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Article abstract

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Spenser's Sprites: Platonic Daemons in *The Faerie Queene*

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Throughout the twentieth century, critics of the poet Edmund Spenser wrestled with the question of the presence of Plato as well as Platonic thought in Spenser's works. Having recently established the profound presence of Platonism in Spenser via Marsilio Ficino and other sources, the field of Spenser studies is now open to a treatment of exactly what kind of Platonism is present in Spenser. Drawing from the work done by researchers in the field of magic and Platonism, in this article I hope to demonstrate the presence of Platonic daemons in Spenser's Faerie Queene *who are found under the name of "sprites" or "sprights" in the poem. An examination of daemons in* The Faerie Queene *will elucidate some questions on the role of Merlin in the poem as well as Spenser's own self fashioning as a poet-magus.*

À travers le XXᵉ siècle, la critique s'est longuement penchée sur la réception de Platon et de la pensée platonicienne dans les œuvres de Spenser. Ayant récemment établi la présence en profondeur du platonisme dans Spenser par l'intermédiaire de Marsile Ficin et d'autres sources, le champ des études spenseriennes s'interroge désormais sur la nature exacte du platonisme de Spenser. En m'appuyant sur les travaux réalisés par les chercheurs dans le domaine de la magie et du platonisme, dans cet essai, j'espère démontrer que La reine des fées *de Spenser met en scène des* daimons *platoniques, qui apparaissent dans ce texte sous le nom de "sprites" ou "sprights". Cette analyse permettra d'élucider certaines questions relatives au rôle de Merlin dans le poème, ainsi que la façon dont Spenser s'est façonné lui-même en tant que poète-mage.*

One of the many manifestations of Renaissance magic in *The Faerie Queene* is Edmund Spenser's depiction of spirits or sprites (often called "sprights") in the poem. In *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser's sprites function like the Platonic daemons that haunt the theurgic and Hermetic magical writings of Renaissance Platonic magi Marsilio Ficino, John Dee,[1] Giordano Bruno,

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1. Scholars have linked Spenser with Dee, a critical figure in Renaissance magic. In *John Dee's Occultism: Magical Exaltation through Powerful Signs* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), Gyorgy E. Szőyni even goes so far as to speak of Dee and Spenser sharing the same occult "hope" that "gave a goal to humankind" and "which became openly searched for from the time of the Renaissance"; it "was the program that inspired Spenser to compose the poetical Alma's House and this urged Doctor Dee to fashion the hieroglyphic monad" (Szőyni, 298). In a similar manner, Andrew Escobedo suggests that both Dee and Spenser explicitly refer in their works "to the expectation of an imminent end," in Escobedo, *Nationalism and Historical Loss in Renaissance England: Foxe, Dee, Spenser, Milton* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 80. Jill Delsigne also links Spenser's Temple of Isis with John Dee's

and even the notorious Cornelius Agrippa (as well as their ancient sources, such as Iamblichus and the *Corpus Hermeticum*). Not only do Merlin and the other wizards in the poem utilize sprites to weave their magic, but even Spenser himself, following the formula of Platonic theurgic magic (or at least, using the language of magic drawn from Platonic myth and metaphysics), utilizes the sprite-filled *Faerie Queene* to elevate the sprite or soul of the privileged reader into an enlightened state of consciousness and even, perhaps, apotheosis.

Spenser and Platonism: the critical discussion

While Edmund Spenser has been recognized as a Platonic poet since at least the seventeenth century, the presence of Plato in Spenser's writings has been debated with some degree of intensity for almost one hundred years.[2] Early- and mid-twentieth-century readings of Spenser ranged from C. S. Lewis's view of Spenser as a definitively Protestant Platonist, whose Platonism is always subordinate to his Protestantism,[3] to Robert Ellrodt's famous dismissal of the presence of any use by Spenser of Platonic or "Neoplatonic" texts outside of medieval Christian works until his later career.[4] Early twentieth-century scholars such as Josephine Waters Bennett undertook close analyses of portions of *The Faerie Queene*, ferreting out Platonic sources for such Spenserian locales as the Garden of Adonis,[5] while other scholars such as Alastair Fowler

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Monas Hieroglypha in "Reading Catholic Art in Edmund Spenser's Temple of Isis," *Studies in Philology* 109.3 (2012): 199–224.

2. As early as 1628, Kenelm Digby, an English Catholic diplomat, wrote in his "A discourse concerning Edmund Spencer" that the earlier Elizabethan poet "had a solide and deepe insights in THEOLOGIE, PHILOSOPHY (especially the PLATONIKE) and the MATHEMATICALL sciences"; quoted in William Junker, "Plato and Platonism," in *Edmund Spenser in Context*, ed. Andrew Escobedo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 275.

3. See C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); his *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954); and the chapter "Neoplatonism in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser" in his *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

4. Robert Ellrodt, *Neoplatonism in the Poetry of Spenser* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1960), 31, 67. For criticism of Ellrodt, see Kenneth Borris, "Reassessing Ellrodt: *Critias* and *The Fowre Hymnes* in *The Faerie Queene*," *Spenser Studies* 24 (2009): 453–80.

5. Josephine Waters Bennett, "Spenser's Garden of Adonis," *PMLA* 47 (1932): 56–80.

argued for a Neoplatonic structure to the poem.[6] Later, in the same century, Elizabeth Bieman emphasized the importance of "older" Platonic texts, which "are at least as important for readers of Spenser and other Renaissance texts as those generated by Ficino and post-Ficinian 'Platonists' which have tended to dominate discussions of Spenser's 'philosophy.'"[7] After these twentieth-century debates, in the early 2000s Andrew Hadfield identified a lull in interest in Plato among Spenser scholars.[8] Despite this apparent dearth, in the early twenty-first century Carol Kaske revived the "Ellrodt Debate" with "Neoplatonism in Spenser Once More."[9] Ellrodt, in turn, moderated his views and seemed to accept many of Kaske's arguments in "Fundamental Modes of Thought, Imagination, and Sensibility in the Poetry of Spenser."[10] After these latest skirmishes, Jon Quitslund soon relit the interest in Spenser and Plato with his superb *Spenser's Supreme Fiction.*[11] With the release of *Spenser Studies'* special issue, *Spenser and Platonism*, Spenser scholars recently have established that Spenser was deeply influenced by some form of Platonism or what contemporary scholars would call "Neoplatonism,"[12] and this philosophy serves as one of the principal intellectual engines of Spenser's poetry. As a final note, however, the special issue does contain Paul Suttie's more cautious argument, which echoes Ellrodt's earlier efforts: that *The Faerie Queene* "ultimately treats its Platonic heritage as

6. Alastair Fowler, "Emanations of Glory: Neoplatonic Order in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*," in *A Theatre for Spenserians*, ed. Judith M. Kennedy and James A. Reither (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).

7. Elizabeth Bieman, *Plato Baptized: Toward the Interpretation of Spenser's Mimetic Fictions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 5.

8. Andrew Hadfield, "Introduction: The Relevance of Edmund Spenser," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spenser*, ed. Andrew Hadfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 12n33.

9. Carol Kaske, "Neoplatonism in Spenser Once More," *Religion and Literature* 32.2 (2000): 157–69.

10. Robert Ellrodt, "Fundamental Modes of Thought, Imagination, and Sensibility in the Poetry of Spenser," *Spenser Studies* 20 (2005): 1–21.

