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Syphilis or Melancholy?  
Desire as Disease in Spenser's  
*The Faerie Queene* (1590)

Laetitia Sansonetti

My contention in this paper is that syphilis and melancholy are represented as related diseases in *The Faerie Queene* because both are directly connected to desire.

I will argue that Spenser relies on the Galenic theory of the passions to treat the topos of love-as-disease literally, as a form of humoral imbalance: people who fall in love often mistake their condition for an excess of black bile; the outcome of lust is systematically described in terms of syphilitic bouts. The two diseases are so alike in some of their symptoms that it may be difficult to distinguish between melancholy and the incipient state of syphilis. Focusing on Duessa's syphilitic body in Books 1 and 2 and on Britomart's several love wounds in Book 3 of *The Faerie Queene*, I will compare the description of the diseased body in Spenser's poem to the medical examination of the causes and effects of syphilis and melancholy in various treatises, from Fracastoro's *Syphilis* to Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. The triangulation between desire, syphilis, and melancholy that I suggest can prove useful, I think, to understand better the interplay between medical forms of discourse and literary works.

From Girolamo Fracastoro, who wrote his treatise on syphilis as a poem in Latin hexameters and named the disease after a fictional shepherd, to Robert Burton, who illustrated his remarks on melancholy with quotations from Shakespeare, Marlowe and Spenser (Burton 71, 73, 74, 77; 3.2.2.2), early modern medical authorities testify to the importance of lit-

erary forms to medical discourses.<sup>1</sup> As poetic rhetoric colours medical writing, so too does medical attention to the body influence Renaissance poetry which deals with passions, and in particular with desire. The suffering lover is a traditional figure in Western literature, be he wounded by Cupid's arrows or by his lady's eyes. But the growing interest in love melancholy, kindled by Ficino in Italy and culminating in Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, made early modern poets more keenly aware of the physical dimension of desire.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time as melancholy was gaining prominence as a theme in literature, another disease linked to desire was scourging Europe. Wherever it originated, syphilis first appeared among the ranks of the Spanish and French armies in Italy in the very last years of the fifteenth century.<sup>3</sup> It then spread quickly to the whole Continent, causing such terrible damage that Fracastoro compared the epidemic to the Black Plague outburst of 1348 (47-49; 1.186-196). As late as 1579, William Clowes, a surgeon at St Bartholomew's in London, indicated that he and three fellow surgeons had treated more than a thousand syphilitic patients (B2<sup>r-v</sup>).

Melancholy and syphilis share a very intimate relation to desire: the former, because one of its varieties is a form of love, the latter, because it is transmitted through sexual intercourse, as its early nickname of "morbus Venereus" clearly reflects (Béthencourt). Arguably, the outbreak of syphilis also contributed to challenging the Galenic theory of the passions as humoral imbalances, which was perfectly illustrated in the definition of melancholy as an excess in black bile. Indeed, the great adversary of Galenic medicine was a Swiss physician/chemist, Paracelsus, who became famous for his methods of curing syphilis. Paracelsus reactivated the old opposition between the understanding of disease as an internal problem that could be treated with a better regulation of bodily fluids, and the understanding of it as an aggression from the outside (Webster 146-148). Studying melancholy and syphilis as diseases of

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<sup>1</sup> As Laura Gowing phrases it, "Renaissance medical texts construct knowledge through narrative and rhetoric, and they openly acknowledge the power of story, myth and metaphor in making sense of the body" (3). Such a statement is not surprising if we bear in mind the early modern curriculum for physicians, which included undergraduate studies in the humanities (see Wear, French and Lonie ix).

<sup>2</sup> As Lawrence Babb remarks, Elizabethan poets "frequently use phraseology which shows that their conception of love has been greatly influenced by the physiological psychology" (145). See also Schoenfeldt about "the profound medical and physiological underpinnings of Shakespeare's acute vocabulary of psychological inwardness" (75), and Beecher and Ciavolella: "we pause before our own imperfect understanding of these same processes in demetaphorized form" (Ferrand 6).

