

THE EMPORIA STATE

RESEARCH



STUDIES

THE GRADUATE PUBLICATION OF THE KANSAS STATE TEACHERS COLLEGE, EMPORIA

**An Inquiry into the
Elements of Time and Space in
Spenser's *The Faerie Queene***

by

Ruby Brandley Kirk

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KANSAS STATE TEACHERS COLLEGE
EMPORIA, KANSAS 66801

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VOLUME XVII

MARCH, 1969

NUMBER 3

THE EMPORIA STATE RESEARCH STUDIES is published in September, December, March, and June of each year by the Graduate Division of the Kansas State Teachers College, 1200 Commercial St., Emporia, Kansas, 66801. Entered as second-class matter September 16, 1952, at the post office at Emporia, Kansas, under the act of August 24, 1912. Postage paid at Emporia, Kansas.

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DATA PROCESSING

MAR 07 1983

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by
Ruby Brandley Kirk*

When the Red Cross Knight, strongly vital, yet strangely lacking in features, canters along the plain with Una and her lazy dwarf, one is drawn into a subtle net of hermetic intrigue. The faceless people of *The Faerie Queene* gleam in the dusk and wear countenances of light. They display certain colors and wear certain metals, although Spenser's references to these details are minimal. They traverse plain and forest, cross water, engage in combat with monstrous creatures and with each other. Rarely, if ever, do they rest, but even when they sleep, their dreams are a trouble. Somehow, they seem smaller than life, as if viewed through the wrong end of a perspective glass. They lack dimension, like paper cut-outs. Drawn with superb artistry and with a minimum of line, they are superimposed upon a single pen stroke — the plain which divides heaven and earth. Spenser's hermetic element is difficult to define, not because of a lack of reference points, but because of an abundance of them. This element contains an involved symbolism of colors and metals, of planets and astrological figures resident in the zodiac. It is spirit and form and matter, fire and water, sulphur and mercury — something called the *quintessence*. It is the rainbow of the peacock's tail, the scarlet and white of the philosopher's stone. It is unity and duality, light and darkness, white and black. It is birth and death, and, more particularly, it is life, separate and distinct from these two. It defies one's efforts to codify its elements in fixed positions, for they are vital and dynamic.

A succinct description of this hermetic impulse and of the style most characteristic of its expression is provided by Bazin, who comprehends it as the view of a world not fixed but always in a state of becoming.¹ Its style is Asian, attractive in the sixth century to the Spanish, Celts, Bretons, and Irish, who produced a literature and an art expressive of an elemental love of nature, the single theme of which is interlacement: “. . . a tracery of abstract and living forms . . . which takes metaphor as its principle.”² Certainly, this description finds responsive chords in Spenser's poem with its interlacement of forms, often one within another. Thus it is that the pageantry of Isis Church fits neatly into the strange glass in which Britomartis first regards herself, and that both of these images are inherent in the veiled idol of the Temple of Venus. Hermetically, these are glyphs of arcane signi-

*Portions of this study originated in a master's thesis under the direction of Professor Charles E. Walton, Department of English, Kansas State Teachers College, Emporia.

¹Germain Bazin, *Loom of Art*, p. 126.

²*Ibid.*, p. 127.

fiance, each a distinctive representation of the cross and a processional. Among these mysteries, the central one is that of Time.

In the passage concerned with the Red Cross Knight's progress into the forest and out again, the element of time (as well as that of space) presents a puzzle. It is true that Spenser has defined both time and space, for a plain has been crossed, a labyrinthine wood entered, a battle done, but how much time and how much space is unknown and probably unknowable. It is impossible to chart the reaches of this land or measure its sequences, and Spenser's time has the same indefinable quality. One assumes that there *is* time and that a time has passed (primarily because there has been motion), yet Spenser's figures move in a curiously static manner. For example, the Red Cross Knight's passage across the plain and into the wood may be a diversion for a rainy afternoon encompassing only a few hours, or a year, a lifetime, an aeon. Spenser's three symbols that establish points in space have an equally dubious quality. The plain, the wood, and the den are his names for prosaic elements in a landscape. Of the plain, he has little to say. It is as barren to the imagination as it is barren of description. On the other hand, the character of Spenser's wood cannot be so lightly dismissed, for Wandering Wood is enchanted. Sweet with bird song, a delight to the eye, it is a pleasant place, but one that thwarts progress through its aisles. Paths mislead, arrive nowhere. There is no backward turning; retraced steps only lead the wanderers into new and strange ways, or into old ways subtly altered. A new doubt — that they have lost their reason — arises to trouble them. When they believe themselves closest to a point of exit, actually they are farthest from it. Hence, they choose a thoroughfare, pressed before by many feet, because it seems the most likely to "lead the labyrinth about," but it leads them to the dragon's den, and only after the Red Cross Knight has entered the darkness of this lair and has overcome the dragon is he capable of finding his way out of the wood. Tried in battle, he has become a more seasoned traveler, and, like many heroes of old who have traversed the dark reaches of the nether world, he easily accomplishes his outward passage with the briefest of comments. So did Aeneas take his leave of Elysium with only a passing reference to the ivory gate. Dante, lost in a wood, found it necessary to descend the more specifically detailed fire escape of the inferno in order to return home.

