Mammon’s piles of ore, ingots, coin, and other chunks of precious metal may stand as an emblem of one problem that allegory can pose to readers. Pursuing this problem through the House of Mammon episode in *The Faerie Queene* II, I will suggest links among the problem of thinking allegorically, greed, and death, and argue that the whole episode – the epic descent of the book’s hero Guyon to an underworld – amounts to an attack on readerly thinking; Spenser represents and critiques the discourse of punitive moral-exemplum allegory (of the kind found in Dante or Boccaccio or Comes) as such an attack on the mobility of interpretive thought. This is so contrary to our usual assumptions about allegorical fictions inviting interpretations that I want to start by calling to mind a very different allegorical fiction about greed and a mound of gold, that in Chaucer’s Pardoner’s Tale.1 Three young ‘riotours,’ hearing of a dangerous murderer, a ‘privee theef’ (675) called Death, swear to
find and slay this dangerous fellow. On the way they meet an old man
whose time for death has not yet come, though he is ready for it; he
directs the young men to Death’s place, in a grove under a tree. The
Pardoner goes on:

\[
\ldots \text{and ther they founde}
\]

Of floryns fyne of gold ycoyned rounde
Wel ny an eighte busshels, as hem thoughte.
No lenger thanne after Deeth they soughte,
But ech of hem so glad was of that sighte,
For that the floryns been so faire and brighte,
That doun they sette hem by this precious hoord.

(769–75)

Of course they have set in train the process by which they will find
death after all, though they have no thought that they are pursuing it
any longer; their greed and reciprocal treacheries guarantee all their
deaths. All these events the Pardoner tells with economy and dispatch,
so that in this part of his tale there is no ambiguity about cause-and-
effect relationships among death and greed. Furthermore, there is no
obstruction to the thinking of the reader about the nature of the alle-
gory. When we hear the man who first tells the youths about Death,
who has killed so many in their region, we know precisely how to take
it, what sorts of resistances to death will work and what sorts will not
work; we know the youths mistake the allegorical nature of the per-
sonification about whom they have been told. The Pardoner’s Death
has, of course, a depth and resonance that come of venerable traditions
about him – Rosemond Tuve would make this kind of argument about
allegorical figures of early periods, that they present us not with obscu-
rity but with the richness of their historical lives – as well as every
mortal’s mysterious relationship to the limit of death – and the old man
who is ready to die greatly intensifies this resonance. But readers of the
Pardoner’s Tale and its many analogues need not twist their minds in
labyrinthine ways in order to make sense of the story. The ironies of the
young men’s mistakings, in interpretation and ethics alike, are spare,
deep, and clear at once.

Spenser’s House of Mammon episode has nothing of this kind of alle-
gory (although Tuve strongly argues for exactly this kind of force of tra-
dition in the Mammon episode). Instead, like the heaps of disparate,
unconnected metals that Mammon turns over and over, the various bits
of the episode seem to invite close scrutiny, but frustrate this kind of