Studies in English

Volume 6 Article 6

1965

Platonism in the Works of Edmund Spenser

A. Wigfall Green
University of Mississippi

PLATONISM IN THE WORKS OF EDMUND SPENSER

by A. Wigfall Green

Platonism in poetry, if the conception be not destroyed by attempt at definition, consists of the doctrine of the duality of being: (1) the visible and transient, which is motivated by (2) the invisible and permanent, which is self-motivated. The worship of beauty seen but fleeting, which continuously flows into the unseen but stationary, in moments of rapture may lead to vision of the immortal, and possibly even to permanent communion with it.

Spenser was little affected by the tenets of Plato the humanitarian, but, even had he wished, he could not have escaped the precepts of Plato the prophet.

He received Platonism from several sources. First, directly: he did know the Greek language and he may have known some of Plato's works in the original, even though he quotes inexactly and sometimes as if from memory. Cambridge, Spenser's university, was the center for the study of Plato when he was a student, and Spenser, as his translation and poetic vocabulary abundantly indicate, became something of a Greek scholar.

Second, indirectly, from several sources: through Cicero, for example, and other pre-Christian authors.

Third, also indirectly, through Christianity: Spenser uses the ornate beauty of the ritual of the Roman Catholic Church for adornment throughout his works, but that very ornateness suddenly becomes the veil for concealing insidious evil, as when the Faith, Fidessa, suddenly becomes the Duplicitous, Duessa. Rich beauty, overheavy, becomes an impactment and is removed by the denial of truth to the original beauty. At such point Spenser becomes puritanical. Spenser was strengthened in his Puritanism at Cambridge University, a center of Puritanism in that day. Irreconcilable as they are, both Platonism and Puritanism are opposed and blended in Spenser's works, especially in *The Faerie Queene*. St.

Augustine said that Platonists are almost Christians, and Lorenzo de Medici, with broader vision, declared that no one can be either a good citizen or a good Christian without the Platonic discipline. His works reflecting little of the asceticism demanded by Christianity in his day, Spenser is more a Platonist than a Christian.

Fourth, through the Renaissance Neo-Platonists of Italy and France. The philosophic school of Plato, which flourished for a thousand years after his death, found reflorescence, after another thousand years of inertia, in Italy in the fifteenth century, when the doctrines of the master were popularized and transformed. Great ecstasy was blended with the futility of Platonism: the combination produced such works as those of Michael Angelo, which, like the poems of Spenser, are suffused with ecstatic conceptions suggesting anguish in strength, and philosophic hope in weakness — an air of vanity brooding over success. Chivalry and Christianity, likewise, were combined with Platonism. Marsilio Ficino, the chief Italian disciple of Plato, after translating the works of his teacher, formed a symposium, at which the literary Italians of the day discussed Platonic ideas. Ficino apotheosized Plato and introduced him to Florentine altars; and he urged youth to adopt Plato's identity of love and beauty. In the preceding century, however, Petrarch, the great Italian contemporary of Chaucer, had allied chivalry and Platonism as Dante had done early in the fourteenth century.

The Italians in their opinion of woman differed sharply with Plato, who, worldly wise and unromantic, recognized evil in her and considered her an inferior being, entitled to less consideration than man. The Renaissant Italian, however, having been strongly attracted by the tranquil beauty of the Virgin Mary, wove and painted countless portraits of her; he carved statues of her in stone and wood; and he dedicated to her memory hundreds of churches, chapels, and shrines. Such devotion to Mary, who even came to be called the mother of all creation, naturally exalted woman generally. Dante's Beatrice and Petrarch's Laura had only to die to be placed in the lady chapel with Mary. The resultant beatification of woman was called Petrarchism, which greatly influenced Spenser, as did the combined graces of chivalry and Platonism in Baldassaare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*. With these homogeneous elements was mingled the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus, which commingled Platonic philosophy with the sciences and pseudo-sciences of his day: cosmology, cosmography, geography,

astrology, astronomy, mathematics, demonology, jurisprudence, and Oriental and Semitic philosophy. This fifteenth century product we call Renaissance Neo-Platonism.

Passing into France, this Neo-Platonism caused the French, through Peter Ramus, to reject Aristotle for Plato. The works of the archbishop of Bordeaux, Joachim du Bellay, best represent the influence upon French literature of Platonism, which flowed to Spenser in England from both the Italian and the French schools.

