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“The Fairy Way of Writing”: Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* and C.S. Lewis’s “Habit of Mind”

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While readers of C.S. Lewis have commonly noted his early love for myths, fairy tales and epic poetry, the fullest impact of Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* on Lewis’s personal worldview as well as on his imaginative and professional writings has yet to be noted. Since “learning about Spenser leads us into Lewis’s inner life” (1), let’s begin by reviewing briefly the responses of Lewis to this longest epic poem in the English language. With his lifelong love of Spenser established, we can then examine two key components embodied in *The Faerie Queene* itself: 1) its ancient neoplatonic worldview with its fusion of classical images of Nature with the poet’s imagination; and 2) its use of the Celtic “Faerie” realm to symbolize the highest spiritual significance of mere historic Britain. After exploring these two aspects of *The Faerie Queene* we can more readily see how Spenser’s “habit of mind” was utilized by Lewis in his own imaginative writings, as well as in his literary criticism and his philosophy of Myth.

LEWIS’S RESPONSES TO SPENSER

In a letter to his boyhood friend, Arthur Greeves, Lewis writes that after reading the poem on weekends for about six months, he has “at last come to the end of the Faerie Queene: and though I say ‘at last,’ I almost wish he had lived to write six books more as he hoped to do—so much have I enjoyed it” (2). This reveals that Lewis in his

adolescence has transcended our modern objections and difficulties: the difficulty with poetic and even archaic language, resistance to long narrative poems, and finally, the modern failure to understand how allegory works. Yet, on the most basic level *The Faerie Queene* offers adventure. To quote Doris Myers:

. . . Its premise is that before Prince Arthur became king he made an extended journey to Fairyland, a parallel world . . . ruled by Gloriana, the fairy queen. In *The Faerie Queene* Arthur was supposed to accomplish great deeds for Gloriana, deeds somehow related to those of twelve other knights. . . . As allegory, its premise is that each knight’s adventures set forth one of the twelve virtues . . . (3).

Let us now hear Lewis’s own middle-aged voice in 1941 in an essay “On Reading *The Faerie Queene*”:

Beyond all doubt it is best to have made one’s first acquaintance with Spenser in a very large—and, preferably, illustrated—edition of *The Faerie Queene*, on a wet day, between the ages of twelve and sixteen; . . . those who have had this good fortune . . . will never have lost

touch with the poet. His great book will have accompanied them year by year . . . To them I need not speak; the problem is how to find substitutes for their slowly ripened habit of mind . . . (4).

Lewis goes on to describe the poem’s “medieval” beauties:

. . . What he [Spenser] had always liked was the Middle Ages as he imagined them to have been and as they survived in his time in the pageant, the morality play, and the metrical romance. . . . [thus] he was enabled to produce a tale more solemn, more redolent of the past, more venerable, than any real medieval romance—to deny, in his own person, the breach between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance . . . (5).

These quotes from Lewis himself reveal the various elements of *The Faerie Queene* summed up by Gene Edward Veith: “Here was golden language, allegory and romance. Here too was the appeal of fairy tales and a self-contained fantasy world, all bound together in an imaginatively realized Christianity” (6). In other words, growing up with Spenser provided Lewis with a model of thought, a “habit of mind” which was fundamentally syncretistic. Lewis thus learned from Spenser that just as the poet taught lessons of moral truth through images of great beauty, he could likewise in his own imaginative writings both enchant and instruct. Before we consider further evidences of Lewis’s Spenserian “habit of mind,” however, we need to hear what Lewis himself has to say about Spenser’s fusion of both Christian thought and Platonic thought. This philosophical syncretism is known as “Neoplatonism” and is much beloved by Lewis.