11. Jon Quitslund, *Spenser's Supreme Fiction: Platonic Natural History and* The Faerie Queene (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

12. Although Spenser would not have recognized the term "Neoplatonism," it has been considered the best label for the type of Platonism that Spenser utilizes in his work. As Quitslund explains, the term "Neoplatonism" was not "current in the Renaissance, although Neoplatonic doctrines were much more accessible in practice to Renaissance minds than what we now consider the authentic thought of Plato" (Quitslund, *Spenser's Supreme Fiction*, 11).

a lost cause—letting go, at the last, of an attractive but irretrievable Christian-Platonic vision of being, in favor of a more apocalyptic Christianity."[13]

On the other hand, there still remains some discussion as to exactly what kind of Platonism is present in Spenser and how this Platonism is woven into the Christian theological framework of Spenser's writings.[14] In this debate, critics have confirmed the presence of the Plato most recognizable in Renaissance and early modern studies as well as in the Elizabethan period itself, that is, "Plato the apostle of love and beauty, of refinement and gentility, of art and poetry."[15] It is difficult to gauge exactly how Spenser received Plato's ideas, for as Quitslund wisely notes, Spenser's "indebtedness to philosophers is *sub rosa*, veiled by his vague reference to 'Aristotle and the rest.'"[16] However, as Valery Rees convincingly argues in "Ficinian Ideas in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser," the writings of both Plato and Ficino would have been available to Spenser during his time at Cambridge.[17] Quitslund likewise in "Melancholia, Mammon, and Magic" has further argued that "fundamental principles" of Ficino's thought, including "the rationale for […] 'spiritual' magic […] illuminate subtle and significant features of *The Faerie Queene*,"[18] and *The Faerie Queene* becomes a "world in which magic is sometimes possible."[19] Moreover, the cross-pollination

13. Paul Suttie, "The Lost Cause of Platonism in *The Faerie Queene*," *Spenser Studies* 24 (2009): 413–30, 427.

14. In addition to the many twentieth- and early twenty-first-century treatments of Spenser and Plato (including an entire 2009 issue of *Spenser Studies*), see Kenneth Borris's superb *Visionary Spenser and the Poetics of Early Modern Platonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). See also Patrick Cheney's *English Authorship and the Early Modern Sublime: Spenser, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

15. Sears Jayne, *Plato in Renaissance England* (New York: Springer, 1995), 225. However, in contrast, Michael J. Allen, the greatest living Ficino scholar, writes that, in the Renaissance, Plato was considered "a theorist of magic and demonology, two areas of inquiry which Ficino predictably regarded as intrinsic to, and legitimately part of, Platonic philosophy," in Michael J. Allen, *Icastes: Marsilio Ficino's Interpretation of Plato's Sophist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 3.

16. Quitslund, *Spenser's Supreme Fiction*, 98.

17. Valery Rees, "Ficinian Ideas in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser," *Spenser Studies* 24 (2009): 73–134, 73.

18. Jon Quitslund, "Melancholia, Mammon, and Magic," *Spenser Studies* 24 (2009): 309–54. In another piece, Quitslund sees the "mystical tradition of Kabbalah" as an influence on Spenser; see Jon Quitslund, "Thinking about Thinking in the *Fowre Hymns*," *Spenser Studies* 24 (2009): 499–527.

19. Quitslund, "Melancholia, Mammon, and Magic," 322.

of Platonism and magic in the work of the great English Renaissance epic poet increasingly has been treated in some detail over the past several decades.[20] As scholars have noted, the presence of magic that utilizes the metaphysical scaffolding of Platonism is strong in the writings of Spenser—whether or not Spenser himself was a "true believer" in the "dark arts."

The critical consensus on magic and the education of Spenser's reader

In his "Letter to Sir Walter Raleigh" appended to the 1590 edition of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser famously writes, "The general end therefore of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline."[21] Thus, Spenser informs us that the reader's journey through *The Faerie Queene* will be a didactic process. This reading of *The Faerie Queene* as a means of educating the reader has been linked with Platonism since the seventeenth century. In his magisterial contemporary work, *Visionary Spenser and the Poetics of Early Modern Platonism*, Kenneth Borris has argued that Spenser fashions his

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20. A number of twentieth-century scholars of occultism in the Renaissance have all too briefly treated Spenser's interest in the occult. See Katharine Mary Briggs, *Pale Hecate's Team: An Examination of the Beliefs on Witchcraft and Magic among Shakespeare's Contemporaries and His Immediate Successors* (London: Routledge, 1962), 75–76; John S. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age: The Occult Tradition and Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 139; John Mulyran, "The Occult Tradition in English Renaissance Literature," *The Bucknell Review* 20.3 (1972): 53–72; Frances Yates, *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 1985) and *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 112; Wayne Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 240. There are a number of works by Spenser scholars that treat individual aspects of the occult; some of the most detailed include two works by Patrick Gerard Cheney, "'Secret Power Unseene': Good Magic in Spenser's Legend of Britomart," *Studies in Philology* 85.1 (1988): 1–28, and "'And Doubted Her to Deeme and Earthly Wight': Male Neoplatonic 'Magic' and the Problem of Female Identity in Spenser's Allegory of the Two Florimells," *Studies in Philology* 86.3 (1989): 310–40; Douglas Brooks-Davies, *The Mercurian Monarch: Magical Politics from Spenser to Pope* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982); Kenneth Gross, *Spenserian Poetics: Idolatry, Iconoclasm, and Magic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); and Genevieve Guenther, "Spenser's Magic, or Instrumental Aesthetics in the 1590 *Faerie Queene*," *ELR* 36.2 (2006): 194–226.

21. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (New York: Routledge, 2013), 714. All of my excerpts from *The Faerie Queene* are taken from this generously annotated edition.

reader through a series of sublime experiences.[22] Some critics, however, have attempted, albeit tentatively, to link Spenser's educational efforts in *The Faerie Queene* with magic. In her recent article, "Spenser's Magic, or Instrumental Aesthetics in the 1590 *Faerie Queene*," Genevieve Guenther argues that Spenser uses his *Faerie Queene* to develop an "instrumental aesthetics of wonder" as a means of charming the reader: enacting "wonder in the reader by representing magic with verse so artfully ambitious that it becomes impossible for the reader to decide whether the pictures in his mind's eye are poetic or demonic, or both."[23] This evocation of wonder is part of an "attempt to train the reader in an intellectual disposition that both uses the desire inspired by beauty to motivate virtuous action and resists the effects of beauty's force which may be exploited by bad poets or, for that matter, by daemons and the magicians that deploy them."[24] As she writes in *Magical Imaginations*, Guenther (whose work is derived from Kenneth Burke's study of the "rhetorical function" of magic) sees Spenser's magic as being "inextricably tied to his desire to fashion disciplined subjects."[25] However, Guenther shies away from delving too deeply into the possibility of Spenser using magic, leaving Spenser's use of magic in a state of unresolved ambiguity. Guenther's argument complements an earlier effort by Isabel MacCaffrey, who had spoken of "Spenser's […] efforts to defuse the potentially diabolic energy of poetry by advertising the imagination's inherent duplicity."[26] As I hope to demonstrate, it is through recourse to the tradition of Platonic magic and especially theurgy that we can see why Spenser's fashioning of the reader into a virtuous gentleman or woman via Platonic daemons under

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22. Borris specifically notes the "revelatory value" of beauty in Spenser's poetry (Borris, *Visionary Spenser*, 50). Patrick Cheney argues that the "sublime experience of rapture" is the "defining experience of [Spenser's] poetics," in *Reading Sixteenth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: Wiley–Blackwell, 2011), 156–59.

23. Guenther, "Spenser's Magic," 198.

24. Guenther, "Spenser's Magic," 211–12. Cheney seems to ignore the practice of using daemons in the "white" theurgy of Platonists, arguing that in *The Faerie Queene* only the evil wizards use "an art that coerces daemons to alter the truth about reality" (Cheney, "Good Magic in Spenser's Legend of Britomart," 8).

25. Genevieve Guenther, *Magical Imaginations: Instrumental Aesthetics in the Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 61. See Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

26. Isabel MacCaffrey, *Spenser's Moral Allegory; the Anatomy of Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 241–42.

the appellation sprites or "sprights" is described as an explicitly magical process with an ancient pedigree.

A definition of Platonic daemons and their role in theurgic magic

Before examining Spenser's text, we need to take a look at what Platonic daemons are and what role they play in theurgic magic as well as how Spenser's contemporaries understood the mechanics of poetry constructed from a Platonic framework. The notion of a poet being like a magus was common among Renaissance thinkers imbued with the writings of Plato. Among Spenser's contemporaries and personal associates, Plato was revered as a "sacred" author. Spenser's former teacher, Richard Mulcaster, referred to the Greek philosopher as the "divine Plato,"[27] and Roger Ascham similarly called Plato "that divine philosopher."[28] Drawing from Plato's *Phaedrus* and, to a lesser degree, the *Symposium* and *Ion*, Renaissance poets and theorists of poetry crafted a view of poetry as, in the words of Jean de Serres, a "divinely enraptured representation"[29] that sprang from what Italian theorist Cesar Ripa called a "divine furor."[30] For Spenser's contemporary Sir Philip Sidney, whose circle, according to Catherine Gemelli Martin, was affected by the "hermetic philosophy"[31] of Ficino and Bruno, a poet has the ability to craft a "golden world" from the "zodiac of his own wit," which itself imitates God's creative act.[32] As Guenther notes, in his *Defense of Poesy* Sidney "sounds almost exactly like Cornelius Agrippa […] who in *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* vaunts the adept's power to ascend in to a transcendent realm of Platonic Ideas, whose representation, Agrippa argues, can transform social and even material life."[33]

27. Richard Mulcaster, *The Passage of Our Most Drad Soveraigne Lady Quene Elyzabeth* (London, 1558), D1v–D2r, STC 7590. See also Borris, *Visionary Spenser,* 12.