A second influence upon Spenser's company of questers is that of the cardinal directions governing their respective journeys. Except for occasional instances (*e.g.*, the story of Jonah), there are few overt descriptions of an eastward passage, but Spenser's consistently high regard for the East cannot be overlooked. One remembers that Jonah passed through the sinful city of Nineveh from west to east without deviation, but not before he had made an initiatory sea passage through the labyrinthine depths. Furthermore, Aeneas was not permitted to approach Latium from the east, even when his goal lay almost within reach, but was required to take a long and devious passage around, entering his homeland from the west. Spenser's unchartered reaches in

The Faerie Queene, however, lend themselves to little more than speculation. It might have been consistent with his theme from antiquity to have had the Red Cross Knight and Una enter Wandering Wood from the west, eventually to discover the heavily trodden path and follow it into the darkest and, therefore, northernmost depths of the grove. But Spenser is more consistent unto himself and his theme and here, as usual, makes his approach obliquely to the conventions of time and space, having the Red Cross Knight and Una enter the grove at an unspecified point and wander about within. They are not concerned with direction, nor, seemingly, is Spenser. His indications of time and direction throughout the poem are customarily made to the rising and the setting sun, to the eastern and western horizons. Thus, in the following passage with reference to the sun, he alludes to the pole star, and by association, to the north:

By this the northerne wagoner had set
His sevenfold teme behind the stedfast starre,
That was in ocean waves yet never wet,
But firme is fixt, and sendeth light from farre
To al that in the wide deepe wandring arre:
And chearfull Chaunticlere with his note shrill
Had warned once, that Phoebus fiery carre
In hast was climbing up the easterne hill
(I.ii.l)³

Here, Spenser's directional plane is the east-to-west path of the sun, and all movement in the poem is otherwise confined to the advancing into and out of varying degrees and kinds of darkness. However obscured its form, Wandering Wood has connotations of the traditional symbol of the *mundus*.⁴ Although the pattern, here, is not marked, in

³Edmund Spenser, *The Complete Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser*, p. 152.

⁴Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and Profane*, p. 44. The Roman *mundus*, a circular trench divided into four quarters, was considered to be the image of the universe and the "paradigmatic model for human habitation." In discussing the *mundus* in its relation to the sacred Center of the universe, Eliade (p. 42 ff) points out that the significance of the Center in the traditional society is the significance of the real and the true; hence, any departure from the Center is a departure from reality. Much of the symbolism of antiquity is related to this simple design of the quartered circle. The original *mundus* was platted in the heavens and described by galactic houses of the zodiac encircling the earth (another Center) surrounded by its sun, stars, and revolving planets. From the Center, the break in plane where deity irrupts and where space is sacred and infused with the uttermost reality, comes the birth of a new universe or of a new form, whether it be that of man, or city, or temple. From the Center, the four horizons are projected, thus defining the four cardinal directions in space and the four seasons in time. The Creator's first gesture, then, may be said to have been the sign of the cross. This design, in turn, became the celestial archetype for the creative gestures of man. Consequently, one's territory is the Center of the world, and one's city within that territory is another Center. Frequently, a city or village was developed from a central intersection, either natural or contrived, where a space was left for the construction of the temple, itself a sacred Center originating from its own central point of origin. Similarly, one's house, although not necessarily in the geographical center either of the territory or the city, was still another Center, an *axis mundi*, by virtue of its hearth or fire altar. Not the least of these domains is man, himself an intersection of two means, carrying about with him always, perhaps but dimly realized, his own temple, his own altar, his own reflection of godhead. For other variations on the theme of the holy Center of the universe, one should consider Plato's description of the beam of light with its golden chains uniting the upper and lower realms of the universe (*The Republic*, Book X). For a description of the rainbow bridge, Bifrost, linking the land of the AEsir to the sky-root of the ash tree, Yggdrasil, see Jean Young, *The Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson*, p. 30. Also, Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 41, for a description of Babylonian temples and the ritual function of the ziggurat.

later passages it becomes suspect, for Spenser has suspended a number of variations of this sunny symbol throughout his poem — in Britomartis' magic mirror, in the sylvan interlude of Chrysogonee and the sunbeam, by implication on the shield of the Red Cross Knight, and, finally and radiantly, in Isis Church.

