind Duessa forever wills good and forever works evil.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of this quotation in relation to the theme of blasphemy, see Nitisor 75.

<sup>2</sup>For additional discussion and references, consult "hell" in Hamilton.

<sup>3</sup>Berger's article on Archimago is one example.

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