Turning to the cosmological conceptions of Plato and Spenser: Plato tells us that the world, being tangible and visible and therefore sensible, was created according to Nature, and that the loveliness of the world and the virtue of the Creator made it essential that he look to an eternal pattern. God, desiring "that all things should be good and nothing bad . . . , finding the whole visible sphere not at rest, but moving in an irregular and disorderly fashion," brought order. "God placed water and air in the mean between fire and earth, and made them to have the same proportion . . . and thus he bound and put together a visible and tangible heaven." The product is "indissoluble by the hand of any other than the framer."[1] Spenser says that the world "was formed of a formelesse mas,"[2] and that "this worlds great workmaister" before his eyes had placed

> A goodly Paterne to whose perfect mould,
> He fashiond them as comely as he could.[3]

This pattern may be stored secretly in the earth or else in heaven. But

> The earth, the ayre, the water, and the fyre,
> Then gan to raunge them selues in huge array.[4]

The elements battle and change:

---

[1]All quotations from the works of Plato are from *The Dialogues of Plato* translated by B. Jowett with an introduction by Raphael Demos (New York, 1937), hereinafter referred to as *Jowett. Timaeus* 28-32; Jowett, II, 14-15.

[2]All quotations from the works of Spenser are from *The Works of Edmund Spenser, A Variorum Edition,* edited by Edwin Greenlaw, Charles Grosvenor Osgood, Frederick Morgan Padelford, and Ray Heffner (Baltimore, 1932-1949), hereinafter referred to as *Greenlaw.* "The Teares of the Muses," 502; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems,* II, 77.

[3]"An Hymne in Honour of Beautie," 29 and 32-33; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems,* I, 205.

[4]"An Hymne in Honour of Love," 78-79; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems,* I, 197.

> The Fire to Aire, and th'Ayre to Water sheere,
> And Water into Earth: yet Water fights
> With Fire, and Aire with Earth approaching neere:
> Yet all are in one body, and as one appeare.[5]

God, or Love

> Did place them all in order, and compell
> To keepe them selues within their sundrie raines,
> Together linkt with Adamantine chaines.[6]

The cosmos, then, in the works of each author was created by God of the four elements according to a divine pattern. The earth, like the Creator, is fair, and its creatures are bound together by mutual love.

Plato believed that the earth retained its equipoise through the equability of the surrounding element. He thought, also, that man lives some distance below the surface of the true or outer earth, where trees and flowers are more beautiful, colors brighter, and jewels and metals richer than in the earth which man inhabits. In the upper earth are the temples of the gods and the dwellings of pure souls; entirely unblemished souls dwell in still more stately mansions. There are various chasms in the earth, leading to its interior, where flow vast tides of water, hot and cold streams, and rivers of liquid mud, and where there is a swinging up and down, caused by the flowing of rivers into a deep gorge, called Tartarus. The rivers causing the motion are, outermost, Oceanus, which encircles the earth; passing under the earth and flowing in an opposite direction is Acheron, the outlet of which is the Acherusian Lake, where souls of the dead await transmigration; the third, Pyriphlegethon, pours into a sea of fire; the fourth is the Stygian River, or Cocytus, which receives strange powers from Lake Styx, through which it passes.

The dead are judged according to their deeds: those who are incurable are thrust into Tartarus, from which they never return. Those who have committed only venial offenses are purified and then compensated for their good deeds. Those who have committed great, but not unpardonable, offenses are thrust into Tartarus, but, at the end of a year, they are returned by way of Cocytus,

---

[5]"Two Cantos of Mutabilitie," *The Faerie Queene*, VII, VII, xxv; Greenlaw, VI, 172.

[6]"An Hymne in Honour of Love," 87-89; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems*, I, 197.

whence they are carried as far as the Acherusian Lake, from which they importune their victims to permit them to enter the lake. If they prevail, their sufferings end; if not, they are reconveyed to Tartarus for atonement, and thus the process continues until they obtain mercy.[7]

Spenser, likewise conceiving of heaven, high above the earth, as the abode of God, says:

> Then rouze thy selfe, O earth, out of thy soyle, . . .
> Vnmindfull of that dearest Lord of thyne;
> Lift vp to him thy heauie clouded eyne, . . .
> And read through love his mercies manifold.[8]

He says that "all earthes glorie"