NEOPLATONIC THOUGHT IN *THE FAERIE QUEENE*

At the conclusion of his essay *Edmund Spenser, 1552-99*, Lewis tries to explain to his readers how Spenser writes “primarily as a (Protestant) Christian and secondarily as a Platonist” (7). Lewis then states that “both systems are united with one another and cut off from some—not all—modern thought by their conviction that Nature . . . is not the only thing that exists. . . . Christians and Platonists both believe in an ‘other’ world” (8). When the poet, through his imagination, aspires for that “other world” which is the Source of all Beauty (the “First Fair”), he produces “beauty making beautiful old rhyme” which is called “golden and sweet” by Lewis in his OHEL volume. Quoting Sidney, a “dazzling” contemporary of Spenser, Lewis reminds that “the poet, unlike the historian, is not ‘captived to the trueth of a foolish world’ but can ‘deliuer a golden’”(9). Speaking against our modern tendency to subjectivize “influences” or “inspiration,” Lewis reminds as well that in the sixteenth century the “pneumatology” of the prevailing ancient “spiritual cosmology” required the word “genius” to be understood literally as “an objective, created, personal being” (10). Thus, the poet does indeed call down fire from heaven to make this “foolish” though lovely world “more lovelie” (11). Perhaps thinking of Spenser’s allegories of the Virtues in *The Faerie Queene*, he tells us that the poet’s aim is *both* ethical and aesthetic: “But this is part of the loveliness, for virtue is lovely, not merely obligatory; a celestial mistress, not a categorical imperative” (12). In discussing “the endless quest” on which Spenser sent his hero Arthur, Lewis defends the utter reality of such quests in Neoplatonic terms reminiscent of his own descriptions of Sehnsucht: “To a Christian Platonist these formless longings would logically appear as among the sanest and most fruitful experiences we have; *for their object really exists and really draws us to itself*” [italics added] (13).

Another aspect of Spenser’s Elizabethan Neoplatonism, pointed out by Dame Frances Yates, a leading Renaissance

scholar, is the fusion of cosmic, astral themes with its moral allegory of the virtues being celebrated in each of the books of *The Faerie Queene*. The complexity and beauty of these fusions are revealed allegorically, of course, but remain philosophically Neoplatonic:

... the planetary themes of the poem should be seen as arranged . . . in an order deliberately selected to express the idea and purpose of the poem, the presentation of an ideal portrait of a religious and moral leader, of Queen Elizabeth I . . . That portrait has a variegated planetary and angelic colouring. Lighted by a Sun of Christian religion and Christian Charity (Book I), it includes red glints of Martial firmness (Book II). The white Chastity of the Moon (Book III) expresses the purity of the Virgin Queen’s reform. Mercury (Book IV) includes all colours and can reconcile opposites with spiritual alchemy. The Justice of Saturn (Book V) represents the wise rule of Astraea. And with Venus (Book VI) this complex movement, or religion, or personality, takes on the colouring of a courtly cult, a court ruled over by the messianic figure whom the poem as a whole celebrates (14).

Although such alchemical and astrological fusions are part of Neoplatonic philosophy, we know that Lewis loved the ancient cosmology found embedded in literature and was deeply read in such matters. In his first published scholarly book, *The Allegory of Love* (1936), in his massive magnum opus the OHEL volume (1954), as well as in the posthumously published *The Discarded Image* and *Spenser’s Images of Life*, Lewis shows his readers that literary history can illuminate Neoplatonic thought, allegorical method, and changing psychologies of Love. As Veith so aptly summarizes: “To enter into this by now quite

alien sensibility by way of romantic allegory, Lewis shows, is to enter a universe charged with meaning and mystery, where every fact of existence carries multi-leveled symbolic depths” (15).

Keeping in mind that most scholars do see Lewis as a “Neoplatonist Christian” (16), perhaps a specific example should here be cited. The reference—of the spiritual reality behind the image of Venus—occurs in his commentary on the Arthurian poetry of his close friend Charles Williams, specifically, his poem *The Calling of Taliessin*. Lewis identifies the figure of Nimue, the “mother of making,” as “that energy which reproduces on earth a pattern derived from ‘the third heaven,’ i.e. from the sphere of Venus, the sphere of Divine Love” (17). Continuing, he notes that what resides in the third heaven is called by Williams “the feeling intellect.” Carefully differentiating Wordsworth’s understanding of the feeling intellect as being a subjective state in human minds, Williams is, according to Lewis:

... thinking of an objective celestial fact . . . [which] exists as a permanent reality in the spiritual world and by response to that archetype Nimue brings the whole process of nature into being. *Williams is here . . . reproducing the doctrine of the Renaissance Platonists that Venus—celestial love and beauty—was the pattern or model after which God created the material universe . . .* [italics added] (18).

Published in 1974, along with Williams’ own Arthurian poetry cycle and his unfinished manuscript, *The Figure of Arthur*, such comments reveal Lewis’s own consistent use of “the old [Neoplatonic] model” in his own thinking. Of course, it is also significant that upon recognizing this ancient and true spiritual reality, he would then cite Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, iii, vi. 12,” [where] the sphere of Venus is “The house of goodly formes and faire aspect Whence all the world

derives the glorious Features of Beautie” (19).