28. Roger Ascham, *The Scholemaster* (London 1570), 17v, 25v, 46v, 52v (STC 1019). See also Borris, *Visionary Spenser*, 12.

29. quoted in Borris, *Visionary Spenser*, 60.

30. quoted in Borris, *Visionary Spenser*, 59.

31. Catherine Gemelli Martin, "Spenser's Neoplatonic Geography of Passions," *Spenser Studies* 24 (2009): 269–307.

32. *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 216.

33. Guenther, *Magical Imaginations*, 4.

For Guenther, Sidney (as well as Spenser) wanted to make it clear that although the poet was like a magician in some sense, the poet certainly did not perform magic, and "the Elizabethan magician was the twin, or rather the evil twin, of Sidney's efficacious poet."[34]

Citing the father of theurgy, Iamblichus, in his *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, Torquato Tasso, one of Spenser's own literary models, writes of the ability of the "Christian poet" "to invoke mind and the intelligences, since the Muses were believed to be nothing but intelligences."[35] As Borris notes, poetry, during the Renaissance, was viewed as a "means of experiencing preternatural vision through discourse that could somewhat overcome the ordinary bounds of human language and perception."[36] However, like many critics, Borris uses language here that seems to describe the very process of theurgic magic; at the same time, also like many critics, Borris avoids treating Spenser's poetry as magic or at least as using the language of magic. More importantly, critics fail to recognize that the image of the theurgic magus was intertwined with the role of the poet in the Platonic tradition.[37]

Theurgy, which was familiar to magicians of the Renaissance, was codified in the writings of Iamblichus, the third and fourth century CE Syrian Platonist, although it was ultimately drawn from the mysterious *Chaldean Oracles.* Theurgy basically produces two results: there is a change in the soul (or, in Spenser's lexicon, "sprite") of the magi and their subject as well as an esoteric experience of transcendence, which may or may not be distinct from the interior change. Iamblichus describes three levels of initiation through which the mage proceeds in theurgy:

> prayer establishes links of friendship between us and the gods, and secures
> for us the triple advantage which we gain from the gods through theurgy,

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34. Guenther, *Magical Imaginations*, 14.

35. Torquato Tasso, *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, trans. Mariella Cavalchini and Irene Samuel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), book 4, 114. Gary Tomlinson argues that Tasso's understanding of imitation and epic allegory in *Gerusalemme liberata* "suggests the magical domain of thought, signifying internal passions and opinions with 'mysterious notes' […] which can be fully understood only by those who know the nature of things," in Gary Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic: Toward a Historiography of Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 219.

36. Borris, *Visionary Spenser*, 38.

37. See Allen, *Icastes*.

the first leading to illumination, the second to the common achievement of projects, and the third to the perfect fulfillment (of the soul) through fire.[38]

Most importantly for our discussion, this theurgy depended upon the use of demons or *daemons* (which could be either good or bad) to impart knowledge to the seeker and transform his or her own spirit into a daemon. Marsilio Ficino, the translator of Plato, Iamblichus, and *The Corpus Hermeticum*, and one of the founding fathers of Renaissance Platonism, made a distinction between "illicit" "Egyptian" magic, which worshipped daemons as gods, and a licit natural magic that simply used daemons as "means."[39] For Ficino, Platonic daemons were not necessarily the same creatures as the demons who fell with Lucifer or Satan from heaven. In his commentary on the *Symposium* of Plato, Ficino writes, "The good daemons, who are our guardians, Dionysius the Areopagite usually calls by the proper name angels, rulers of the lower world. [...] Moreover, those souls whom Plato calls gods, or the souls of spheres and stars, we can call angels, or ministers of God, as Dionysius does."[40] Despite his distinctions and protestations of Christian orthodoxy, Agrippa, however, was much less cautious than Ficino as scholars unquestionably agree.[41] Nonetheless, like Ficino, Agrippa also tries to dismiss the idea that evil spirits were necessarily always invoked (although he will later discuss the ability for magi to control evil spirits).[42] Finally, as Andrew Escobedo points out, daemons were often associated with Christian conscience in medieval thinkers such as Alain de Lille; Escobedo even notes that Spenser's description of Genius resembles the

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38. Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, trans. with intro. and notes by Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbell (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), book 5, section 26.

39. See D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (College Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 46, and Charles Nauert, *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought* (Champaign; University of Illinois Press, 1965), 230.

40. Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium of Love*, trans. Sears Jayne (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1985), 6.3.

41. See Nauert, 124. In *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), Frances Yates presents a similar view, arguing that, after Agrippa, Bruno went even further in stripping away Christian restraint and caution (146–60).

42. Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, trans. James Freake, ed. and annot. Donald Tyson (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1992), book 2, section 58.

Platonist Apuleius's depiction of daemons.[43] Quitslund had likewise earlier stated that the function of Genius "is consistent with the mediating role Ficino assigned to daemons in the commentary *On Love*," and that the Garden of Adonis "as a whole is a poetic analogue to Ficino's doctrine of the world soul and its daemons."[44]

These Platonic daemons were linked with the planets and could be harnessed by the magician to perform noble acts of healing and creation. For Renaissance Platonists, this magic had a distinct role of purging not only the "receiver" of the magic, but all of creation, and the goal of the magus, "the supreme artist," would be to set about redeeming creatures "through his magic from all impurity."[45] These magi perceived themselves as the centre of the universe, as John Mebane notes: "as perceivers or 'interpreters' of nature, as artists, and, finally, as magicians, it is the sacred privilege of humankind to unite the intelligible and the physical aspects of the cosmos and thus to play a role in perfecting the created world."[46] The daemons aid both in God's divine creation and in the work of the artist-magician. For Ficino, the images that objects produce "owe their existence to divine contrivance" by means of daemons.[47] As a result, daemons are "the makers, the creators in the restricted sense, of the whole realm of images, reflections, and shows in the natural world," who "are accustomed to reveal certain wondrous sights to men."[48] What is more, for Ficino, our imaginations have a "demonic power."[49] Thus in art, according to Michael Allen's reading of Ficino, "our imaginations became creating daemons, agents, 'in a way' of the divine phantastic art."[50]

The imagination was also connected with demonic power; daemons could participate in strengthening and enlightening the imagination, and, in turn, could be used by a magus to manipulate his or her subject. Brian Copenhaver

43. Andrew Escobedo, *Volition's Face: Personification and the Will in Renaissance Literature* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 100.

44. Quitslund, *Spenser's Supreme Fiction*, 99.

45. Mebane, 47.

46. Mebane, 29.

47. Allen, 21.

48. Allen, 171, 172.

49. Allen, 175.

50. Allen, 177.

explains that in Bruno's reading of Ficino, if the artist-magus creates images that are "astrological" in which there was "magic," then the human faculties "of imagining and remembering could open channels of heavenly power. And the information that flows through figures and images might be processed through the symbolic machinery that Bruno found in the Lullian art of memory."[51] As Allen notes, for Renaissance theorists such as Ficino, "one phantasy can affect another" and "a more powerful imagination […] can mold the images that strike our spirit and hence our phantasy or can reflect others onto it."[52] In a letter to Braccio Martelli, Ficino writes that poetry frightened some in the Renaissance precisely because it functions like magic and "makes use of an eloquence perfectly suited to produce entrancement and seemingly magical attraction; it is also easily able to charm and entice minds, and therefore it produces in us a belief in utterly impossible things."[53] There is thus a clear link for many Renaissance Platonists (and Platonic magi) between the ability of a magus to affect the object of his or her magic and a poet's ability to affect his or her audience.

These ideas are echoed in the writings of Bruno as well as of Agrippa and Dee,[54] all three of whom seem to take Ficino's largely philosophical and theological discussion and apply it to the real practice of magic (especially in the case of Agrippa and Dee). Dee speaks of a "Zographer," in his *Mathematicall Preface*, who like Ficino, Agrippa, and, as we will see, Spenser's notion of a magus, was a divine artist who has a "certaine divine power" to "represent things" "so as, at their being the Picture shall seame (in maner) to have Created them."[55] Bruno also links the creation of an artist with that of a magician who harnesses the power of the Platonic forms, and "any magician who wishes to

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51. Brian Copenhaver, *Magic in Western Culture: From Antiquity to Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 318.