> Seeme durt and drosse in thy pure sighted eye,
> Compar'd to that celestiall beauties blaze."[9]

The gods, Spenser moveover says, dwell there just as in Plato's upper earth: "affixe thine eye," he says

> On that bright shynie round still mouing Masse,
> The house of blessed Gods, which men call *Skye*,
> All sowd with glistring stars more thicke then grasse,
> Whereof each other doth in brightnesse passe.[10]

The place of happy souls is heaven, and high above the heavens which we may see are "others farre exceeding these in light."[11] As Plato conceived his lower earth to be a place of trial, so Spenser says:

> So thou thy folke, through paines of Purgatorie,
> Dost beare vnto thy blisse and heauens glorie.
>
> There thou them placest in a Paradize
> Of all delight, and ioyous happie rest.[12]

The Greek Hades is the equivalent of Spenser's Cave of Mam-

---

[7]*Phaedo,* 112-114; Jowett, I, 496-498. *Republic,* X, 614-621; Jowett, I, 872-879.

[8]"An Hymne of Heavenly Love," 218-224; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems,* I, 219.

[9]*Ibid.,* 275-277; Greenlaw, *ibid.,* 221.

[10]"An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie," 50-54; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems,* I, 223-224.

[11]*Ibid.,* 78 and 65; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems,* I, 224.

[12]"An Hymne in Honour of Love," 278-281; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems,* I, 278-281.

mon and the hell which Duessa of *The Faerie Queene* visits. Such places, like the Gulf of Greediness, which devours the waters of the earth, are entered through rifts in the surface of the earth, in the interior of which lies that

> . . . darke dreadfull hole of *Tartare* steepe,
>
> Through which the damned ghosts doen often creepe.[13]

And in Spenser's Cocytus the souls "do endlesse waile and weepe,"[14] as they do in

> . . . the biter waues of *Acheron*,
> Where many soules sit wailing woefully,
> And come to fiery flood of *Phlegeton*,
> Whereas the damned ghosts in torments fry,
> And with sharpe shrilling shriekes doe bootlesse cry.[15]

Plato did not take Hades so seriously as does the average inlightened Christian today. From the works of Homer and other poets he would expunge terrifying descriptions of "mansions grim and squalid," of the soul which "had gone to Hades, lamenting her fate, leaving manhood and youth," of the "soul, with shrilling cry" which "passed like smoke beneath the earth," and of souls "with shrilling cry" holding together like "bats in hollow of mystic cavern." "Undoubtedly," Plato says through conversation between Socrates and Adeimantus, "we shall have to reject all the terrible and appalling names which describe the world below—Cocytus and Styx, ghosts under the earth, and sapless shades" because "the nerves of our guardians may be rendered too excitable and effeminate by them."[16]

Spenser believes that "through infusion of celestiall powre" the Great Workmaster quickened "with delight" the "duller earth" after its creation.[17] Analogously but previously Plato created the world soul and placed it in the world body: "eternal God" created "a body, smooth and even, . . . a body entire and perfect, and formed out of perfect bodies. And in the center he put the soul, which he diffused throughout the body."[18]

---

[13]*The Faerie Queene*, II, XII, vi; Greenlaw, II, 160.
[14]*Ibid.*, II, VII, 1vi; Greenlaw, II, 92.
[15]*Ibid.*, I, V; xxxiii; Greenlaw, I, 64.
[16]*Republic*, III, 386-387; Jowett, I, 648-649.
[17]"An Hymne in Honour of Beautie," 50-51; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems*, I, 205.
[18]*Timaeus*, 34; Jowett, II, 16.

But what is the nature of God? In both Plato and Spenser, God is identified with the world soul. The soul of the individual seeks to possess God, by whom all its ideals are directed. God is the complete embodiment of love, wisdom, honor, virtue, happiness, and beauty, of which man is constantly in pursuit. God is not cold, impartial Justice, rewarding human success and condemning human failure. He is the expression of the psychic ideal. All the creatures of God have his attributes; both authors say that God created man in his own image but that God is infinitely fairer. "God lighted a fire," Plato says, "which we now call the sun."[19] But even the sun, being a creature, is less bright than the Creator. Spenser likewise says "both Sun and Moone are darke" compared to the "resplendent sparke" of the "Maiestie diuine."[20]