Like Aeneas and Dante, the Red Cross Knight is accompanied on his journey into the darkness, but, compared to the Sibyl of Cumae, the Red Cross Knight's guide is peculiarly inept. Una gives little, if any, indication that she is *not* lost in the wood. She lends him no assistance and offers him no advice until he approaches the Den of Error and bravely (or foolishly) essays to enter the dark cavern. Only then does she reveal to him that she knows this place and its dangers: "The perill of this place / better wot then you . . ." (I.i.13) Somewhat belatedly, she indicates that it is now too late for him to turn back without incurring disgrace, adding, ". . . *wisdom* warnes whilest foot is in the gate, / To stay the steppe, ere forced to retrate . . ." Her dwarf, however, chattering with fear, urges the knight to flee, disgrace or none. Subtly, Una has identified herself. She is Wisdom of the kind that remains silent until the foot is in the door, when to retreat is to advance. If she is an uncertain guide, her dwarf, too, is hardly commendable. To the occasion, he adds only a shrill note of fear, perhaps as a necessary adjunct of wisdom, as long as his dwarfish proportion is maintained. Although he echoes the words of fearsome Charon concerning the entry of living men into the forbidden realm of the dead, the dwarf has little else in common with that venerable guardian of the deep. Through the dwarf, however, Spenser obliquely establishes the association of this dark and dangerous den with other Stygian worlds and their lurking monsters.

Anonymous at first in borrowed gear, the Red Cross Knight reveals his nature considerably earlier in Book I than in his encounter with Error. When he enters the darkness of the cave, he gleams with light, and, although his ray is weak, it is sufficient to reveal the danger before him, arousing and exposing the dragon to a fearful threat. Darkness is her natural lair, light her natural enemy, concealment her intent. But she, too, is denied any retreat. When these two opponents hurl themselves upon each other in a fated and deadly embrace, Spenser's implications are as obvious as they are numerous, perhaps tailored to suit his reader's biases, for the Red Cross Knight is St. George slaying the dragon.⁵ He is also the light in the tomb, the soul in the body, making

⁵The Red Cross Knight is not actually St. George at any time in Book I, although this identification seems strongly implied by his company in the earliest passages. Donald Cheney, *Spenser's Images of Nature*, pp. 21-32, thinks there should be no mystery about this knight's identity, because the reader is expected to recognize the tableau of knight, lady, ass, and lamb. However, as an unproved knight, he is only potentially St. George. One recalls that, after the aged guide, Contemplation, leads the Red Cross Knight, purged and shriven, to the top of the highest hill in the episode at the House of Busirane, he shows him the distant and iridescent Holy City, approached by a steep and narrow path. Here, he is advised to choose the path leading to the heavenly city where he will ultimately and after long labors take his place among the elect and assume his identification as St. George. His origins are revealed to him. As an initiate, he has been led to the top of a sacred mountain where he is permitted to gaze upon absolute reality, beyond time and space, into the Sabbath day. V. W. Whitaker, *The Religious Basis of Spenser's Thought*, p. 29, sees in these passages an indication of Spenser's lack of sympathy with Puritanism.

its perilous descent into time and space and its progression through the stations of form. He is man on a physical and spiritual odyssey, surmounting his brutish aspects. One cannot say, "brutish origins," and be consistent with the thought of the poem, for there is nothing brutish about the origin of the Red Cross Knight. He is a stranger to the present time and place. Brutality, when it appears, is something acquired in a progress through the lower realm and something to be overcome when it is assumed. In this respect, the Red Cross Knight is triumphant, at least, momentarily.

The dragon is not this knight's first opponent, but rather the third, so subtle are the devices of the serpent. His first test is the rainstorm that drives him with his little company into the grove. His light is dim, perhaps even reflected; still, he is a child of fire, and water is alien to his natural element. His second test occurs in the dusk of the grove, a shadowy mean between two extremes, requiring more sophistication than the young knight possesses. However, in the utter darkness of the dragon's den, he is distinguished by his light — an attribute of fire. His foe is external to him, easily recognized. On the other hand, in the semi-darkness of the grove, he is not remarkable for his light, for his little gleam is inadequate in the gleaming shadows, themselves half-light, half-darkness. Thus, he is identified at this point by a measure of darkness contained within himself. His enemy is within and, predictably, escapes immediate detection. In his silver shield, however, is a whispered clue to his nature, for silver, although one of the "royal" metals, is not gold. In the hermetic tradition, it is tending toward gold but, unlike gold, is corruptible in the presence of corruptive elements.⁶ The Red Cross Knight is not an imperfect knight, but an infant knight, unfinished, tending toward perfection, or holiness, his quest. The elements of fire and water, air and earth operate in the initial passages of his adventure. From Gloriana's court to the dragon's den, he makes an easily recognized passage into increasingly gross elements, from fire, or light (symbolic of the highest), to earth, or darkness (symbolic of the lowest). Because he enters the den, he literally enters the earth to emerge, again, if not a new knight, at least an altered one. Spenser is rehearsing old themes, here — the light in darkness, the life in death.

In the manner of poet historical, Spenser begins the poem abruptly in the middle but explains, in his letter to Raleigh, that it would have ended (had he completed it) at the exact point wherein the historiographer would have begun it.⁷ The place and time are Gloriana's court

⁶Stanley Redgrove, *Alchemy, Ancient and Modern*, p. 27.

⁷Spenser intermingles pagan and Christian orthodoxy throughout *The Faerie Queene* to the extent that his time concepts call for extended examination. For example, T. Driver, *The Sense of History in Greek and Shakespearean Drama*, p. 19 ff, explains that in the Greek world view (manifest in art, literature, and ritual) the concept of time is essentially cyclical, and in the Hebrew it is essentially linear. In a comparison of the historical consciousness of the two cultures, he indicates that Hebrew thought is historically grounded, and that the valorization of history was extended still further in Christianity. The Greek sense of history, on the other hand, is unhistorical, being derived from a "passion for what is permanent," reality unaffected by the ebb and flow of coming into being and passing away. As an attitude of historical consciousness, however, it seems to be self-negating, for history involves precisely those elements of change and imbalance that the Greeks sought to overcome in their search for the permanent.

where twelve annual days of festival are in progress. This place and time Spenser offers as antecedent to his abrupt opening, thereby making of last things true beginnings. Thus it is that the beginning of *The Faerie Queene* is really a middle, and one finds the knight, newly clad in something akin to the magical armor of Achilles, and Una, radiant yet mantled in black, crossing a plain. Having come from one point and now going toward another, they are occupying in time and space a midpoint that moves when they move along their plane of existence.

In its style and thought, *The Faerie Queene* resembles Nicholas of Cusa's description of *cosmos* as a circle whose circumference is nowhere and whose center is everywhere.⁸ At no point is this kinship more remarkable than in the element of time in this poem. Spenser's time is all "middest," and like the center of Cusanus' cosmos, is not central to the theme of the poem, but is also everywhere throughout the poem; yet his treatment of the elements of time and space is one of studied indifference, casual, even capricious, suggesting that time, at least, is of no great consequence either to him or to his poem. There is little enough of continuity between his books, and a characteristic confusion of figures and actions within his cantos, frequently with no perceivable relation to time or to each other. The action is disjunct, and disconcerting gaps in time and space are bridged primarily by his remote unconcern for both. Landscapes, strongly emblematic in nature, are set up momentarily and struck as peremptorily. Figures come and go, sometimes to reappear, sometimes to vanish without explanation or apology. There are no seasons with which to orient the reader-wanderer within the circle of the year. There is no year, clearly indicated. No leaf turns. No snow falls. Rather, a perpetual summer holds indefinite sway. There are alternate periods of darkness and light but in no predictable sequence, and, finally, these, too, assume a curious quality that belies their identification as night and day. But time is here. Apprehended in the figure of Kronos, agreeably pictorial, conventionalized in the familiar figure of Father Time armed with hour glass and sickle plying his way between the two gates of the Garden of Adonis, admitting

Although their time concept has been described as a rejection of history, it seems more an acceptance conditioned by the inadequacy of history to function as a major factor in their world view. Considered in its cosmic perspective, historical time and event are but fragments of larger reality and cannot, therefore, constitute a valid mode of being for a people oriented to something that is beyond change. The Greek approach to reality has been described as strongly visual. They lived in a roundish world (the circular horizon, the round sea, the dome of the sky), surrounded by certain circular tracings and processes that repeated themselves endlessly. Conditioned by their sense of sight and a profound sense of poetry, they found in the circle an eloquent structure of time and space — the single form that provides a symbol of the principle of Being and in which the changing and the changeless are reconciled. In contrast to the Hellenic circle of time, the symbol of Judaism and early Christianity was an upward sloping line; Oscar Cullman, *Christ and Time*, p. 51. The idea of cyclic time was rejected, however. Time was considered as having a beginning and ultimately an ending. In Christianity as in Judaism, time was conceived of as a straight line progressing from the Creation to the end of the world. See Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, p. 143.

⁸C. S. Lewis, *Spenser's Images of Life*, fn., p. 15, quotes from Cusa's *De docta ignorantia*: "Every man, whether he be on earth, in the sun, or on another planet, always has the impression that all other things are in movement whilst he himself is in a sort of immovable centre In consequence, there will be a machina mundi whose centre . . . is everywhere, whose circumference is nowhere."

and releasing clamorous cherubs and intermittently scything down fair and fresh forms growing in the garden — here is Spenser's time made visible, at last.

But having seen time, or thinking that he has seen it, the reader is in as great a quandary as before, no better oriented than before. Whatever time has to do with the Garden of Adonis and whatever the Garden of Adonis has to do with the rest of the poem remains unclear. Certainly, great numbers of characters canter, lag, boat, and do battle in and about hastily erected land- and waterscapes without encountering the mythical Garden. Except for certain recited genealogies and references to a time of great antiquity (a Golden Age), there is little sense of time past and still less of time to be. All that happens does so at *this* moment and in *this* place, the center foreground, time and space having been brought into sharp focus at one point, the *here* and *now*. It is to this point that Spenser's reader must orient himself, even though he may eventually realize that he is searching in the wrong place for the answers he seeks. Spenser's treatment of time is irrational. It is the kind of time and space encountered in the dream, exploited in the dream, experienced in the ritual, always consistent with strains of hermetic thought that sang alike in the minds of poet, priest, philosopher, and scientist, at least until the early years of the seventeenth century. The kinship of this concept of time to the circle is self-evident, for there is no point in the circumference of the circle that may be identified as beginning or end, and, in the delineation of this form, there is no place that is not a flowing point retracing itself, meaningless except in its total context of circularity. From this vantage point in the middle of time, Spenser anticipates the future in retrospect, and the past becomes a mirror in which he images the future. What has been, not only will be, but is now. Here is Spenser's powerful image of time — a time that was, a time that is yet to be, both detached and suspended, yet absorbed into the unique and vital instant of the present, always advancing, always returning upon itself — the dynamics of eternity brought to bear upon a single point. This deceptively simple definition of "poetic time" is fundamental to Spenser's highly involved patterns of image and action in *The Faerie Queene* in which distinctive figures and actions take on the attributes of dissimilar figures and actions, thus producing in the reader a disturbing sense of *déjà vu*. Inherent in this cycle of time is the triad, a pattern of two opposing figures united by, or in, a third which, in turn, partakes of the elements of each. The significance of this pattern-of-three to Spenser's theme is suggested by the frequency with which it appears in the poem in such varied representations as Medina and her jangling sisters; Cambina and the warring knights, Cambello and Triamond, the latter a three-in-one figure; and the three rooms in the House of Busirane in which Britomartis peers into the Masque of Time. Spenser's mirror imagery (a cosmic triad of viewer, object viewed, and viewing medium) is a variation on this theme, reënforcing it with profound implications. In a characteristically understated manner, Spenser employs this mirror imagery in what might be described as the creation of Britomartis when

she gazes into the magic glass; and it is almost subliminal that the cross and the circle are interjected into this account, for it is the ansate cross, or Venus' looking-glass, into which she gazes.

If to the historiographer time is only linear, to the poet it is circular — often enough, both circular and linear. To the historiographer, first things and last things are strictly ordered, neither to be confused nor altered. To the poet, these distinctions vanish. Kronos, despite his austerity, has much in common with the plummy-winged Hermes, descending the towers of heaven to gaze in amazement and with a little fear at militant Mutability, each owing something to that most oriental of figures, the serpent, or dragon. It is precisely within the context of winged figures and serpent forms and of the mythic realities which they prefigure that Time and Hermes are to be considered. In his office as messenger to the other gods, Hermes may be compared, not unreasonably, to a dynamic quality inherent in processional art, a vital spirit that exists fully and intensely in the intervals between processional figures, passing through those figures, silently and visibly, much as through a series of arches. Sensed when not seen, and seen but indistinctly, it is the same fleeing spirit that animates the passages of Spenser's poem, for whether evoked in the figure of Hermes, winged, youthful, and bearing his snaky wand, or in the figure of Kronos, aged and trudging afoot at his wintry craft in the Garden of Adonis, Time is a protean figure in *The Faerie Queene*.

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