52. Allen, 199. See this fascinating theme developed in Ioan Culianu's *Renaissance in Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, trans. Margaret Cook (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). See also Mebane, 29.

53. Arthur Farndell, ed., *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, 12 vols. (London: Shepheard-Walwyn, 2018), 7:29, 36.

54. Valery Rees points out that Dee had a copy of Ficino's *Opera Platonis* that "was much used […] during Spenser's lifetime" (Rees, 109).

55. quoted in Peter French, *John Dee: The World of An Elizabethan Magus* (London: Routledge, 1972), 152.

carry out his work in accordance with nature must especially understand this ideal principle and how it applies specially to species, numerically to number and individually to individuals."[56] Art, in the tradition of magic rooted (however loosely) in the writings of Plato, thus has the power to radically modify the spirit of the magus who, in turn, uses numbers, images, and words to influence his or her subject, transforming spirit, imagination, and intellect.

The idea of powerful words to control spirits (both daemons and the spirits and subject of the magus) has ancient roots. The *Corpus Hermeticum*[57] speaks of the power of Egyptian words as does Iamblichus in *De Mysteriis*.[58] Iamblichus further writes of the ability of "unutterable truths" to be "expressed through secret symbols" as well as of "beings beyond form brought under the control of form" and "things superior to all image reproduced through images."[59] The magic power of words can likewise be found in the work of Renaissance magi such as Agrippa[60] and Bruno.[61] There is, therefore, an integral relationship in this Platonic tradition between magic, poetry (as *poesis* or making), and rhetoric. In the tradition of Platonic magic that Spenser knew (and in which he may have dabbled), therefore, daemons could be licitly employed by an artist-magician or rhetorician who had the power to manipulate a subject as part of a transformative, theurgic process.

Spenser and the poet magus

Spenser and his immediate circle used the language of Platonism to describe Spenser as acting like a magus. Sir Walter Raleigh, who had an interest in magic himself, and Gabriel Harvey—in their commendatory poems affixed to *The Faerie Queene*—describe Spenser as a Platonic poet imbued with "furor." Raleigh, in fact, refers to Spenser as a "celestiall thiefe," comparing Spenser to Hermes and thus possibly with the Hermetic tradition with which both

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56. Giordano Bruno, *On Cause, Principle, and Unity*, Richard J. Blackwell and Robert de Lucca, trans. and eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 112.

57. *Hermetica,* trans. and ed. Brian Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), book 16, section 1.

58. Iamblichus, 7.1.

59. Iamblichus, 1.21.

60. Agrippa, 1.67.

61. Bruno, 115.

Raleigh and Spenser were familiar. In *Visionary Spenser*, Borris argues that Raleigh's reference here is to Prometheus,[62] while A. C. Hamilton argues that the reference is to Hermes.[63] Either way, Raleigh depicts Spenser as acting like a godlike magus. What is also interesting is that, as Allen argues in *Icastes*, "in Platonism the daemons also are assigned the role of messengers and interpreters between the gods and men; and as such they can be thought of as Hermes-like."[64] Harvey, in turn, writes that the majesty of *The Faerie Queene* is evidence that "some sacred fury hath enrich't" Spenser's "braynes."[65] This argument, that Spenser has become possessed by some Platonic fury, is the grounding to Spenser's self-fashioning as a poet-magus who himself, in turn, changes the spirit or spright of the reader through the manipulation of spirits or sprites. English Renaissance writers such as Joshua Sylvester also considered Spenser a "divine" poet with allegedly mystical powers, calling Spenser Britain's "mysterious ELFINE oracle"; while Henry More called Spenser "a Prophet as well as Poet."[66] In his *School of Abuse*, Stephen Gosson likewise identifies poets with magicians, including practitioners of black magic.[67] Certainly this language could be mere hyperbolic, patriotic praise, but, as we will see, Spenser appropriates the image of a magus for himself and makes very bold claims for the power of his poetry.

Spenser's garden of sprites

Having examined the tradition of Platonic theurgy and the importance of daemons in this intellectual legacy, let us now turn to Spenser's use of daemons as sprites in *The Faerie Queene*. While acknowledging Spenser's familiarity with Platonic daemons, critics such as Ellrodt have denied the presence of such daemons in the work of the English poet. Ellrodt famously points to "the absence of the Neoplatonic daemons in his 'fairy land', which should have proved hospitable to their airy tribe"; moreover, "the absence of aeros

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62. Borris, *Visionary Spenser*, 3.

63. Hamilton, ed., *Faerie Queene*, 721.

64. Allen, 113.

65. Gabriel Harvey, "To the learned Shepeheard," quoted in *Faerie Queene*, ed. Hamilton, 722.

66. Sylvester and More are quoted in Borris, *Visionary Spenser*, 23.

67. Stephen Gosson, *Apologie of the Schoole of Abuse* (London: Thomas Dawson, 1579), fols. 84a 97b.

Daemones in his cosmology must betray a conscious choice and personal disinclination, whether dictated by religious scruples or common sense or an aesthetic preference for classical mythology and native fairy lore."[68] Eschewing the influence of Platonic magic on Spenser's writing, Ellrodt nonetheless acknowledges that "Platonic demonology must have been early known to Spenser if not through the Alexandrian and the Florentine Platonists, or through Paracelsus and dabblers in magic from Agrippa to Dr. Dee at least through Apuleius and Plutarch."[69] For Ellrodt, Spenser's sprites are simply spirits or faeries derived from an indigenous British folk tradition, and the English poet did not draw from his knowledge of Platonic daemonology to craft his poetry.[70] In contrast, Angus Fletcher, using a host of examples from Spenser himself, views many of the "allegorical characters" in Renaissance literature as functioning like Platonic daemons and/or figures who resemble classical heroes possessed by such daemons.[71] Fletcher does not explore the magic roots of this idea in depth; however, an examination of what Spenser's sprites are and what they do reveals a clear pedigree in Platonic daemonology. What is more, sprites as Platonic daemons play an essential role in the economy of *The Faerie Queene* as a didactic and magical work meant to manipulate the sprite of the reader, forming him or her into a virtuous gentleman or woman.

Aery sprites as Platonic daemons

While Spenser uses the word "spright" to denote the animating principle of human life or the emotive centre of humans (and elves and fairies), there are also sprites in the poems who are not located in the human body (most of the time) but seem to resemble the ghosts of folklore as well as Christian angels and daemons. Most important for our discussion, these sprites also function as Platonic daemons. There are a couple of points at which human sprites

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68. Ellrodt, *Neoplatonism in the Poetry of Spenser,* 92

69. Ellrodt, *Neoplatonism in the Poetry of Spenser*, 92.

70. For Spenser's use of the fairies drawn from the British or "Celtic" folk tradition, see Edwin Greenlaw, "Spenser's Fairy Mythology," *Studies in Philology* 15.2 (1918): 105–22. See also Matthew Woodcock's more recent *The Faerie Queene: Renaissance Elf-Fashioning and Elizabethan Myth-Making* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004).

71. Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press)—especially the chapter "The Daemonic Agent."

resemble demons or the ghosts of folklore, and there a few instances of the sprites needing vengeful appeasement for their deaths. These sprites are almost always bad, and, at various points, Spenser calls them "misformed" (1.1.55), "false" (1.2.3), "damned" (1.2.4), "cruell (2.7.57), "cursed" and "euill" (2.2.29); associated with trickery and deception, they are "guileful" (1.2.34) and are further called "feends" (1.2.4).These damned sprites seem to resemble demons more than the daemons of Platonism or "Neoplatonism."[72] These sprites, when not performing the behest of witches and wizards, dwell in the underworld of Fairy Land.

Furthermore, there are references to magi in the poem who operate magic with the help of wicked sprites. Archimago, for example, summons his sprites "out of deepe darknes dredd" (1.1.38), and in book 4 we learn that Ate is "raised from below, / Out of the dwellings of the damned sprights" (4.1.19). We learn that the evil sprites are at least analogous to the daemons of Christian angelology, for Spenser, in book 3, places some sprites in the Christian narrative of the fall of angels from heaven: "in heuen, whereas all goodnes is, / Emongst the Angels, a whole legione / Of wicked Sprightes did fall from happy blis" (3.9.2). However, not all sprites are bad. When the newly created elf in the *Antiquitee of Faerie lond* discovers the Fay that is gifted to him, he finds her to be so beautiful that he thinks she is "either Spright / Or Angell" (2.10.71).