<sup>3</sup> At the battle of Fornovo di Taro, 5 July 1495. One of the first accounts is Joseph Grünpeck, *Tractatus de pestilentiali Scorra Sive Mala de Franzos* (1496).

desire will thus help shed light on a crucial question for medicine as well as for literature: once you assume that desire has a bodily existence, where do you locate it? Is it an attack on the body or the product of inner imbalance?

Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is particularly distinctive in its representation of desire as disease. First, it is a romance, whose topic is the role desire plays in triggering (or preventing) heroic deeds; it is also an attempt to determine whether you can trust appearances (hence it raises the question of symptoms and what is hidden within the body, or revealed by it); and it is a reflection on incarnation – both on the validity of using allegory, metaphor, metonymy and related rhetorical devices and on the religious stakes of the English Reformation. The 1590 edition consists of three books, respectively devoted to “Holiness,” “Temperance,” and “Chastity,” thus clearly linking the physical control of the passions and the moral conduct of the individual. I shall start with a comparison of diagnoses and treatments for love, melancholy, and syphilis, before moving on to focus on the material wounds of desire. My last point will bear on Spenser's use of syphilis as an allegory of treachery.

### *Diagnosis and treatment*

Britomart, the heroine of Book 3 of *The Faerie Queene*, is a young princess bored in her father's castle, spending her days musing on her marital future, “as maydens vse to done” (Spenser 3.2.23.5). Her father owns a magical mirror, which shows its owner's enemies. To Britomart, the image of a handsome knight named Artegall appears in the mirror when she looks into it. She falls in love with the mysterious image straight away, but at first does not diagnose her symptoms correctly, mistaking them for signs of melancholy:

And her proud portance, and her princely gest,  
 With which she earst triumphed, now did quaile:  
 Sad, solemne, sowre, and full of fancies fraile  
 She woxe; [...]

Yet thought it was not love, but some melancholy.

(Spenser 3.2.27.3-6, 9)

Britomart's symptoms do indeed correspond to the characteristics of melancholy love described by Robert Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. The melancholy lover is physically weak; he loses his appetite, grows paler and leaner; and he spends his time pining for his beloved (Burton 133-184; 3.2.3).

When he tries to determine the location of melancholy love, Burton reviews different possibilities: is it in the heart, as some argue, or in the blood, as Ficino suggested, or rather in the brain? He favours the brain because this particular form of melancholy affects the patient's capacity to pass judgments (the *vis estimativa*): "the major part concur upon the brain, 'tis *imaginatio laesa*; and both imagination and reason are misaffected, because of his corrupt judgment, and continual meditation of that which he desires, he may truly be said to be melancholy" (Burton 58; 3.2.1.2). Lawrence Babb suggests that the overlap between love and melancholy, which is obvious in Burton's treatise, may be the result of the courtly influence on Elizabethan love literature, to which Burton clearly is indebted (Babb 52). By focusing on a naive heroine who is unaware of the general confusion between love and melancholy, Spenser thus offers a subtle critique of the poetic tradition of the morose lover.

If Britomart mistakes the symptoms of love for those of melancholy, her disease is described in terms that are strikingly close to a diagnosis of syphilis. Fracastoro lists the symptoms of incipient syphilis thus:

Those afflicted were burdened by an unusual lethargy and, feeling a languor with no apparent cause, performed their tasks with increasing weariness and tried to keep themselves going although their whole body felt sluggish. Their natural liveliness fell downcast from their eyes, their colour from their unhappy brow. (Fracastoro 55; 1.325-329)

This is exactly what happens to Britomart after she has seen the image in the mirror. Of course, these are common enough symptoms. But her nurse, Glauce, uses a significant oxymoron when she comments on her altered complexion: "what euill plight / Hath . . . liuing made thee dead?" (Spenser 3.2.30.7-8, 9). This sentence reminds us that the plague was often referred to as "Death" and that syphilis, which causes the slow deterioration of the body, had become known as "living Death" (Healy 130).

Glauce tries to cure Britomart with herbs that were recommended in the treatment of syphilis for their soothing effects, such as rew (Spenser 3.2.49.5), which features in several of Fracastoro's recipes. As for camphor ("Camphora" [3.2.49.6]), known for its antiseptic and anaphrodisiac properties, it can be synthesised from turpentine, an ingredient also mentioned by Fracastoro. Calamint (3.2.49.5) is an anti-pyretic, and dill (3.2.49.6) is a variety of fennel, which was infused to be drunk by victims of the pox (Fracastoro 71; 2.177).

According to A. C. Hamilton, Glauce has diagnosed Britomart with a case of anaemia, more precisely the kind of anaemia that affects virgins: "morbus virgineus," or "the green sickness" (Hamilton *apud* Spenser

3.2.39.2-5). Glauce does not in fact refer to iron, or any other traditional treatment used to cure hypochromic anaemia. But Hamilton's hypothesis is not to be entirely discarded, as Glauce does prescribe the archetypal remedy for young women suffering from the green sickness, namely sex, which will cure the hysterical imbalance of desire in a virgin.

If the diagnosis shows how similar the symptoms of love, melancholy and syphilis can be, the cure implemented by Glauce identifies Britomart's disease not as the consequence of unrestrained sexual activity, but as the outlet of her frustrated desire. As I will try to demonstrate presently, the alterations undergone by Britomart's body, because they can be diagnosed as either melancholy or syphilis, invite the readers to reshuffle the traditional oppositions between inner imbalance and aggression from the outside, as well as between love in the mind and love in the heart.

*The melancholy and the syphilitic wounds of love*

After seeing the image in the mirror, Britomart starts having nightmares:

And if that any drop of slombring rest  
 Did chaunce to still into her wearie spright,  
 When feeble nature felt her selfe opprest,  
 Streight way with dreames, and with fantasticke sight  
 Of dreadfull things the same was put to flight,  
 That oft out of her bed she did astart,  
 As one with vew of ghastly feends affright.

(Spenser 3.2.29.1-7)

Her disturbed mind seems to be under attack by phantasms, material particles running through her brains. Such particles were sometimes understood to be demons named *incubi*, which were thought to be capable of inseminating women by penetrating their bodies via their imagination in their sleep. According to Bernardus Gordonius, a French physician from the late thirteenth century, *incubi* could cause the body to move and speak, and even to suffocate (Bernardus 115; 2.24). In his translation of Lemnius's *Touchstone of Complexions*, Thomas Newton mentions those aggressive spirits that try to penetrate human bodies and permeate the minds, staging a conflict between the body-as-fortress and disease-as-besieger (Lemnius 22<sup>r-v</sup>). The cure recommended by William Vaughan reflects a different conception of the nature of these spirits: he advises purging and bleeding so as to get rid of the melancholy vapours that can cause nightmares (Vaughan 290-291).

We know that Britomart's melancholy dreams begin after she sees the image in the mirror, which might induce us to identify her dreams with the manifestation of malignant spirits which have seized the opportunity of her vulnerable state to invade her mind. Thus it was believed that melancholy could enter a weak body, just as syphilis propagates via contagion. But in Renaissance medical terms, we could also interpret her dreams as the corpuscular condensation of her melancholy vapours. It is therefore as difficult to determine the origin of the wound in Britomart's mind as it is to relate her love symptoms to an inner or an outer cause.

When it comes to the hackneyed image of the heart wound, about which every lover poetically complains, the situation is different, and the vocabulary of syphilis seems to hold sway. Just as Petrarch compares his *innamoramento* to a deer being wounded by an arrow (Petrarch 209.10: "Et qual cervo ferito di saetta"), Britomart receives a love wound on first seeing Artegall in the mirror. She explains how the wound, launched in her heart, has spread to her bowels and infected her whole organism:

Sithens it hath infix'd faster hold  
 Within my bleeding bowels, and so sore  
 Now ranckleth in this same fraile fleshly mould,  
 That all mine entrails flow with poysnous gore,  
 And th'v'lcer groweth daily more and more;  
 Ne can my running sore find remedie[.]

(Spenser 3.2.39.1-6)

For Maureen Quilligan, Britomart's complaint is an obvious parody of the stereotyped Petrarchan discourse to which all poets/lovers were resorting. Quilligan even finds it too extreme to be effective:

Spenser makes Britomart speak Petrarchese with such a vengeance that her description of love's suffering sounds more like a clinical account of stomach cancer than a conventional complaint of love. Both Britomart and Glauce take the traditional metaphor of the arrow wound from the *Roman de la Rose* too literally. (Quilligan 200)

But the process by which metaphorical clichés are remade into literal statements constitutes much more than a parody of Petrarchist rhetoric. First, the "entrails" have a very important symbolic value for such Protestant authorities as Paul and Augustine, who believe them to be the siege of conscience (Hillman 16). And secondly, some medical authorities thought that love melancholy originated in the liver (Burton 40; 3.2.1.1). Spenser is not only parodying a literary tradition, he is directly

associating it with a medical and religious tradition dealing with literal wounds and metaphorical interpretations.

Britomart's terminology when describing her wounds is particularly striking, as it is strongly reminiscent of the words used to describe bodies cankered with syphilis. Her "poisonous gore" (Spenser 3.2.39.3, quoted above) recalls the description of Ulrich von Hutten's own rotten blood, and her ulcers and sores are also typical of syphilis at an advanced stage (Hutten 4<sup>r</sup>). Despite Britomart's spotless virginity, her love wound is made literal via a location and an evolution that point to the pox, whose means of transmission Hutten clearly identified: "defilynge of hym selfe, which thing especially happeneth by copulation" (Hutten 3<sup>r</sup>, 52<sup>r</sup>, 35<sup>v</sup>; see also Boorde lxxxvii and Du Laurens 23-24).

To revivify the poetic language of love, Spenser borrows from the clinical language of health breviaries such as Ulrich von Hutten's *De morbo gallico*. The quickening of desire in a young virgin is presented both as an aggression from outer elements and as a change coming from within the body that makes it more receptive to external impressions. Spenser is thus combining two different kinds of discourses on the passions, testifying to the growing influence of the discourse on syphilis at the end of the sixteenth century. As he satirises those who mistake love for melancholy, he does not fall into the trap of mistaking love for syphilis: Britomart's literal wounds of desire are not the pox, as a study of two unmistakably syphilitic female bodies will show.

### *Allegories of syphilis*

In Book I of *The Faerie Queene*, Duessa, who has pretended to be a chaste damsel, is unmasked – and unclothed – so as to reveal her moral and physical uncleanness. While the symbolic fox tail and cloven feet clearly make her an allegory of false – that is to say Catholic – religion usurping the identity of Una, the true (Reformed) religion, her diseased body was intended to remind Renaissance readers of syphilis:

A loathly, wrinckled hag, ill fauoured, old,  
Whose secret filth good manners biddeth not be told.

Her craftie head was altogether bald,  
And as in hate of honorable eld,  
Was ouergrowne with scurfe and filthy scald;  
Her teeth out of her rotten gummes were feld,  
And her sowre breath abhominably smeld;  
Her dried dugs, like bladders lacking wind,

Hong downe, and filthy matter from them weld;  
 Her wrizled skin as rough, as maple rind,  
 So scabby was, that would haue loathd all womankind.

Her neather parts, the shame of all her kind,  
 My chaster Muse for shame doth blush to write[.]  
 (Spenser 1.8.46.8-9, 47, 48.1-2)

“Secret filth” is one of the characteristics of syphilis, as signalled by Ulrich von Hutten, who tells his reader how frequently he has to cleanse his sores (see also Clowes Aiv<sup>r</sup> and Bi<sup>v</sup>). We also know that syphilis first strikes the genitalia, which Spenser signals in alluding to Duessa’s shameful “neather parts.” Far from being an innocent damsel in distress, Duessa looks much more like a cunning prostitute using tricks, clothes, unguents and other ointments to conceal her disease from the men she tries to seduce. Among other consequences of syphilis, or of its cures, rank hair loss and scabby scalp, loss of teeth and foul breath, which all affect Duessa’s unmasked body (Hutten 7<sup>r</sup>).

The association between syphilis and false religion is obviously made stronger by the location of the first outbreak among a Catholic army stationed in Italy, inciting Marian exiles to use the pox as a metaphor for Popery. Thus, in his pamphlet entitled *A newe booke of Spirituall Physik for dyverse diseases of the nobilitie and gentlemen of Englande*, William Turner combines the image of the defiled prostitute with the dangers of religious transgression, setting in parallel syphilis, or “the Frenche pokkes” as it was known then, and “the Romish pokkes”: “There was a certeyne hore in Italy, whych had a perillus disease called false religion” (Turner 74<sup>r-v</sup>). Spenser knew about the fate of the Whore of Babylon (Revelation 17), the daughters of Zion (Isaiah 3.17) and more generally, God’s enemies, struck with various forms of the plague, which is probably why he imitated Turner in making a poxy prostitute the allegory of false religion.

Spenser goes a step further in the creation of False Florimell, an artificial creature made by a witch out of materials such as snow and gold, which were traditionally used to describe feminine beauty (Spenser 3.8.6-7). False Florimell is not only love poetry materialised, she is also a compound of medical treatments against syphilis and concealing products, such as mercury, advocated as a miracle cure by Paracelsus, and vermillion, used by diseased courtesans to disguise their pale complexion (Hutten 6<sup>v</sup>).<sup>4</sup> If Florimell can be seen as an allegory of syphilis, she

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Healy refers to an emblem by Francis Quarles entitled “Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away by his own lust, and enticed,” in which the serpent describes the fruits on the forbidden tree in terms reminiscent of pocky faces: “Mark what a pure Vermilian blush has dy’d / Their swelling Cheeks” (Quarles 5; Healy 166).

also reminds us of melancholy: the anti-syphilitic treatments coat an incubus, a type of demonic spirit associated with melancholic pathologies.

Whereas Britomart's beauty and chastity were genuine, in the case of Florimell but most of all with Duessa, the language of syphilis is connected with religious allegory so as to denounce jointly false beauty and false religion. Spenser also seizes the opportunity to critique his own poetic practices, implicitly mocking those, including himself, who continually compare women's white skin with snow or their red lips with vermillion.

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When describing Britomart's love wound, Spenser focuses on how the disease affects her imagination, thus setting his description in the context of melancholy love, a pathology which stems from frustrated desire. Britomart, on the other hand, laments her physical condition in words that clearly allude to the sores and cankers of syphilis. The vocabulary divide reflects the gap between Britomart's naive interpretation of her condition, in which she equals all forms of desire to degenerate lust, and Spenser's insistence on the passive suffering of the despairing lover. Whereas Britomart thinks there is no remedy to her disease and is ready for a life of pain (just as syphilitic patients could hope for no definitive cure), Spenser shows that the only remedy to frustrated love is action: Britomart will leave her father's castle to go in search of Artegall.

In *The Faerie Queene*, the interaction of medical and literary discourses allows the poet to revivify dead metaphors and to discriminate between love and lust. But the poem also registers mutual influences within medical discourse, in which the lore on melancholy helped phrase the discourse on the symptoms of syphilis, while the fear of contagion raised by epidemics of syphilis put to the fore a more invasive notion of melancholy. Spenser combines the two aspects to set a physical and moral programme of temperance in which *regimen*, the control of inner operations, and *regiment*, the protection against external attacks, work together to preserve the body and the soul.

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