

Spenser and the Stuart Succession

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Had Edmund Spenser not died in 1599, he had good reason to fear the future when James I ascended to the English throne. As is well known, Spenser aroused James I's wrath through his portrait of the trial of Duessa in *The Faerie Queene*, V. ix, a transparent allegory of the trial and execution of Mary Queen of Scots on 8 February 1587. The English ambassador in Scotland, Robert Bowes, wrote to Lord Burghley on 1 November 1596 that James refused to allow the second edition of *The Faerie Queene* to be sold in Scotland and 'further he will complain to Her Majesty of the author as you will understand at more length by himself.'¹ On 12 November, Bowes wrote again explaining that the problem stemmed from 'som dishonourable effects (as the King deems thereof) against himself and his mother deceased.' Although Bowes claimed that he had persuaded James that the book had not been 'passed with privilege of Her Majesty's Commissioners', James 'still desire[d] that Edward [sic] Spenser for his fault be duly tried and punished'.² Nor was the affair over yet. On 5 March 1598, George Nicolson, a servant of Robert Bowes, wrote to Sir Robert Cecil that Walter Quinn, a poet later to enjoy a successful career at the courts of James and Charles I, was 'answering Spenser's book, whereat the king is offended'.³ The work, assuming it was ever completed, has not survived.

Spenser's relationship to the Stuart claimants to the throne was clearly a key feature of his mature work published in the 1590s, as Richard A. McCabe has conclusively demonstrated.⁴ Nevertheless, a series of questions about Spenser's representation of an event that had taken place nine years before the publication of the second edition of *The Faerie Queene* remain unresolved. In

attacking Mary, was Spenser deliberately trying to blacken the name of her son and thwart his chances of becoming the king of England, as James clearly suspected? If so, are we justified in reading Duessa/Mary as James in Spenser's published poetry, or does the non-appearance of James in the poem indicate that Spenser was not making any attempt to offend the Scottish monarch and may have been genuinely surprised at the diplomatic row that ensued? Does Spenser's allegorical representation of Mary demonstrate that he was asking readers to infer a moral significance from a historical event, which, like the legend of King Arthur, was 'furthest from the daunger of enuy, and suspition of present time', in the words of the 'Letter to Raleigh' appended to the first edition of the poem?⁵ Or, does it show that Spenser re-used and re-figured work he had written earlier, as J. W. Bennett suggested was his habitual method of composition?⁶ There is no surviving evidence that will enable us to answer these questions with any certainty. Nevertheless, ignoring the issues involved impoverishes and distorts our comprehension of the context in which Spenser produced his *magnum opus*, something that has been a main aim of recent criticism of the poem. Furthermore, as I shall hope to demonstrate in this essay, there is a direct relationship between the way in which we assume that Spenser composed his poetry and its allegorical significance. Our judgements concerning Spenser's political involvement, acumen and belief, help to determine how we read the wider significance of *The Faerie Queene*. In this chapter I will analyse the extant evidence of Spenser's complex and problematic attitudes towards Mary Stuart and James VI of Scotland. Such hermeneutic decoding poses central questions about the nature of Spenser's allegorical purpose in *The Faerie Queene* and his intentions when writing the poem.

I

James VI of Scotland had a distant, complex and often difficult relationship with his mother, Mary Queen of Scots. While he may have been much more sympathetic to her than is often assumed, her execution must have come as some relief because it cleared the way for James to realise his ambition to become king of both England and Scotland.⁷ It marked the end of Mary's rather half-baked plans, conceived in 1581, some thirteen years into her captivity in England, that she and her son would rule Scotland jointly as an 'Association'.⁸ James, who had not seen his mother since 1567, when she had abdicated her Scottish throne and fled to England after the murder of her second husband, Lord Darnley, apparently declared 'I am now sole king'.⁹ James had a powerful claim to the English throne through his mother's descent from Henry VII and the same ancestry of his grandmother, Margaret Douglas, Countess of Lennox, who had passed her claim on to her grandson when she died in 1578.

Nevertheless, as Susan Doran has recently argued, James's concerns about his impending accession were well founded, and there were a number of

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potential rivals and alternative plans, some more plausible than others, circulating up to end of the 1590s.¹⁰ Many significant English aristocrats and politicians were afraid of James because they were concerned that he would use his position to avenge the trial and execution of his mother (his reaction to Spenser's representation of Mary supported this view). Despite James's protestations of loyalty to the reformed faith, his appointment of Catholics to key positions in his government in Scotland, toleration of priests and Catholic nobles, undermined the good will he had hoped to gain with many who had influence. Key figures here were William Cecil, Lord Burghley, and his son, Robert, who had earlier pledged support for the less substantial claims of the Suffolk line. Another claimant was James' cousin, Arbella Stuart (1575–1615), who appears to have shown no great personal interest in the throne, but who was to suffer throughout her life for her birthright. After 1603, this was directly a result of James's fear of her as a rival.¹¹ There were rumours that Burghley intended to marry his son to Arbella, as a means of thwarting James' claim, and, after Burghley's death in 1598 that Robert Cecil favoured a match with the Spanish infanta, Isabella. Rumours circulated around Europe too, that Henri IV of France planned to marry Arbella, and that Isabella would be married to a high-ranking English Catholic nobleman through the designs of exiled priests and Catholic nobles eager to return England to the Catholic faith.

In straightforward terms, it was clear from the early 1580s, after the failure of the Alençon marriage plans, that the Stuarts had a strong claim to the English throne, but that James's route to power was by no means straightforward or easy.¹² He tried to shore up his claim as much as he possibly could and make himself attractive to those he hoped would be his future subjects by emphasising his Protestant faith and aptitude for government. James christened his son Henry in 1594, 'an essentially English name', and the name of the king who had brought peace after the Wars of the Roses, from whom his claim stemmed. He called his daughter Elizabeth, 'as a gesture of respect to the English queen and godmother.'¹³

It is likely that James was less concerned about the character of a mother whom he hardly knew being blackened, than the effects such attacks could have upon his claim to the English throne. George Nicolson's letter cited above also contains a reference to James commissioning Walter Quinn to write another book 'concerning the king's title to England', indicating that James linked his mother's fortunes to his own hopes and plans. In his published advice to Prince Henry, *Basilikon Doron* (1599), James was quite happy to argue that the work of John Knox and his old tutor, George Buchanan, should be suppressed. The main reason, presumably, was that their writings threatened his path to the succession.¹⁴ His anger at Spenser's temerity in *The Faerie Queene* was clearly of the same order. As James Emerson Phillips has pointed out, the specific terms in which Bowes's and Nicolson's letters express the king's anger articulate his concerns: 'James's complaint, focussed as it was

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on Elizabeth's licensing policies, suggests his fear that her government, by allowing Spenser's work to be published, was thereby condoning an attack on the Scottish right and title to the succession in England'.¹⁵ Moreover, he was quite correct to be offended. Spenser's portrait of Mary rivalled the most hostile attacks of George Buchanan: 'Never had Spenser been so overtly political and never was the immediate reaction so intense.'¹⁶ The Bill of Association (1586) stated that 'anyone who practiced upon Elizabeth's life automatically lost all title to the crown', a point not lost on James who publicly stated his fears in *Basilikon Doron*, that his claim might be undermined through his unavoidable association with his mother.¹⁷ Elizabeth had forbidden her subjects to publish on the subject, and Protestant supporters of James moderated their hostility towards Mary because they realised that denigrating her was likely to damage his chances of securing the English throne.

Spenser's intervention singled him out as a notable opponent of the Stuart succession and, given the uncertainty of James's claim to the English throne and the existence of numerous other rivals, it is easy to see why James was so incensed and made the threats that he did. It is possible that Spenser, seeking to vilify female rule, had misjudged the effect that his allegorical representation of Mary would have had on her son. But it seems more likely that he was prepared to risk the hostility of the Scottish king through the figure of Duessa. The question remains why Spenser was so opposed to the Stuarts and felt the need to stick his neck out when everyone else was busy retracting theirs. A variety of reasons can be suggested. Spenser was no stranger to controversy and had been prepared to risk serious trouble before through his portrait of Lord Burghley in *Mother Hubberds Tale*, which may have led to his departure for Ireland in 1580 when it probably circulated in manuscript, and caused a major scandal in 1591, when the published edition was called in.¹⁸ He was clearly prepared to risk hostility when he felt strongly enough about a vital issue and no one could doubt that the New English Protestants in Ireland felt very keenly that they had been abandoned by Elizabeth's regime in the 1590s.¹⁹ It is plausible to assume that an attack on Mary Queen of Scots was also an implicit attack on the Catholicism of the Stuart line. Throughout his life, Spenser was associated with leading Protestants and Protestant causes, particularly the forward foreign policy and anti-Spanish position adopted by Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester, the Sidneys, Raleigh, and later Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex, his last patron.²⁰

More significant still, I would suggest, Spenser appears to have become concerned about the dangers of contaminating England and diluting Englishness through the advent of a greater British union, especially if that union was inaugurated by a ruler whose pedigree and policies were not in line with Spenser's conception of England. Such fears haunt the second edition of *The Faerie Queene, and A View of the Present State of Ireland*, also probably written in 1596.²¹ Both works acknowledge that a 'pure' identity cannot be preserved when different peoples are forced to interact through force of

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circumstances. A *View* recognises that interaction between the English and the Irish will involve a series of compromises and changes that will transform the English in Ireland. Nevertheless, the principal goal of English rule and civilisation must not be abandoned or else everything will degenerate into (Irish) chaos. *The Faerie Queene* charts the same journey, the English Red-Cross Knight making way for the idealised future British queen, Britomart in the first edition. By the end of the second edition, however, failure to preserve English military rule and civilisation sees the un-named pastoral British space of Book VI overrun by hostile savages. If movement to a greater Britain was inevitable, it would be vitally important exactly who would rule the new multiple kingdom, or the hegemonic dominance of Protestant England could be dissipated or overturned.²²

James publicly declared his adherence to the Protestant faith from the late 1580s onwards, possibly as part of a pact with Elizabeth's privy councillors to enable him to become king of England.²³ However, this clearly failed to convince a number of English observers, Spenser probably being one of them.²⁴ Spenser did become an increasingly hostile critic of the Elizabethan regime – along with a whole host of others in the 1590s – and, appears to have been moving towards a conviction that republican ideas might best revitalise a decaying body politic, writing a posthumously published sonnet to preface Lewis Lewkenor's translation of Gaspar Contareno's extravagant praise of the Venetian republic's political system, *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice* (1599), and citing Machiavelli's *Discourses* at a key point in the *View*.²⁵ Certainly his later works, from the publication of *Complaints* (1591) onwards, are more explicitly critical of the politics and culture of the English court than his first flurry of publications in the late 1570s and early 1580s, and it is possible that he was starting to believe that an oligarchy would preserve the interests of the English people better than a hereditary monarchy which threatened the core values of the nation.²⁶ If the crown was to pass from the Tudors to the Stuarts, then Elizabeth, a queen who appeared to many of her male subjects to have justified all the hostility to female rule by her behaviour in the late 1580s and 1590s, would have further betrayed the legacy others had worked so hard to establish. The transfer of power to the son of a Catholic traitor was, perhaps, simply a bridge too far and Spenser may have felt that the Catholic poachers would turn gamekeepers.

II

However, all such comments, reasonable as I think they are, depend on the assumption that Spenser knew what he was doing with his allegorical designs, even if he evidently miscalculated the extent of the problem he would cause. Perhaps he assumed that his poem would not come to the attention of the Scottish monarch but would only be read by sympathetic parties in England and Ireland. Given his complaint about his obscurity in Ireland in the same

poem ('who knowes not Colin Clout?' (VI.x.16)), it is conceivable that Spenser did not expect his work to be widely and carefully read, even though he had received a £50 annual pension from the queen in 1590.²⁷ There is no surviving evidence enabling us to reconstruct the manuscript circulation of *The Faerie Queene*, apart from the references to early versions of the poem by Gabriel Harvey and Lodowick Bryskett.²⁸ From these it is clear that Spenser wrote and circulated early versions of the poem. The only serious attempt to reconstruct the possible genealogy of the text has been that of Josephine Waters Bennett, who argued that the early versions of the poem were probably inspired much more by the Italianate romances of Ariosto than the published versions and that much of the early material had been incorporated – not entirely successfully – into Books III and IV.²⁹ Bennett also suggested that Book V, which followed the 'Letter to Raleigh' closely and was allegorically rather wooden because it directly represented historical events and commented on their political significance, may have been an early work.³⁰ Bennett's assumptions, most notably her comments on the allegory of Book V, are based on the questionable notion that Spenser's work became more sophisticated and less overtly political as he got older, whereas it is more plausible to argue that the allegory of *The Faerie Queene* was more overt in Book V because the author wanted to make a series of urgent points about contemporary politics in the 1590s. Nevertheless, it is possible that in representing the allegory of Mary Queen of Scots in 1596, Spenser was simply re-using older material and making a general point about the wiles of Catholicism without paying heed to the particular circumstances of 1596 and without any specific reference to James VI's claims to the English throne. No obviously allegorised form of James appears in *The Faerie Queene*, and it is possible that Spenser did not have him in mind at all, but was merely reintegrating earlier work into the published form of the poem.³¹ His control over his allegory may not have been as firm as is often assumed and references to Duessa as Mary may not have any relevance to James whatsoever.

Duessa's role in the poem and her allegorical representation as doubleness or duplicity is more complex than has often been acknowledged. It is crucial that we appreciate that the metaphysical, spiritual and moral implications of her role are directly related to her allegorical representation as Mary. It is notable that the first surviving reader of Spenser linked the events of Book One to the Stuart succession. John Dixon, writing in 1597, glossed Archimago's success in separating the Red-Cross Knight from Una and linking him to Duessa in canto two, as 'A fiction of a Challenge by Q: of: s: that the religion by hir maintained to be the truth'.³² Duessa's temporary triumph in leading the Red-Cross Knight astray is read as Mary's challenge to Elizabeth. The link between Duessa and the key figures associated with her, and Mary, appears to have been evident to contemporary readers from the start of the poem, showing that the Stuart pretender was represented as the arch figure of duplicity all along.

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Nevertheless, as Spenser evidently realised, it was not an easy matter to separate good and evil. Commentators on *The Faerie Queene* have recognised the continuity between the figure of Duessa as the whore of Babylon in Book I and Mary Queen of Scots in Book V.³³ Duessa clearly stands as an allegorical representation of all that threatened to undermine the religious and political unity of the Elizabethan regime. The problem was, as Claire McEachern points out, that '[L]ess than modelling itself upon the tropes of virginity, the cult of Elizabeth was far more eager to appropriate those of sovereignty: to dress, as it were, for success. Elizabeth was not imitating a virgin, but the Whore of Babylon . . . Far from defining itself in opposition to Roman rule, the Tudor state sought to appropriate its powers.'³⁴ Elizabeth and her doppelgänger were always in danger of becoming the same figure: 'The Woman in the Apocalypse moves fluidly between good and evil'.³⁵ Mary/Duessa was never simply an external enemy who could be easily circumscribed and so opposed. Her presence as the evil queen threatening to undermine stability showed how insecure Spenser was about the foundations of the regime he served. How could any English subject ever be sure that their queen would not become a Duessa, that Elizabeth would not turn into Mary and do her work for her? Although Mary's execution prevented her from becoming queen of England, her son might still become king through the complicity of Elizabeth.

One of the recurrent motifs of the poem is that the failure to destroy evil completely will result in its eventual return, often in mutated form. Artegall, the Knight of Justice, has to learn this lesson. He defeats Radigund, the Amazon Queen, in single combat, but throws away his sword when his senses are bewitched by her 'faire visage', enabling her to triumph and imprison him (V.v.12–20).³⁶ After he has been liberated by Britomart, Artegall shows no mercy to the shape-shifting Malengin, a 'wicked villain' who preys on unsuspecting travellers passing through the wilderness where he hides. Artegall has Talus destroy Malengin completely with his 'yron flayle' so that

all his bones, as small as sandy grayle
He broke, and did his bowels disentrangle;
Crying in vaine for helpe, when helpe was past.
So did deceipt the selfe deceiver fayle,
There they him left a carrion outcast;
For beasts and foules to feede upon for their repast. (V.ix.19)

Only an unexplained recall to the Faerie Court prevents Artegall from establishing 'true Iustice' and completing the quest he was sent out to undertake (V.xii.26–7). The Faerie Queene – or her courtiers – are acting like the Artegall who was defeated by Radigund, not his later incarnation, and so actually performing the work of the queen's enemies. Mercilla/Elizabeth is not as diametrically opposed to Radigund as she should be, and the two figures are shown to collude and combine.