A few times in *The Faerie Queene*, we learn that bad sprites can inspire bad behaviour in the souls of humans on their own without being manipulated by a magus. Medina calls out to the combating knights in book 2: "what cursed euill Spright, / Or fell *Erinnys*, in your noble harts / Her hellish brond hath kindled with despight" (2.2.29). Furthermore, Glauce tells Merlin in book 3 that she is worried that some "euill spright" might be tormenting Britomart "within her hollow brest" (3.3.18). These sprites, then, have the ability to affect human souls on their own without provocation by a wizard.

We have a further indication of the nature of sprites and their spooky retinue in Spenser's description of Maleger, the monster who leads the attack of hellish fiends upon the House of Alma in book 2. Spenser describes Maleger as being like an "aery spirite vnder false pretence, / Or hellish feend raysd vp through diuelish science" (2.11.39). In the first description, we have a probable

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72. In her treatment of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Guenther identifies Ariel as a demon of Christian demonology, not a "Neoplatonic daemon," due to Ariel's mischievous character (Guenther, *Magical Imaginations*, 94).

reference to the lower theurgy of Iamblichus and Ficino in which there are incorrect ways to summon daemons. There is a lower theurgy in the Platonic tradition, which magi like Archimago and Busyrane in *The Faerie Queene* seem to represent. In *De Mysteriis*, Iamblichus diminishes those who

> conjure spirits up secretly, without these blessed visions, grope, as it were, in darkness, and know nothing of what they do, except for some very small signs which appear in the body of the one divinely inspired, and some other signs that manifest themselves clear; but they are ignorance of the whole of divine inspiration, which is hidden in obscurity.[73]

Iamblichus further explains that this malfunction is due to "some error […] in the theurgic technique" in which "inferior kinds" of images are summoned in the "divine vision."[74] A true vision will result from the gods as well as "those following the gods," which "reveal the true images of themselves, and do not in any way offer apparitions of themselves such as those contrived in water or in mirrors."[75] As Copenhaver explains in Iamblichus, "the genuine theurge contemplates the true essential forms (eidê) of the gods, but the thaumaturge only sees and touches their false artificial images (eidôla)."[76]

Examining these passages in light of theurgy, we see that in the second description, we have what Spenser's contemporaries—such as Raleigh—would call *goetia* or a "diuelish science," which uses a formal pact with the devil to summon evil spirits. Thus, it is when the sprites are used at the behest of a wizard or witch that we see a clear parallel between sprites in *The Faerie Queene* and daemons in Platonic theurgy. We also hear of the ability for magicians to summon sprites in Spenser's description of Cruelty in the Mask of Cupid in the house of Busyrane, who is described as a "dreary Spright / Cald by strong charmes out of eternall night" (3.12.19). Guenther argues in this scene that Spenser is causing the reader "to doubt that he is seeing it truly," and that "for the reader who believes in the possibility that demons can implant images into the imagination, this verse enacts the experience of ontological doubt that

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73. Iamblichus, 3.6.

74. Iamblichus, 2.10.

75. Iamblichus, 2.10.

76. Copenhaver, 78.

makes allegorical figures objects of wonder."[77] Thus, again we have evidence to suggest that sprites are at the very least Platonic daemons if not the wicked daemons of Christian angelology.

Because of the intimate link between magic and art in *The Faerie Queene*, these sprites also are associated with the creation of art and the images produced by the imagination. Archimago is the first magus we encounter in *The Faerie Queene* who wields sprites. Impelled by his command, Archimago's sprites have the ability to cross boundaries between worlds; Archimago sends a sprite to get an "ydle dream" from the god Morpheus in the underworld (thus again linking Archimago, Phantastes, and wicked sprites). Moreover, the "Legions of Sprights" that Archimago is able to summon "out of deepe darknes dredd," and which "like litle flyes" are "Fluttring about his euerdamned hedd" (1.1.38), are clearly linked with the "flyes" or "idle thoughtes and fantasies, / Deuices, dreames, opinions vnsound, / Shewes, visions, south-sayes, and prophecies" of Phantastes in the House of Alma in book 2 of *The Faerie Queene*, which "buzzed" all about (2.9.51). Allied with the illusory imaginative power of Phantastes, Archimago utilizes these sprites to create illusions to tempt Redcrosse. However, he is not the only bad wizard to do so.

Echoing the legends of the power of ancient Egyptians to instill spirits into statues, there is further evidence of a Platonic pedigree in the use of sprites by Archimago and the witch who created False Florimell, both forming animated and compelling illusions.[78] The witch, who like Merlin lives in a cave or "secret mew" (3.8.4), uses a "false spright" who is "wicked" and "yfraught with fawning guyle" (3.8.7) to "engraft" in the "forme" of the False Florimell (4.2.10). Her sprites further, like Platonic daemons whom she is "wont" "to entertaine," are her teachers or "masters of her art"; she calls on them "in order to her ayde" and to "counsell her" and to teach her how "she might heale her sonne" (3.8.4). Additionally, like Archimago and, as we will see, Merlin, the witch has a tremendous power and can threaten the sprites with "eternal paine" (3.8.4). Moreover, it is through the combined "device" as well as the "wicked wit" of the witch that she is able to create the False Florimell and "deuizd a wondrous worke to frame" (3.8.5). This witch who "frames" False Florimell

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77. Guenther, *Magical Imaginations*, 60.

78. Agrippa, for example, writes of the "ancient priests" of Egypt who "made statues, and images, foretelling things to come, and infused into them the spirits of the stars" (Agrippa, 1.39).

seems to use some sort of theurgic magic to summon a sprite and make an animate creation, and "in the stead / Of life […] put a Spright to rule the carcas dead" (3.8.7). False Florimell also appears to resemble the "Lady" "fram'd of liquid ayre" (1.1.45) created by Archimago to model the "semblance" of Una "vnder feigned hew" (1.1.46). This spirit, shaped like Una and linked with False Florimell, is called "faire-forged" (1.2.2) and "miscreated faire" (1.2.3) because it appears beautiful; it is a work of deceptive art, unlike the true, magical art of Spenser's Merlin as well as of Spenser himself.

If the sprites in *The Faerie Queene* simply were "wicked" and associated with illusory magic, then our discussion would be much simpler; the magicians who use these sprites could simply be written off as practitioners of goetic or demonic magic. However, even the "good" wizards in the poem (including Spenser himself) utilize sprites—even wicked sprites—in a way remarkably similar to how bad wizards such as Archimago and the witch who created False Florimell use sprites. We are thus left with a conundrum that can only be resolved by appeal to the daemonic magic of Platonic theurgy.

Platonic daemons and the puzzle of Merlin's sprites finally solved

A summoner of sprites and wielder of theurgic magic, Merlin is an especially curious character in *The Faerie Queene* whose role was debated in a series of articles in the twentieth century. The core issue of the debate has been the problem of placing Merlin as a good wizard in an allegedly Protestant Christian poem. The seminal twentieth-century essay on the role of Merlin in *The Faerie Queene* is William Blackburn's "Spenser's Merlin" in which Blackburn argues that Spenser presents Merlin primarily as "a figure of a poet," thus making him "of central importance to the treatment of art in the entire poem."[79] In response, Matthew A. Fike argues that Merlin contains a "demonic side" that makes Merlin an ambiguous character; according to Fike, even though "Merlin can draw on hell for his magical power," he nonetheless "urges reverence and submission […] to God," and although "Merlin's power stems from hell itself," his magic is "presumably in line with God's will for His children. Merlin commands a demonic force rather than being subject to it, and his power, at

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79. William Blackburn "Spenser's Merlin," *Renaissance and Reformation* 4 (1980): 179–98, 179.

least potentially, serves the good of human characters."[80] More recently, in "Spenser's Merlin Rehabilitated," Jerrod Rosenbaum suggests that Spenser did not mean to depict Merlin as a conjurer of spirits, and we should not assume "that all the details regarding Merlin provided in canto ii of Book II are meant to be taken as authoritative and true."[81] Certainly, Merlin is a requisite artifact of the medieval Arthurian legends that Spenser is trying to "Protestantize" and appropriate for Tudor cultural consumption as well as a required presence in the Italian romances such as *Orlando Furioso* from which Spenser is drawing. Merlin is also an important figure in Spenser's minor poems. In Spenser's early *Ruines of Time* we hear how Merlin was able "by his magicke slights" (line 523) to build a "pleasant paradise" (line 519) on earth full of the "daintiest delights" (line 520), in which one could "feed his cheerfull sprights" (line 522).[82] However, Spenser's Merlin is remarkably similar to Archimago, Busyrane, and the witches in the poem. Nowhere is the weirdness of Merlin more prevalent than in his use and manipulation of spirits or sprites. Paralleling the use of spirits by "bad" magicians in the poem, Merlin utilizes sprites to perform similar tasks of transforming his subject as well as revealing hidden information. Spenser's use of Merlin is the key element in the equation that reveals the presence of Platonic theurgic magic in *The Faerie Queene*, and Merlin not only allows Spenser to claim the status of "philosopher-poet," as Borris suggests; Merlin also reinforces the image of Spenser as poet-magus.[83]

Unlike his rival wizards, Merlin is not simply a manipulator of sprites; he himself is part sprite, "wondrously begotten, and begonne / By false illusion of a guilefull Spright, / On a faire Lady Nonne" (3.3.13). In addition to discovering that sprites have the ability to engender children with human females, we learn that Merlin is born of the same sort of sprite that Archimago uses, which is linked with "false illusion" as well as guile. This strange pedigree associates Merlin with the "Geaunts" in *Briton moniments*, in book 2, who come from the coupling of "*Dioclesians* fifty daughters" "with feends and filthy Sprights"

80. Matthew A. Fike, "Spenser's Merlin Reconsidered," *Spenser Studies* 13 (1999): 89–99.

81. Jerrod Rosenbaum, "Spenser's Merlin Rehabilitated," *Spenser Studies* 29 (2014): 149–78, 150.

82. William Oram, et al., eds., *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

83. Kenneth Borris, "Platonism and Spenser's Poetic: Idealized Imitation, Merlin's Mirror, and the Florimells," *Spenser Studies* 24 (2009): 209–68, 210.

(2.10.8). Thus, from the beginning, Merlin seems inescapably allied with what appear to be evil sprites.

We further know that Merlin's sprites are not "good," but in fact are the same evil sprites used by the witch and Archimago. These sprites are dangerous, "cruell Feends" who might "vnwares deuowre" Spenser's reader (3.3.8). These "thousand sprights," bound by Merlin's power, are forced to "tosse" "yron chaines" and "brasen Cauldrons," which "thousand sprights with long enduring paines / Doe tosse" (3.3.9). Furthermore, these sprites do the bidding of Merlin and are forced to work at creating the magic wall around Cairmardin, for Merlin is a wizard of great power whose "commandment" the sprites "feare" (3.3.10). Fike describes the curious powers that Merin has in book 3, canto 3, which seem to "contrast with those of Christ," for "[r]ather than using divine power to break through brazen gates, Merlin uses infernal power to force hell fiends to build a brazen wall whose very construction ensures their own bondage and whose circular shape may recall the walls around hell itself," although Fike does admit that Merlin's binding of the pestilential sprites is "a clear boon to human beings."[84] However, if we see Merlin as a theurgic magus in the tradition of Christian Renaissance Platonism, this issue is, hopefully, clarified, for Merlin can then be seen to be a magus able to wield over sprites such power as Renaissance magi like Ficino, Agrippa, and Dee held—while remaining safely within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy.

Merlin's great power parallels that of Fidelia in the house of Dame Caelia as well as that of the other wizards in the poem—perhaps even eclipsing them. We should, however, not conflate Fidelia and Merlin's powers. Rosenbaum rightly points out Fidelia's superiority to Merlin: "Although Merlin shares with Fidelia the ability to manipulate the sun and moon, part waters, and vanquish vast armies, only she can cast mountains into the sea."[85] Merlin's tremendous ability echoes Agrippa's description of the tremendous power of the magician to "predominate over nature, and cause such wonderful, sudden and difficult operations, as that evil spirits obey us, the stars are disordered, the heavenly powers completed, and the elements made obedient."[86]

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84. Fike, 92.

85. Rosenbaum, 163.

86. Agrippa, 3.6.

Furthermore, like the witches and wizards in *The Faerie Queene*, as well as Spenser's own contemporary magi in the tradition of Platonic theurgy, Merlin counsels "with his sprights encompast around" (3.3.7), using them for knowledge that he reveals to others. Like the foul enchanter Busyrane, Merlin also writes with "straunge characters on the ground," which he uses to control "stubborne feendes" (3.3.14). As Rosenbaum notes, we cannot escape from the reality that Spenser again and again links Merlin with wicked wizards such as Busyrane: "[t]he phrase 'bloody wordes' recalls practitioners of maleficium such as Busyrane, who is said to 'bloody lynes reherse' (3.12.36). More broadly, reference to a kind of magic based upon illusion ('all that was not such, as seemd in sight') comprehends all the maleficent sorcerers who populate the poem."[87] However, it is not so much that Spenser condemns "Busirane's art as magical," as Guenther suggests; rather it is that Busyrane is the wrong sort of magician who uses the wrong sort of magic.[88] The images that Merlin's sprites summon have themselves a profound effect on the viewer. As Borris notes, after Britomart views the images in Merlin's magic mirror, the images she sees become "written in her heart" (3.2.29) and "infixed" in her "bowels," which, like the pneuma, spirit, or sprite in Platonic tradition are "considered the seat of the passions."[89] This mirror transforms Britomart and "imprints its contents within her"[90] in a manner similar to that of a magician affecting his or her subject. Like Busyrane as well as Spenser himself, and Platonic theurgic magi, Merlin thus is a poet magus. Moreover, like Archimago, Busyrane, and Spenser himself, Merlin also uses sprites to project images, and his images are like those of Phantastes's prophecies and soothsaying in book 2's House of Alma.[91] However, such power and association with poets and artists, rather than make Merlin wicked, link him with the powerful poet magi, depicted by Ficino, Agrippa, Dee, and even Sidney, who were considered imitators of God and whose creative power utilized daemons and spirits.

87. Rosenbaum, 169.

88. Guenther, *Magical Imaginations*, 56.

89. Borris, "Platonism and Spenser's Poetic," 238.

90. Borris, "Platonism and Spenser's Poetic," 240.

91. Iamblichus writes that prophecy can be linked to theurgy, for daemons "reveal through symbols the purpose of the gods, even given advance notice of the future. […] Thus even as they create all things by images so also they signify them in the same way by agreed-upon signs; and perhaps they even awaken our understanding, by the same impulse to a greater acuteness" (Iamblichus, 3.15).

Merlin, one of the poems many "vatic figures,"[92] uses a mirror that presents prophetic revelation to Britomart, and his association with sprites who reveal knowledge to him would indicate that the sprites are involved in the revelation of Britomart's destiny in the mirror. Spenser critics have noted the importance of the mirror and its possible sources. As Blackburn points out, without developing the idea further, this use of a mirror creates a "connection with the daemones of Neo-Platonic pneumatology (and so with the fallen angels)" and "is the source of Merlin's occult powers.[93] In contrast, Rosenbaum points to a biblical source for the mirror: "Mirrors also appear as a biblical device, most notably at 1 Corinthians 13:12, in which Paul touches upon the subject of obfuscations and revelation."[94] This use of a mirror links Merlin with Dee as well as the wider tradition of Platonic magic in which the image of a mirror is frequently used to describe the imagination. In Spenser's immediate Elizabethan milieu, a mirror would also have special magic implications. Dee and his summoner of spirits Edward Kelley were sought out for their lucrative alchemical skills, but the two English magicians were most interested in angelic magic, the ability to summon spirits in a crystal ball, which Dee called a "shew-stone,"[95] as well as a "strange mirror" that even "caught the eye"[96] of Queen Elizabeth. This type of magic, sometimes called "Sintrillia," made use of gems and crystals as well to induce visions and summon angels.[97]

Finally, Merlin seems to be overwhelmed by a Platonic daemonic furor at the end of his prophecy. Merlin's prophetic furor is linked with poetic furor, and thus Merlin himself again is connected to Spenser as poet. Spenser references poetic furor in his minor works as a divine possession in which knowledge is received and transmitted to the reader or audience. In his gloss on the Ovidian emblem for "October" of Spenser's great pastoral *The Shepheardes Calender,* the commentator E. K. writes that poetry is "a divine gift and heavenly instinct not to be gotten by laboure and learning, but adorned with both: and poured

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92. Richard McCabe, "Spenser, Plato, and the Poetics of State," *Spenser Studies* 24 (2009): 433–52, 446.

93. Blackburn, 181.

94. Rosenbaum, 165.

95. William H. Sherman, *John Dee: The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 80.

96. Benjamin Woolley, *The Queen's Conjuror: The Science and Magic of Dr. John Dee, Adviser to Queen Elizabeth I* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2002), 21.

97. Glyn Parry, *The Arch Conjuror of England: John Dee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 26.

into the witte by a certain ἐνθουσιασμός. and celestiall inspiration."[98] The Greek word ἐνθουσιασμός or *enthusiasmos* is defined as "enthusiasm, inspiration, possession by a divinity" as the editors of the *Yale Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser* explain.[99] In "The Teares of the Muses," Spenser also treats poetry as a "heavenly gift" from the muses who transmit their "skill" via "divine infusion," revealing a "hidden mysterie."[100] For Renaissance Platonists, furor was integrally associated with daemonic activity. In his *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, Ficino writes of the phenomenon of individuals such as Socrates or Zoroaster developing "friendships" with gods and daemons, and "[f]or this reason signs, voices, and portents from daemons are said to have come to them, when they were awake, or oracles and visions when they were asleep."[101]

Likewise, in *The Faerie Queene*, as Merlin finishes his prophecy to Britomart, Spenser describes how Merlin "stayd / As ouercomen of the spirites powre" and is in a "suddein fitt" and "half extatick stoure" as well as a "fury" (3.3.50). Merlin appears to have undergone a state of possession of some kind via the sprites he has summoned that present him with the prophetic vision of the rise of the house of Tudor. Critics have questioned whether or not this ecstatic state is the result of something that Merlin cannot understand, but critics have failed to examine what is going on here. Disturbed by this frenzy, some Spenser critics have suggested a Christian source to deflect any demonic implications. Rosenbaum, for example, points to similar experiences that Sts. Peter and Paul had.[102] However, we can trace a source for this ecstatic furor in both pagan and Christian theurgy. Iamblichus, the father of philosophical theurgy, explains that "[t]umult and disorder" accompany the vision of daemons.[103] Commenting on Agrippa and the tradition of Renaissance magic, Charles Nauert eloquently writes:

> Frenzy is the illumination of the soul by gods or daemons. The first type of prophetic frenzy comes from the Muses, or presiding intelligences of the

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98. Oram, et al., eds., 170.

99. Oram, et al., eds., 170.

100. Oram, et al., eds., 263.

101. Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium of Love*, 6.10.

102. Rosenbaum, 161.

103. Iamblichus, 2.3.

nine celestial spheres, each of which governs certain classes of prophecy. A second type proceeds from Dionysius, being preceded by certain rites which direct the soul (*anima*) into its highest part, the intellect (*mens*), and so make it a temple of the gods. A third type comes from Apollo, the mind of the world, and grants sudden infusion of learning, knowledge of the future, and immunity from bodily harm.[104]

Agrippa himself had written,

> Now the third kind of phrensy proceeds from Apollo, viz from the mind of the world. This doth by certain sacred mysteries, vows, sacrifices, adorations, invocations, and certain sacred arts, or certain secret confections, by which the spirits of their god did infuse virtue, make the soul rise above the mind, by joining it with deities, and daemons.[105]

All of these descriptions seem to match Merlin's furor and link it to theurgy and Platonism, which, as Kaske notes, has "the four divine frenzies" as one its "hallmarks."[106] As a result, we have the answer to the question of whether Merlin is a Platonic theurgic magus, for the tradition of Platonic theurgy requires a trance-like state or furor for theurgic transcendence to be accomplished.

Spenser's use of sprites

However, it is not only Merlin who practises theurgy with the aid of sprites. Spenser himself also perhaps seeks the aid of daemons, at least symbolically, in his own "magic" poetry of *The Faerie Queene*. Treating Spenser as a poet of Platonic furor and sublime experience, recent critics such as Patrick Cheney, Borris, Quitslund, and William Junker have argued that Spenser envisioned himself as having tapped into a power higher than himself that he had "channeled" into his verse.[107] Junker provides a quote from Kenelm Digby's "A discourse concerning Edmund Spencer," which reads, "SPENCER in what he

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104. Nauert, 286.

105. Agrippa, 3.48.

106. Carol Kaske, "Hallmarks of Platonism and the Sons of Agape," *Spenser Studies* 24 (2009): 15–72, 16.

107. Borris, *Visionary Spenser*, 3.

saith hath a way of expression peculiar to him selfe; he bringeth downe the highest and deepest misteries that are contained in human learning, to an easy and gentle forme of delivery; which sheweth he is Master of what he treateth of."[108] Arguing that Spenser, in Digby's reading, "'brings down' these truths into language through the mediation of poetic 'forme' just as the Ideas find expression in bodies through the mediation of shape and number," Junker explains that Spenser functions like the demiurge in Plato's Timaeus who "fashions the sensible cosmos after the image of the intelligible cosmos by impressing material bodies with mathematical forms. Plato's mythic retelling of the world's emanation is the story of Spenser's poetic creation."[109] However, like Borris, Junker does not make the connection between Spenser's self-depiction as a demiurge and the theurgic and Hermetic magic reintroduced to the West by Ficino and modified by Bruno, Dee, and Agrippa, which gave the poet a role as a magus who "brings down" and "channels" hidden truths into the soul or mind of the reader by affecting his or her sprite. Quitslund, however, does argue that as an "Orphic poet," Spenser's poetry offers "ecstatic knowledge […] in belated and mediated form, and his mediation depends upon the philosophers' interpration of mediation in the cosmos."[110] Nonetheless, the language that Spenser uses in *The Faerie Queene* echoes that of Platonic theurgists and Hermeticists. As Rees notes, citing one of Ficino's early letters, "Spenser […] seems to have been influenced by the importance that Ficino ascribes to poetic frenzy and 'the mysteries,' including the communication of philosophical truths in poetic veils."[111] Ficino himself had written in his *Commentary on Plato's* Symposium that such fury is necessary to obtain true wisdom as well as for moral formation, and "only by divine inspiration can men understand what true beauty is, what legitimate love is, and in what way one ought to love."[112] This view of the experience of *The Faerie Queene* as a theurgic initiation for the reader is illustrated by Spenser who invokes the help of the muses, "sacred imps," who guard "learnings threasures," which they "well" into "the mindes of mortall men" and "infuse" "goodley fury" into them (6.proem.2). Spenser here

108. Junker, 277.

109. Junker, 278.

110. Quitslund, *Spenser's Supreme Fiction*, 101.

111. Rees, 94.

112. Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium of Love*, 107.

does not merely present himself as a poet offering ideals to the reader to be mimicked; he is describing himself as a magus who conjures truths with the aid of spirits and, in turn, via the same spirits, imparts these truths into the spirt of the reader, impelling him or her to deeds of greatness.

Moreover, Spenser's framing of his poem as a "song most fitly […] addrest" to Elizabeth, "The Queen of love" (4.proem.4), which will inspire her (and the other readers) to virtuous action, has precedence in the tradition of Platonic theurgy. Borris is thus correct to identify Spenser as being comparable to a Platonic lover who, as he ascends beauty's scale to seek its paradigm, refines an ideal of the beloved and other beauties in his mind to restore the "'first perfection' of their transcendental origin."[113] However, this process is also akin to how a magus in the Platonic tradition would describe his or her own work. In *De Vita*, his manual of medicine and magic, Ficino discusses the power of songs; for Ficino, a song "provokes the singer and the audience to imitate and act out" the things sung; a song, further,

> [b]y the same power when it imitates the celestials […] also wonderfully arouses our spirit upwards to the celestial influence and the celestial influence downwards to our spirit. Now the very matter of song, indeed, is altogether purer and more similar to the heavens than is the matter of medicine. […] Song, therefore, which is full of spirit and meaning—if it corresponds to this or that constellations not only in the things it signifies, its parts, and forms that results from those parts, but also in disposition of the imagination—has as much power as does any other combination of things and casts it into the singer and from him into the nearby listener.[114]

Thus, music has the ability to function as natural magic and transfer the power of the stars into the singer as well as the audience. Ficino further argues in his *Commentary on Plato's* Symposium that some artists can lure "men over to themselves through the powers of eloquence and the measures of songs, as if by certain incantations."[115] Agrippa likewise suggests that "verses" and "orations" can attract the "virtue of any star, or deity" and in order to harness the power

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113. Borris, "Platonism and Spenser's Poetic," 220.

114. Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, ed. Carol Kaske et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), book 3, section 21.

115. Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium of Love*, 6.10.

with one's verse, "you must diligently consider what virtues any star contains, as also what effects, and operations, and infer them in verses, by praising, extolling, amplifying, and setting forth things which such a kind of star is wont to cause by way of its influence."[116] Spenser seems to be accomplishing a similar task in his *Faerie Queene,* for his language in the proems appears drawn from Ficino as well as other magi who spoke of the use of daemons to initiate a transcendent experience and thus transform the initiate.

In the fourth stanza of book 2's proem, Spenser further mocks those who would "more inquyre" of "faery lond" and would "admyre" what his senses would reveal; rather, he should follow the lead of Spenser, the poet, who is the "hound" leading the reader through the tangled thicket of the poem "By certein signes here sett in sondrie place" (2.proem.4). In a dated but erudite essay, Edwin Greenlaw suggests that these signs refer to "such signs as are familiar in Celtic folklore."[117] However, such signs can also be a reference to Merlin's and Busyrane's writing with its ability to control sprites or daemons and its roots in Platonic theurgy. These muses also function as sprites and thus perhaps as Platonic daemons to guide Spenser to Fairy Land. The world that Spenser is entering, as he further communicates, is a strange, bold, new world, and he needs the help of the muses who will guide him, telling them, "Guyde ye my footing, and conduct me well / In these strange waies, where neuer foote did vse, / Ne none can find, but who was taught them by the Muse" (6.proem.2). This language of "footprints" or vestiges parallels Ficino's description of the ascent of the mind to God in the *Theologia Platonica*: "We can enjoy the divine mind through various Ideas, seek it through various traces (vestigial), travel toward that goal by various paths."[118] Drawing from Ficino and other Renaissance Platonists imbued with a magic pedigree, Spenser is voyaging into another world via what is at least analogous to a theurgic mystical experience that he will, in turn, impart to his readers with the aid of the muses who, as part of the calculus of *The Faerie Queene*, function as Platonic daemons. This passage echoes the descriptions of Merlin as well as Archimago and the witch who creates False Florimell, who summon help from the sprites to work their craft.

116. Agrippa, 1.71.

117. Greenlaw, 4.

118. quoted in Paul Oskar Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. Virginia Conant (New York: Peter Smith, 1964), 255.

Finally, there is a need for a special reader with a prepared, enlightened mind to receive Spenser's teaching. Only those with a pure mind (and noble sprite), such as Elizabeth, who have received a similar divine inspiration from divine spirits will gain access to the true meaning of the poem. Spenser suggests that Elizabeth may be such an elite reader when, in the proem to book 1, Spenser calls Elizabeth's mind a "Mirrour of grace and Maiestie diuine" (1.proem.4). The mirror is an important image in the tradition of Platonic magic; it is regularly used as an icon of the soul, and of the soul's ability to reflect and "capture" images as well as even daemons themselves. Allen links the image of a mirror with occult experiences that take place in the "*spiritus phantasticus* of Neoplatonic pneumatology," which enables "the bodily senses […to…] perceive phenomena that seem to us to be solely outside the body but are in actuality being mirrored by our spirit."[119] In the *Theologia Platonica*, Ficino himself writes, "it is apparent that the Soul is inflamed by the divine splendor, glowing in the beautiful person as in a mirror, and secretly lifted up by it as by a hook in order to become God."[120] As Copenhaver also explains, in the thought of Ficino, "The magus can use spirit as a mirror to capture the likeness of any other thing, including the daemons who are lords of light and shadow, masters of calculation and illusion."[121] Agrippa also uses the image of the mirror to describe the process of illumination, enlightenment, and even apotheosis:

> Our pure and divine soul being loosed from all hurtful thoughts, and now freed by dreaming, is endowed with this divine spirit as an instrument, and doth receive those beams and representations which are darted down; and shine forth from the divine mind into itself; and as it were in a deifying glass, it doth far more certainly, clearly and efficaciously behold all things, than by the vulgar inquiry of the intellect.[122]

These ideas drawn from Platonic magi seem to have influenced Spenser's depiction of Elizabeth as the ideal reader of *The Faerie Queene*. In the proem to

119. Allen, 198.

120. quoted in Kristeller, 267.

121. Copenhaver, 268.

122. Agrippa, 3.51.

book 6, Spenser says that Elizabeth is an elite woman who has a "pure minde," which like a "mirrour" shows "Princely curtesie" and "doth inflame / The eyes of all" (6.proem.7). This idea of an elite, found in Kabbalism and Gnosticism as well, was common among Renaissance magicians; it held that a new reformation of the world would come about through an enlightened intellectual and moral elite who had become aware of their "divine origins" and who laboured to bring the perfection of the world that would be achieved "when humanity regained the knowledge and power it had lost through original sin."[123] Indeed, many occultists such as Bruno and Paracelsus thought that "God had chosen them personally to eliminate all traces of corruption from human society."[124] In the *Corpus Hermeticum*, available to Renaissance readers via Ficino's translation, we learn of the soul of a human who has reached a godlike state of enlightenment:

> For the human is a godlike living thing, not comparable to the other living things of the earth but to those in heaven above, who are called gods. Or better—if one dare tell the truth—the one who is really human is above these gods as well, or at least they are wholly equal in power to one another.[125]

In a similar fashion in *The Faerie Queene*, Elizabeth thus has a privileged access to Spenser's secret teaching, and this idea of people with specially illuminated minds is essential to thinkers in the tradition of Platonic magic. Spenser therefore establishes *The Faerie Queene* as a magic mirror that will illuminate the privileged reader, Elizabeth (and other British readers who share a similar access to the meaning veiled behind the "darke conceit").[126] Spenser critics have pointed to this idea of illumination in Spenser, but have not done all the detective work rooting out the sources of Spenser's Platonic and perhaps even theurgic understanding of enlightenment. Borris, for example, argues, "For minds that can be awakened, he [Spenser] assumes, *The Faerie Queene*'s mode of esthetic fairness affords heightened perceptions of reality.

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123. Mebane, 84.

124. Mebane, 12.

125. *Hermetica*, book 10, section 24.

126. Borris refers to both Merlin's mirror and *The Faerie Queene* as being *specula* in "Platonism and Spenser's Poetic," 238.

The others will enjoy the shadows."[127] Nonetheless, in addition to the more familiar philosophical and aesthetic readings of Spenser's use of Plato, it does seem that Spenser made use of the language of Hermetic and Platonic magic or theurgy. The mechanics of this magic are facilitated by Platonic daemons who are labelled sprites in the poem and who illuminate Spenser as well as his reader. As we have seen, a similar magical formulation takes place within the drama of *The Faerie Queene* itself.

Conclusion

Our treatment of Spenser's sprites as being (or at least being influenced by) Platonic daemons is only the beginning of a wider discussion of the presence of Hermetic and Platonic magic in *The Faerie Queene*. More than solving the riddle of Merlin and his use of magic, Spenser's sprites as Platonic daemons help us understand both *The Faerie Queene* as a whole and Spenser's self-fashioning as a poet-magus. Just as philosophers such as Ficino and the early modern magi, Agrippa, Bruno, and Dee, all struggled to graft their interest in theurgy with their honest and even devout Christian faith, so too did Spenser, the "Protestant poet," as Anthea Hume has called him, attempt to blend magical strands in the Platonic tradition into his own Christianity.[128] Furthermore, with the help of his sprites, Spenser utilizes this theurgic or Platonic magic formula as part of his method of shaping and forming his reader into a virtuous gentleman or woman. This magical education or "framing" is used throughout the drama of the text of *The Faerie Queene* itself, as Spenser's characters—good and bad—utilize daemons coded as sprites along with theurgic magic. In the end, while *The Faerie Queene* is a work coloured by pessimism as well as sober humility, it is also a work of triumph and bombastic ambition and excess, and Spenser, whether a true believer in magic or not, depicted himself, like his wizards in the poem, as a poet-magus who, through his channelling of Platonic sprites, could effect a unique revelation to his reader.

127. Borris, "Platonism and Spenser's Poetic," 255.

128. Anthea Hulme, *Edmund Spenser: Protestant Poet* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).