SPENSER’S USE OF “FAERIE” AS SPIRITUAL SYMBOL

Keeping these details of ancient spiritual cosmology in mind, we can now move on to explore the significance of the poem’s setting: Faerie itself. It seems so basic to readers: that the settings for this iconic epic poem, are both historical England and its mythical Celtic “Otherworld” of Faerie. In his fascinating 1918 article, “Spenser’s Fairy Mythology,” Edwin Greenlaw unpacks the implications. It is worth quoting him on the ancient story of King Arthur, the prophecy regarding his return as the “true king,” his association with the realm of Faerie, and the association of a “fairy bloodline” with the “true ruler” of Britain:

The traditional Arthur was a British king about whose birth many mysterious legends clustered, and who, at the end of his life, was received in *Faerie*, after that last great battle in the West, to be healed of his grievous wound by Morgain . . . After a long sojourn in *Faerie*, he was to come again and rule Britain. . . . Spenser’s use of this tradition about the fairy sovereign gives the clue to the idea on which the entire poem rests. . . . To state the proposition concisely: *Spenser conceives the Tudor rule as a return to the old British line; he conceives Elizabeth Tudor as the particular sovereign, coming out of Faerie, whose return fulfils the old prophecy.* . . (20).

Greenlaw goes on to delimit the critical importance of Spenser’s “chronicles” which blend the “histories” of the line of “British kings” with the “line” given in the “Fairy chronicles” seen in the prophecy of Merlin given to the character of Britomart in Book III. The identification of both the old British line and the “fairy line” with the present

actual 16th century historical sovereign, Queen Elizabeth I, is further made by Spenser in the Prologue to Book II st. IV, where the English realm is called the “lond of Faery” and in this “antique ymage” the Queen is asked to see her “great auncestry.” By this means Spenser is able to enrich the “real history” of Queen Elizabeth’s conflict with Philip of Spain with the Arthur-Gloriana story. In Book III, ii, 7-8, Britomart says that she has come from her “native soyle, that is by name The greater Britaine,” to “Faery lond,” where she has heard that many famous knights and ladies dwell:

. . . That is, fairy land, for the moment is Wales, the last stronghold of Britain. This is quite in agreement with the entire conception. Avalon, Fairy Land, Wales, is ruled by a *fee* who became the protector of Arthur, healed his wound, and preserved him until the time for his return, in the Tudor house, to worldly empire . . . (21)

Although Spenser’s “Faerie” provides “the entire conception” for the unifying structure of his epic poem, Frances Yates also uncovers a kind of “British Israel mystique” (22). Yates claims that there was a highly charged atmosphere of sacred destiny and “religious mission” found in Elizabeth’s court and particularly the circle of her court astrologer, Dr. John Dee, who, according to Yates, was the “great formative influence on Spenser” (23). She believes that *The Faerie Queene* “expresses a ‘prophetic moment’, after the Armada victory, when the queen appeared almost as a symbol of a new religion, transcending both Catholic and Protestant in some far-reaching revelation, and transmitting a universal Messianic message . . .” (24). In other words, just as ancient Israel was the carrier of God’s message to humanity, so Britain was to be the carrier of a second coming of God’s Kingdom on earth.

Since Lewis was deeply read in English literature as well as the Florentine

Neoplatonists, he of course would have been aware of this “millenarian underground.” The idea of the heavenly City somehow being incarnate on earth as part of humanity’s redeemed destiny is at least part of the meaning of Logres or “spiritual Britain” preparing for some sort of second Advent. Having loved Spenser’s poetry for almost his entire life, it is therefore no surprise that Lewis himself utilizes this idea of mythic “history” for his own mature fictional writings and literary criticism. Indeed, in his seminal 1944 essay, *Myth Became Fact*, he relates how the “cosmic Christ” is “heaven” and how the kingdom needs to be incarnated on earth:

. . . Now as myth transcends thought, Incarnation transcends myth. The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be myth*, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history . . . By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle . . . If God chooses to be mythopoeic—and is not the sky itself a myth—shall we refuse to be *mythopathic*? For this is the marriage of heaven and earth: Perfect Myth and Perfect Fact (25).

He further explains the relation of myth to reality when he says “what flows into you from myth is not truth but reality . . . and, therefore, every myth becomes the father of innumerable truths on the abstract level” (26).

CONCLUSION

As we conclude our exploration of Lewis’s lifelong responses to Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, it is easy to see that his love for this poem bore rich fruit. As Maria Kuteeva puts it “Lewis’s imaginative stories can indeed be considered as a form of his own ‘creative mythology’. . . The study of classical and medieval literature [particularly as embedded in *The Faerie Queene*] had a

profound effect on Lewis as a myth-maker. As a result, both mythological and cosmological aspects of his imaginary world seem to be deeply rooted in the beliefs of those periods” (27). Gene Edward Veith flatly states that “What Spenser does with Faerie Land, Lewis does with Narnia” (28). Rather than this-equals-that schematic allegorical codes, Lewis’s images function sacramentally to bring his readers face to face with Reality itself, thus becoming “landscapes of spiritual testing” (29).

Professionally, his repeated readings of Spenser must have also been the foundation for his work as a literary critic, scholar and lecturer. He gives a central place to his praise of Spenser in his first professional work, *The Allegory of Love* (1936), saying that there is a harmony of Spenser’s mind, such that “his work is one, like a growing thing, a tree” with its branches reaching to heaven and its roots to hell. And, “there is a place for everything and everything is in its place. Nothing is repressed; nothing is insubordinate. To read him is to grow in mental health” (30). The last chapter of *Allegory* treats *The Faerie Queene* as “the final defeat of courtly love by the romantic conception of marriage” (31). 15 years later, he returns to reassess Spenser for his magnum opus, the OHEL volume, saying that he had not previously “sufficiently emphasized the originality and fruitfulness of this structural invention [of Faerie Land]” (32). According to Lewis, it solves all the problems of writing about states of the heart, Spenser’s real concern, for “all the states become people or places in that country” (33). When Lewis lectured on Spenser at Cambridge University in the 1950’s, these lecture notes were gathered up and published posthumously as *Spenser’s Images of Life*. Partly because Spenser is embedding medieval values in his visionary epic and carrying them forward into his own time, Renaissance England, Lewis most famously believed that there was more to connect these periods of history than to separate them, therefore proclaiming that “the Renaissance never happened.”

Time prevents detailing the philosophical impact of Spenser’s entwining of mythic “fairy” history and British everyday “literal” history. This fusion of Myth and History presented as spiritual Reality played a key role in Lewis’s conversion to Christianity in 1931. Lewis clearly outlines his belief of images functioning mythopoeically to bring us the experience of Reality in his essay *Myth Became Fact* (1944). He tells us there that we must be “mythopathic” in our understanding and not to fear the “mythical radiance resting on our theology” (34). It seems that for Lewis, reading *The Faerie Queene* was his lifelong preparation for showing us this necessary truth.

NOTES

1. Myers, Doris T. “Spenser.” IN: *Reading the Classics with C.S. Lewis*. Thomas L. Martin, editor. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 2000, p. 99.
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3. Myers, op. cit., pp. 88-89.
4. Lewis, C.S. “On Reading *The Faerie Queene*.” IN: *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*. Collected by Walter Hooper. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966, 1998, p. 146.
5. Ibid., p. 148.
6. Veith, Gene Edward. “Renaissance.” IN: *Reading the Classics with C.S. Lewis*. Thomas L. Martin, editor. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 2000, p. 112.
7. Lewis, C.S. “Edmund Spenser, 1552-1599.” IN: *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*. Collected by Walter Hooper. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966, 1998, p. 144.
8. Ibid., p. 144.
9. Lewis, C.S. *Oxford History of English Literature: English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, excluding Drama*. Edited by Bonamy Dobree and Norman Davis and the late F.P. Wilson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954, p. 320.
10. Ibid., p. 322.
11. Ibid., p. 322.
12. Ibid., p. 322.
13. Ibid., p. 357.
14. Yates, Frances. *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*. London: Routledge Classics, 1979, p. 121.
15. Veith, op. cit., p. 106.
16. Barkman, Adam. *C.S. Lewis & Philosophy as a Way of Life*. Zossima Press, 2009.

17. Lewis, C.S. “Williams and the Arthuriad.” IN: *Arthurian Torso*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974, p. 285.
18. Ibid., pp. 285-86.
19. Ibid., p. 286.
20. Greenlaw, Edwin. “Spenser’s Fairy Mythology.” IN: *Edmund Spenser’s Poetry*. Second edition. Selected and edited by Hugh Maclean. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1982, 1968, p. 586.
21. Ibid., p. 590.
22. Yates, op. cit., p. 122.
23. Ibid., p. 122.
24. Ibid., p. 123.
25. Lewis, C.S. “Myth Became Fact.” IN: *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*. Edited by Walter Hooper. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970, pp. 66-67.
26. Ibid., p. 66.
27. Kuteeva, Maria. “Myth.” IN: *Reading the Classics with C.S. Lewis*. Thomas L. Martin, editor. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 2000, p. 279.
28. Veith, op. cit, p. 114.
29. Ibid., p. 114.
30. Lewis, C.S. *The Allegory of Love*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1936, p. 359.
31. Ibid., p. 298.
32. Lewis, *The Oxford History of English Literature*, op. cit., p. 380.
33. Ibid., p. 380.
34. Lewis, “Myth Became Fact,” op. cit., pp. 66-67.