From the nature of God, let us turn to the nature of man and consider particularly the body and the soul of man. According to Plato's conception, the Creator of the cosmos delegated to the created gods the duty of fashioning the body of man. He himself created the human soul, of the elements of which he made the universal soul. The created gods "borrowed portions of fire, and earth, and water, and air from the world . . . and welded them together . . . making up . . . each separate body" which is "in a state of perpetual influx and efflux." In each body was placed an immortal soul.[21] Spenser's God (Love), having first created angels like the subordinate gods of Plato, fashioned man of base, vile clay, according to a heavenly pattern and

breathd a liuing spright

Into his face most beautifull and fayre , . . .
Such he him made, that he resemble might
Himselfe, as mortall thing immortall could;
Him to be Lord of euery liuing wight,
He made by loue out of his owne like mould.[22]

Plato's doctrine of the previous existence and intelligence of the soul[23] is adopted by Spenser, who says that

he raignd, before all time prescribed,

---

[19]*Ibid.*, 39; Jowett, II, 20.

[20]"An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie," 124-126; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems*, I, 226.

[21]*Timaeus*, 43; Jowett, II, 24.

[22]"An Hymne of Heavenly Love," 106, 110-111, and 113-116; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems*, I, 216.

[23]*Phaedo*, 73; Jowett, I, 456. *Meno*, 86; Jowett, I, 366.

In endless glorie and immortall might[24]

and he continues in *The Faerie Queene*

thou alone,

That art yborne of heauen and heauenly Sire,
Can tell things doen in heauen so long ygone;
So farre past memory of man that may be knowne.[25]

Plato believes that "every soul of man has in the way of nature beheld true being" before it was "enshrined in that living tomb which we carry about, now that we are imprisoned in the body, like an oyster in his shell."[26] Similarly Spenser says that the soul is clothed in an "earthly myne" and that sometimes

a gentle mynd

Dwels in deformed tabernacle drowned.[27]

"The soul and body," it is said by Plato, "although not, like the Gods of popular opinion, eternal, yet having once come into existence, were indestructible (for if either of them had been destroyed, there would have been no generation of living beings)."[28] But Spenser distinguishes between body and soul: Whatever springs from earth

Yet see we soone decay; and, being dead,

To turne again vnto their earthly slime.[29]

Spenser then concludes that the body is subject to mortality but is eternal in mutability.

Socrates tells Cebes that "the soul is . . . immortal" and "the body is . . . mortal."[30] Likewise Spenser believes the soul to be undying, for he says that "things immortall no corruption take."[31] Plato's theory is that the body exists for the sake of the soul and is inferior to it;[33] but he thinks that the soul through "forgetfulness

---

[24]"An Hymne of Heavenly Love," 36-37; Greenlaw, I, 214.
[25]*The Faerie Queene,* VII, VII, ii; Greenlaw, VI, 166.
[26]*Phaedrus,* 250; Jowett, I, 254.
[27]"An Hymne in Honour of Beautie," 46 and 141-142; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems,* I, 205 and 208.
[28]*Laws,* X, 904; Jowett, II, 646.
[29]*The Faerie Queene,* VII, VII, xviii; Greenlaw, VI, 170.
[30]*Phaedo,* 80; Greenlaw, I, 465.
[31]"An Hymne in Honour of Beautie," 161; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems,* I, 208.
[32]*Laws,* IX, 870; Jowett, II, 615.
[33]*Ibid.,* V, 728; Jowett, II, 496.

and vice" may fall to the ground and this soul shall pass "not into any other animal, but only into man."[34] The converse is accepted by Spenser:

> Therefore where euer that thou doest behold
> A comely corpse, with beautie faire endewed,
> Know this for certaine, that the same doth hold
> A beauteous soule, with faire conditions thewed.[35]

"Ten thousand years must elapse before the soul of each one can return to the place from whence she came," Plato says, "for she cannot grow her wings in less . . . . The ordinary good man . . . gains wings in three thousand years."[36] Spenser believes that it may remain "some thousand yeares" and then be "clad with other hew."[37]

"Love is of the immortal," Diotima says to Socrates, "for . . . the mortal nature is seeking as far as is possible to be everlasting and immortal; and this is only to be attained by generation, because generation always leaves behind a new existence in the place of the old."[38] Spenser likewise says:

> But man, that breathes a more immortall mynd,
> Not for lusts sake, but for eternitie,
> