Spenser and the Death of the Queen

Andrew Hadfield

Few Renaissance poems contain more examples of different types of spectacular death than Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*.¹ We witness numerous monsters, dragons, giants and other villains coming to justly sticky ends; Christian and pagan knights falling in battle; as well as some deaths which appear to be more natural, such as the strange deaths of Mortdant and Amavia (2.2).² The poem is also full of near death experiences such as the Red-Cross Knight’s planned suicide when tempted by Despair (1.9), the sufferings of Marinell and Timias (3.4–5), and the rescue of Serena and then Pastorella (6.8; 11). And there are deaths of numerous kings and mythological figures (such as Adonis, represented in a tapestry on the walls of Castle Joyous (3, 1, 34)) in the chronicles and embedded narratives. The rate of deaths and executions increases as the poem becomes more violent in Books 5 and 6, where it is a rare canto that does not contain a killing of some sort, although the first four books are not without their bellicose moments. In *The Faerie Queene* we witness the deaths of Error (1.1); Sansfoy (1.2); Fradubio (1.2); Orgoglio (1.8); the old Dragon (1.9); Mortdant and Amavia (2.1); Pyrochles and Cymochles (2.8); Maleger (although he may already be dead) (2.11); Corflambo (4.8); the headless lady killed by Sanglier (5.1); Pollente and Munera (5.2); the Giant with the Scales (5.2); the sons of Dolon (5.6); Radigund (5.7); the Souldan (5.8); Malengin (5.9); Geryoneo’s seneschal (5.11); Geryoneo (5.11); Grantorto (5.12); Maleffort (6.1); an anonymous knight slain by Tristram (6.2); the savages who kidnap Serena (6.8); and Meliboe, the shepherds and the brigands (6.11).

It is the variety of deaths as well as their sheer number that is important. On one obvious level, these grisly incidents help to distinguish *The Faerie Queene* from Italian romances such as the *Orlando Furioso* or...
native chivalric works such as _Le Morte D’Arthur_. But as well as performing this task they also point to the deaths _not_ actually represented in the poem, ones which no reader could possibly have failed to miss or ignore. The death that everyone was waiting for in the 1590s was that of the aged Elizabeth, who was 57 in 1590 when the first edition of _The Faerie Queene_ was published, not only well beyond the life expectancy of an aristocratic woman in the sixteenth century, but also beyond the age that any Tudor monarch had survived before her reign (Henry VIII had lived to 56; Henry VII to 52). And, as Spenser’s poem makes absolutely clear, the Faerie Queene herself was Elizabeth: ‘in that Faery Queene I meane glory in my generall intention, but in my particular I conceiue the most excellent and glorious person of our soueraine the Queene, and her kingdome in Faery land’ (716).

Nevertheless, when the Faerie Queene does appear, she presents an image of life – albeit an insubstantial one. She enraptures the weary Prince Arthur when he falls asleep in a passage that is as tantalising as the evidence of her presence she leaves behind (‘nought but pressed grass, where she had lyen’ (1.9.15)) that:

Most goodly glee and louely blandishment
She to me made, and bad me loue her deare,
For dearly sure her loue was to me bent,
As when iust time expired should appeare.
But whether dreames delude, or true it were,
Was neuer hart so rauisht with delight,
Ne liuing man like words did euer heare,
As she to me deliuered all that night;
And at her parting said, She Queene of Faeries hight.

(1.9.14)

This verse exploits numerous ambiguities, most obviously the tradition of knights serving and loving ladies in chivalric romance. The most famous example of such ambiguity was the relationship of Lancelot and Guinevere, one of the key stories of the romance tradition. Lancelot was able to serve his king with apparent honesty because he could declare that he loved the queen as her knight, and so could hide the fact that he had embarked on an adulterous affair with her. Spenser has recast this story in proposing an ambiguous relationship between the young Arthur, later to be the cuckolded husband of Guinevere, and the Faerie Queene. The potentially sexual nature of the encounter is manifest: the queen may only deliver words in the night but they ravish Arthur, and