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978-0-521-12946-6 - Spenser's Anatomy of Heroism: A Commentary on
The Faerie Queene

Maurice Evans

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A COMMENTARY ON
THE FAERIE QUEENE

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PREFACE

So many books have been written on *The Faerie Queene* during the last decade that the production of yet another might seem to call for an apology. Recent Spenserean criticism, although doing ample justice to the myths, the verbal techniques and the rhetoric of the poem, has tended to play down what once seemed the element of most importance, namely its didacticism. The object of this book is to place the emphasis once more upon Spenser's didactic intention, to analyse the rhetorical techniques by means of which he manipulates the reactions of the reader, and to redefine the logic which underlies the sequence of his six virtues. The famous phrase 'to fashion a gentleman' will be at the centre of the discussion, although it is in fact a misleading phrase; for Spenser's explicit concern is to fashion heroes, and he uses the heroic poem both as a means of anatomising the nature of heroism in his own sense of the term and of influencing the reader to embrace its values. For this reason, I have begun by reiterating some of the common Renaissance conceptions of the heroic poem before moving on to Spenser's personal and unique treatment of the genre. For Spenser wears his didacticism with a difference. His moral theme is more subtle than is generally recognised, and his language has much of the paradox and complexity normally associated with the Metaphysical poets but usually denied to *The Faerie Queene*. A surprising number of Spenser's lines, as we shall see, have a controlled ambiguity which lends itself to simultaneous and diametrically opposed interpretations: the description of Lucifera, for example, 'Looking to heaven; for earth she did disdayne' [I. iv. 10], would fit either pride or virtuous idealism, just as that of Archimago, 'And to the ground his eyes were lowly bent' [I. i. 29], could describe either humility or ignoble earthiness. In both cases, of course, Spenser is making the contrast between what people seem to be and what they are; and the double meanings implicit in 'disdayne' and 'lowly' mark the

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distinction between the erroneous vision of the truth, which is all that Red Cross is capable of at this early stage of his moral education, and the full truth which Spenser wishes to communicate to the reader. Not all of Spenser's ambiguities, however, are explicable in this way. The description of Acrasia bound by the Palmer in chains of Adamant, 'For nothing else might keep her safe and sound', leaves us genuinely uncertain whether she is kept safely locked up or safely preserved in her fetters of reason; and the frequency with which statements of this kind occur throughout the poem suggests that for Spenser both interpretations are valid, and that the moral vision which prompts them is an ambivalent one. I shall argue that *The Faerie Queene* embodies a double perspective throughout which replaces the simple distinction between virtue and vice by something altogether more complex.

Spenser makes no wholly explicit statement of his intention within the poem, and the nature of his moral vision emerges only gradually through the accumulation of innumerable instances. In exploring the theme, therefore, I have tried to follow the method of the poem by plunging into the current of its detail through the successive books and emerging with my general conclusions only in the final chapter. No book which deals with the whole of *The Faerie Queene* can hope to be completely original, and such originality as this one claims lies more in the attempt to reassemble what are often familiar materials into a new pattern than to produce fresh interpretations of individual details. My debt to previous critics—in particular, to Miss Williams, Alastair Fowler, Professor Berger, Professor Alpers and, of course, C. S. Lewis—is obvious and far greater than can be acknowledged in footnotes. Some of the ideas of this book have been raised tentatively and briefly in my book on sixteenth-century poetry, and I have used with modification material previously published by me in the *Review of English Studies*, *ELH*, *English Studies* and *Studies in Philology*.