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Duessa is the most spectacular example of this repeated pattern of inversion and subversion. She gains in power once the Redcross Knight falls prey to the wiles of Archimago in Book I, canto ii, until she helps imprison the knight and inaugurate the rule of Orgoglio, appearing herself as an explicitly signalled emblematic model of the Whore of Babylon riding on a dragon (I.vii.16–8). After Orgoglio's defeat, she is stripped and exposed in a cruel parody of the blazon, appearing as a half-woman, half-beast (I.viii.46–50). However, just as the defeat of a monster called Error leads to the proliferation of errors and the delusive overconfidence of those whose duty it is to protect the truth, the subsequent banishment of Duessa to the wilderness only makes her more dangerous. Duessa, predictably enough, returns to assert a previous claim to the Redcross Knight at his betrothal to Una (I.xii.24–36), through Archimago. He is unceremoniously thrown into a dungeon, but the claim is not, despite Una's protestations of her prior right (33–4), laid to rest. The book ends with the knight returning to his service to the Faerie Queene for another six years, and Una 'left to mourne' (41) alone. The question that remains hovering is whether Una can, after all, be separated from Duessa.³⁷

Duessa plays an important role in Book IV, summoning Ate from hell (IV.i.19), and supporting her crimes, before she returns as the explicit allegory of Mary in V.ix.³⁸ But just as Duessa is not killed earlier on in the poem, neither is her execution actually represented at the end of canto 9. The canto ends with a description of the pity her fellow sovereign, Mercilla/Elizabeth, feels at her rival's plight and her own grim duty in ordering her death:

But she [Mercilla], whose Princely breast was touched nere
 With piteous ruth of her so wretched plight,
 Though plaine she saw by all, that she did heare,
 That she of death was guiltie found by right,
 Yet would not let iust vengeance on her light;
 But rather let in stead thereof to fall
 Few perling drops from her faire lampes of light;
 The which she couering with her purple pall
 Would have the passion hid, and up arose withall. (V. ix 50)

The description recalls Artegall's foolish pity for Radigund when he surrenders the initiative at the sight of her pretty face mired with blood and sweat: 'At sight thereof his cruell minded hart / Empierced was with pitifull regard, / That his sharpe sword he threw from him apart, / Cursing his hand that had that visage mard' (V.v.13). Artegall is fortunate enough to have Britomart to rescue him, and it was equally fortunate for all concerned, Spenser implies, that Elizabeth/Mercilla was rescued from her folly, made to use her sharp sword on Mary's neck, and so allowed her to learn from her mistakes.

Mercilla/Elizabeth is described as hiding her passion, a description that not only plays upon the ubiquitous conundrum of the queen's two bodies

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and suggests that women are unsuited to rule, but also shows Elizabeth disguising her true self, clearly reminding the reader of the exposure of Duessa and the possibility that Una – Mercilla/Elizabeth – may not be so far removed from her rival as writers like Spenser would desire her to be.³⁹ The sympathy between the two women is a clear recollection of the scene at the start of Book III, when Britomart ‘by self-feeling of her feeble sexe’ (III.i.54) is drawn into foolish sympathy for the sexually incontinent Malecasta.⁴⁰ Mercilla/Elizabeth is guilty of pandering to what she has in common with Mary – her gender – rather than establishing their religious and political differences. The implication is that a man – or an oligarchy of men such as the council who urge Elizabeth to act decisively and execute Mary – would police this distinction more effectively than the queen.⁴¹ If the allegory is to be applied directly to James, then its message would seem to be that, despite all his attempts to either distance himself from his mother, or rescue her reputation from the slanders she had to endure, he was neither manly nor Protestant enough to rule England.⁴²

Duessa, although her death is not actually described, does not appear again in *The Faerie Queene*. But, it seems to me, her role is by no means over. Book VI shows the dangers inherent in tolerating the Catholic threat, principally through Spanish support for rebellion in Ireland, and its devastating effects on the rest of the British Isles.⁴³ Duessa’s legacy, like that of Error, whose monstrous brood devour their mother when the Redcross Knight kills her (I.i.25–6), and who are actually more dangerous when dead than alive, is poisonous and destructive. More significantly still, I would suggest, Duessa is transformed into the ultimate threat to order in the poem, Mutabilitie, a change in keeping with the most conspicuously Ovidian poem Spenser wrote.⁴⁴

The Faerie Queene, as many commentators have noted, can be read as a battle between the two figures of Orpheus and Proteus for control over the narrative, which lurches between a confidence that the wilderness can be stabilised, controlled and the savage made civil, and a fear that the forces of good and reason must surrender to primeval chaos.⁴⁵ Put another way, the battle for the mastery of Spenser’s poem is that between Virgil and Ovid. If Virgil retains the upper hand in the first edition, the second increasingly emphasises Ovid. Spenser becomes more dependent on Ovidian motifs, myths and tropes at crucial junctures as the narrative progresses. A key myth is that of Actaeon and Diana, one of the central stories from the *Metamorphoses* for a Renaissance audience.⁴⁶ Elements from this myth dominate Book VI, especially the fear that the pleasures of the civilised are being surreptitiously observed by hostile creatures on the margins of society hidden from view in the dangerous forests.⁴⁷ The myth reaches its apotheosis when it forms the sub-text for the story of Faunus and Diana, how his desire to see her naked leads to the transformation of Ireland from the holy to the cursed island (VII.vi.37, 55).

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Spenser's use of the myth has – quite rightly – been seen as a way of making the grand philosophical designs of the poem relevant to contemporary Irish politics.⁴⁸ But the obvious topical references – Faunus as an allegory of Hugh O'Neill, leader of the Irish during the Nine Years War (1594–1603), daring to see Diana/Elizabeth naked in the most vulnerable part of her dominions – have perhaps hidden an even clearer meaning, more fundamental to the allegorical core of Spenser's myth, and one that is also based on another Ovidian myth, that of the challenge of the Titans to the supremacy of Jove.⁴⁹ It is absolutely clear that Cynthia, who is challenged by Mutabilitie, can be read as a representation of Elizabeth, making her the same figure as Diana – Cynthia's alternative name – who is stalked by the voyeuristic Faunus, as the 'Letter to Raleigh' indicates.⁵⁰ Moreover, Cynthia's steeds, one black, the other white, represent Elizabeth's colours (VII.vi.9).⁵¹ In her final words before Nature gives her judgement, Mutabilitie sets herself against Jove and his creature, Cynthia, in hostile terms which assert her right to control the universe. Despite her pretence and avoidance of the key issues, Cynthia is all too human and fallible:

Then is she mortall borne, how-so ye crake;
 Besides, her face and countenance every day
 We changed see, and sundry forms partake,
 Now hornd, now round, now bright, now brown and gray:
 So that *as Changefull as the Moone* men use to say. (VII.vii.50)

These pointed lines refer to two principal issues. First, they make the irrefutable observation that Elizabeth is reaching the end of her reign because she will die soon.⁵² Her political wiles and regal bearing cannot save her body from its imminent demise. Second, they criticise her vacillating and fickle style of government, in a commonplace attack on women's rule made by numerous disillusioned, frustrated and worried men in the 1590s.⁵³

But, more specifically, they appear to allude, albeit obliquely, to the behaviour of Mercilla in Book V, canto ix, when she has to be forced by her male advisers to act decisively against Duessa/Mary Queen of Scots. The 'Two Cantos of Mutabilitie' as a whole can be read – on one level – as a re-writing of the Mercilla episode. They both dramatise the battle between civilisation and chaos; describe a journey into the inner workings of the state/universe; make explicit reference to legal theories, problems and language which are related to more metaphysical issues; and culminate in trial scenes with ambiguous endings (nature's victory can be seen as no less problematic than Mercilla's reluctant surrender of authority). Cynthia claims her descent from Jove, but Jove, as all readers obviously would have known, was a usurper himself, just like the Tudors.⁵⁴ In fact, Elizabeth's claim to the throne was, in many ways, no better than that of Mary, who was also descended from Henry VII. For Catholics, Henry VIII's divorce from Katherine of Aragon was not

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recognised, so Elizabeth was illegitimate, making Mary Stuart the true heir of Mary Tudor and her cousin the real usurper. This claim, announced by Henri II of France on Mary Tudor's death, was recognised throughout Catholic Europe and formed the basis of the series of plots against Elizabeth throughout her reign.⁵⁵ Mutabilitie's initial challenge is made against Cynthia. When Mercury, Jove's messenger, tries to force her to drop her claim she refuses to 'leave faire *Cynthias* siluer bower; / Sith shee his Ioue and him esteemed nought, / No more than *Cynthia's* selfe; but all their kingdoms sought' (VII.vi.18). Mutabilitie and Mary have identical aims.

Jove's response to Mutabilitie, made on behalf of Cynthia, is brutal and less than convincing. He dismisses the claim of the Titans and asserts that

For, we by Conquest of our soueraigne might,
And by eternall doome of Fates decree,
Haue wonne the Empire of the Heauens bright;
Which to our selues we hold, and to whom wee
Shall worthy deeme partakers of our blisse to bee. (VII.vi.33)

The first part of Jove's statement might have reminded readers of the way in which the Tudors seized the English throne. Certainly there were enough chronicles available to remind any audience literate enough to read *The Faerie Queene*, notably those of Hall and Holinshed. The second, especially given the self-referential nature of the argument, appears to be an adjunct of wishful thinking at odds with the impending fate of Elizabeth and the Tudors which the Cantos are at pains to emphasise. Jove's claims, while they may support the forces of reason and order, appear no better than those of Mutabilitie even if the narrator reminds us that she plans to break not only 'the lawes of Nature', but also 'Iustice and of Policie', turning the universe upside down: 'And wrong for right, and bad of good did make, / And death for life exchanged foolishlie' (VII.vi.6). In Ovidian terms, Mutabilitie plans to turn the world back to the primeval chaos described at the start of the *Metamorphoses*, mirroring the Titans' attack on heaven.⁵⁶ Perhaps another myth from the same book also informs Mutabilitie's actions: Orpheus was slain by the Ciconian women when 'for the first time, his words had no effect', just as Spenser might well have felt that his words had no effect on the queen and the question of the succession in the 1580s and 1590s.⁵⁷

'Two Cantos of Mutabilitie' dramatise the conflict between Nature and order ranged against the forces of chaos; Jove against the Titans; Elizabeth against Mary Queen of Scots; the Tudors against the Stuarts. Nature awards the victory to the former on the problematic grounds that although everything changes 'They are not changed from their first estate; / But by their change their being doe dilate: / And turning to themselves at length againe, / Doe worke their owne perfection so by fate' (VII.vii.58). Metaphysically this may be true, but it clearly does not square with the description of the ailing

queen eight stanzas earlier, or the myth of Ireland's fall into contemporary chaos at the end of canto vi. Mutabilitie, I would suggest, is a transformed version of Duessa, just as Duessa was a transformed version of Error. As such, she inherits the allegorical mantle of Mary. Mary's execution, as I have already pointed out, is not actually represented in the poem, surely a sign that Duessa has been inadequately dealt with, banished rather than extinguished. The graphic destruction of Malengin outside the gates of Mercilla's castle, after that shape tries, unsuccessfully, to prolong his life by transforming himself from his 'proper forme' (V.ix.16), serves as a pointed contrast and a key to the correct way to deal with dangerous enemies. The fear the poem articulates is that Mutabilitie may be evil and wrong, but that her claims – like Mary's – are impossible to resist. Order will return to chaos and Orpheus, his words savaged by the Blatant Beast (VI.xii.40), will be torn apart by the Ciconian women and their evil legacy.

The question arises, whether Spenser intended the Cantos to be read as an attack on the Stuart claim, rather than on just Mary herself as an evil Catholic queen. If so, then the Cantos have to be read as an attack on James, who clearly enabled his mother to live on, making the reader equate James with Mary, as the son assumes the mother's mantle. This is possible and the fact that James took no action when the poem was published in 1609 cannot in itself be read to prove the opposite case.⁵⁸ By then, Spenser had been dead for ten years and the problem of the succession had long been decided. Had he read the poem, it is likely that James would not have bothered much about the representation of his mother as his own objectives had been achieved.

However, we do not know when the 'Two Cantos of Mutabilitie' were written. They were published by Matthew Lownes, who probably inherited them from the papers of Spenser's major publisher, William Ponsonby, but in exactly what state is not clear. As Colin Burrow has pointed out, they 'may just be an incomplete fragment of an unfinished book', that Lownes could possibly have printed . . . to make his 1609 edition more attractive to the book-buying public'.⁵⁹ There are enough topical references contained in them to suggest that parts were written in the 1590s and a plausible case has been made that they refer directly to Spenser's land dispute with his immediate neighbour, Lord Roche of Fermoy.⁶⁰ However, it is also possible that the representation of Mutabilitie herself was written much earlier, perhaps when the question of Mary's influence was more topical in the late 1580s.⁶¹ Once again, how we decide to date the parts of the poem helps to determine how we read the allegory, its significance and relevance.

III

What conclusions can be drawn from this analysis of Spenser's representation of Duessa and the intervention of James VI? I would suggest that given the careful rewriting that characterises *The Faerie Queene*, where episodes

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conspicuously echo and qualify earlier ones, forcing readers to go back and re-read passages, it is likely that the links between Mary Queen of Scots, Duessa and Mutabilitie are deliberate and form part of the wider allegorical significance of the poem. Figures of Elizabeth – Britomart, Florimell, Gloriana, Belphebe, and so on – are to be read against these dangerous and divisive female rulers and powerful figures, but also stand as examples of what Elizabeth could be (as recent analyses have made clear, figures such as Lucifera were designed as explicit criticisms of Elizabeth and her court, illustrating the overlap of good and bad queens in the poem).⁶² The poem suggests that that there may be less to choose between such figures than there should be and that Elizabeth, in spite of herself, is likely to do the work of Duessa and Mutabilitie herself. It is clear, then, that the representation of Mary Stuart plays a key role in the poem's allegory. It is hard to believe that Spenser had no idea that his work might reflect badly on James VI, even if he underestimated the attention it would receive, but, in the absence of corroborating evidence, we must work with conjecture. But it is possible that Spenser was a careless writer who recycled his work in a more haphazard manner than we have often assumed and James, not realising that Spenser had no official sanction, over-reacted most unfortunately. On the other hand, it is much more likely that the attack on the claim of Mutabilitie would seem to reflect explicitly on James himself, and serve as a warning that he should not resemble his mother in any way.

Notes

- 1 Cited in Willy Maley, *A Spenser Chronology* (Basingstoke, 1994), pp. 678. On Bowes, see *Dictionary of National Biography* (DNB) entry.
- 2 Maley, *Spenser Chronology*, p. 68; *Calendar of State Papers relating to Scotland, 1589–1603* (CSPS, 1589–1603), (London, 1858), p. 723.
- 3 CSPS, 1589–1603, p. 747. On Quinn, see DNB entry.
- 4 Richard A. McCabe, 'The Masks of Duessa: Spenser, Mary Queen of Scots, and James I', *English Literary Renaissance*, 17 (1987), 224–42.
- 5 Edmund Spenser, A. C. Hamilton (ed.), *The Faerie Queene* (London, 1977), p. 737. All subsequent references to this edition in parentheses in the text.
- 6 J. W. Bennett, *The Evolution of The Faerie Queene* (Chicago, 1942).
- 7 Susan Doran, 'Revenge her Foul and Most Unnatural Murder? The Impact of Mary Stewart's Execution on Anglo-Scottish Relations', *History*, 85 (2000), 589–612.
- 8 D. Harris Willson, *King James VI and I* (London, 1956), pp. 54–5.
- 9 Irene Carrier, *James VI and I: King of Great Britain* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 29.
- 10 Doran, 'Revenge her Foul and Most Unnatural Murder?', pp. 608–9. The rest of this paragraph is indebted to Doran's analysis.
- 11 *The Letters of Lady Arbella Stuart*, Sara Jane Steen (ed.), (Oxford, 1994), p. 30.
- 12 Marie Axton, *The Queen's Two Bodies: Drama and the Elizabethan Succession* (London, 1977), *passim*; Susan Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony: The Courtships of Elizabeth I* (London, 1996), chs 6–7.
- 13 Carrier, *James VI and I*, p. 29. Two excellent works on English responses to Mary are James Emerson Phillips, *Images of a Queen: Mary Stuart in Sixteenth-century*

Literature (Berkeley, CA, 1964); Howard Erskine-Hill, *Poetry and the Realm of Politics: Shakespeare to Dryden* (Oxford, 1996), *passim*.

14 James I, *Basilikon Doron*, in *The Workes* (1616) (rpt. Hildesham and New York, 1971), pp. 137–92, at pp. 176–7. For Buchanan's and Knox's writings on Mary Stuart, see Phillips, *Images of a Queen*, *passim*. On James's attitude to censorship in general, see Cyndia Susan Clegg, 'Burning Books as Propaganda in Jacobean England', in A. Hadfield (ed.), *Literature and Censorship in Renaissance England* (Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 165–86.

15 Phillips, *Images of a Queen*, p. 203. James had obviously misunderstood the process of press regulation in England, imagining that any work approved by the Stationers' Company had royal backing, whereas their Register was a means of establishing rights to publish a book. For details, see Cyndia Susan Clegg, *Press Censorship in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge, 1997), pt 1.

16 McCabe, 'Masks of Duessa'; see also Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature* (Baltimore, MD, 1983), pp. 1–2.

17 McCabe, 'Masks of Duessa', pp. 240, 225–6.

18 Muriel Bradbrook, 'No Room at the Top: Spenser's Pursuit of Fame', in John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris (eds), *Elizabethan Poetry* (London, 1960), pp. 91–109; Richard S. Peterson, 'Laurel Crown and Ape's Tail: New Light on Spenser's Career from Sir Thomas Tresham', *Spenser Studies*, XII (1991) [1998], 1–35.

19 A. Hadfield, *Spenser's Irish Experience: Wilde Fruyt and Salvage Soyl* (Oxford, 1997), ch. 1. In addition to Spenser's works complaining of the fate of the New English, see 'A Supplication of the blood of the English most lamentably murdered in Ireland, Cryeng out of the yearth for revenge' (1598), ed. Willy Maley, *Analecta Hibernica*, 36 (1994), 1–90.

20 King, *Spenser's Poetry and the Reformation Tradition*, *passim*. See also Darryl Gless, *Interpretation and Theology in Spenser* (Cambridge, 1994), and K. J. Larsen (ed.), *Edmund Spenser's Amoretti and Epithalamion: A Critical Edition* (Tempe, Arizona, 1997), both of which stress the central importance of Protestant doctrine, theology and liturgy to Spenser's poetry. However, it should also be acknowledged that a general commitment to Protestantism did not necessarily preclude association with Catholics. *Prothalamion*, published in the same year as the second edition of *The Faerie Queene* (1596), celebrated the betrothal of the two daughters of Edward Somerset, earl of Worcester, one of the leading Catholic nobility, to two (Catholic) gentlemen of the Temple. For an argument – not always convincing – that Spenser was more ecumenical and eclectic than Protestant in his religious beliefs, see H. L. Weatherby, *Mirrors of Celestial Grace: Patristic Theology in Spenser's Allegory* (Toronto, 1994).

21 See ch. 9 for further discussion. See also Willy Maley, 'Spenser and Scotland: The View and the Limits of Anglo-Irish Identity', *Prose Studies*, 19 (1996), 1–18. For some incisive observations on Spenser's relationship with power after the accession of James, see Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature*, ch. 1.

22 See Hadfield, *Spenser's Irish Experience*, for an elaboration of this argument.

23 Willson, *King James VI and I*, ch. 9. I owe this point to Anne McLaren.

24 Doran, 'Revenge her Foul and Most Unnatural Murder?', p. 608.

25 A. Hadfield, 'Was Spenser a Republican?', *English*, 47 (1998), 169–82; J. Guy, 'The 1590s; The Second Reign of Elizabeth I?', in J. Guy (ed.), *The Reign of Elizabeth I: Court and Culture in the Last Decade* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 1–19. On the general currency of republican ideas in Elizabethan England, see M. Peltonen, *Classical Humanism and Republicanism in English Political Thought, 1570–1640* (Cambridge, 1995), ch. 2; P. Collinson, 'The Monarchical Republic of Queen Elizabeth I', in J. Guy (ed.), *The Tudor Monarchy* (London, 1997), pp. 110–34.

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- 26 See T. H. Cain, *Praise in The Faerie Queene* (Lincoln, 1978). For an argument that Spenser was always critical of court culture, see A. Hadfield, *Literature, Politics and National Identity: Reformation to Renaissance* (Cambridge, 1994), ch. 6.
- 27 Hadfield, *Literature, Politics and National Identity*, pp. 170–2.
- 28 Maley, *Spenser Chronology*, pp. 9, 28.
- 29 Bennett, *Evolution of The Faerie Queene*, ch. 1.
- 30 Bennett, *Evolution of The Faerie Queene*, p. 180.
- 31 See M. Eccles, 'James I of England', in A. C. Hamilton (ed.), *The Spenser Encyclopedia* (London and Toronto, 1990), p. 409. Eccles comments that suggestions that James appears in 'allegorical guise' in Spenser's works are 'unsubstantiated'.
- 32 G. Hough (ed.), *The First Commentary on 'The Faerie Queene'* (Privately printed, 1962), p. 10. See also Michael O'Connell, 'Dixon, John', *Spenser Encyclopedia*, pp. 220–1; King, *Spenser's Poetry and the Reformation Tradition*, pp. 72–4, 118–9.
- 33 See, for example, McCabe, 'Masks of Duessa', pp. 226–7.
- 34 Claire McEachern, *The Poetics of English Nationhood, 1590–1612* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 57–8.
- 35 L. L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford, 1990), p. 82. I owe this reference to Anne McLaren.
- 36 For commentary on this episode, see Clare Carroll, 'The Construction of Gender and the Cultural and Political Order' in *The Faerie Queene 5* and 'A View of the Present State of Ireland: The Critics, the Context and the case of Radigund', *Criticism*, 32 (1990), 163–91.
- 37 For comment, see McEachern, *Poetics of English Nationhood*, p. 46.
- 38 See Anthea Hume, 'Duessa', *Spenser Encyclopedia*, pp. 229–30.
- 39 On female rule and the general male opposition, see Anne McLaren, *Political Culture in the Reign of Elizabeth I: Queen and Commonwealth, 1558–1585* (Cambridge, 1999).
- 40 For further analysis of this episode, see A. Hadfield, (ed.), *Edmund Spenser* (Harlow, 1996), introduction, pp. 15–6.
- 41 Hadfield, 'Was Spenser a Republican?', pp. 175–7.
- 42 Could Spenser have known of the scandal of James's close relationship with Esmé Stuart? His enemies alleged that he had been sent to Scotland in 1579 to lure James back to Catholicism, and it was claimed that the two men shared a homosexual passion; see R. Lockyer, *James VI and I* (London, 1998), pp. 11–5; Robert Ashton, *James I by his contemporaries* (London, 1969), pp. 107–8, *passim*.
- 43 Hadfield, *Spenser's Irish Experience*, ch. 5.
- 44 M. Holahan, 'Imque opus exegi: Ovid's Changes and Spenser's Brief Epic of Mutability', *English Literary Renaissance*, 6 (1976), 244–70. On the cultural importance of Ovid and Spenser's relationship to Ovid as a precursor throughout his career, see P. Cheney, *Marlowe's Counterfeit Profession: Ovid, Spenser, Counter-Nationhood* (Toronto, 1997), ch. 1; J. Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford, 1993), *passim*.
- 45 See, for example, A. B. Giamatti, *Play of Double Senses: Spenser's Faerie Queene* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1975).
- 46 Ovid *Metamorphoses* (trans. Mary M. Innes), (Harmondsworth, 1955), pp. 77–80; Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, pp. 162–6, *passim*.
- 47 Hadfield, *Spenser's Irish Experience*, ch. 5.
- 48 Julia Lupton, 'Mapping Mutabilitie; Or, Spenser's Irish Plot', in B. Bradshaw, A. Hadfield and Willy Maley (eds), *Representing Ireland: Literature and the Origins of Conflict, 1534–1660* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 93–115; Patricia Coughlan, 'The Local Context of Mutabilitie's Plea', *Irish University Review*, 26 (1996), *Special Issue: Spenser in Ireland, 1596–1996*, ed. Anne Fogarty, pp. 320–41.
- 49 On the former allegory, see Helena Shire, *A Preface to Spenser* (Harlow: Long-

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man, 1978), pp. 64, 187. On the Nine Years War, see C. Lennon, *Sixteenth-Century Ireland: The Incomplete Conquest* (Dublin, 1995), ch. 10. On the Titans, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, pp. 32–5; Anne Lake Prescott, 'Titans', *Spenser Encyclopedia*, p. 691.

50 *Faerie Queene*, ed. Hamilton, p. 737.

51 R. Strong, *The Cult of Elizabeth: Elizabethan Portraiture and Pageantry* (London, 1977), pp. 71–4. I owe this point to John N. King.

52 D. Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (London, 1984), pp. 152–3.

53 Guy, 'The 1590s'.

54 Hadfield, *Spenser's Irish Experience*, ch. 6.

55 Jayne Elizabeth Lewis, *Mary Queen of Scots: Romance and Nation* (London, 1998), p. 20.

56 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, pp. 29–36.

57 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, p. 247. Spenser's thoughts on the succession were articulated in a number of works from *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579) onwards. See H. McLane, *Spenser's 'Shepheardes Calender': A Study in Elizabethan Allegory* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1961); Hadfield, *Literature, Politics and National Identity*, ch. 6.

58 Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature*, p. 17.

59 C. Burrow, *Edmund Spenser* (Plymouth, 1996), p. 41.

60 Coughlan, 'Local Context of Mutabilitie's Plea'.

61 An early date is argued in Alice Fox Blich, 'The Mutabilitie Cantos: "In Meet Order Ranged"', *English Language Notes*, 7 (1969–70), 179–86. Most critics assume a later date; see Helen Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen: Elizabeth I and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Basingstoke, 1995), p. 269; R. J. Meyer, "'Fixt in heauens high": Spenser, Astronomy, and the Date of the *Cantos of Mutabilitie*', *Spenser Studies*, 4 (1984), 115–29.

62 See P. Suttie, 'The Political Pragmatism of Edmund Spenser', *Studies in Philology*, 95 (1998), 56–76; McEachern, *Poetics of English Nationhood*, ch. 2.

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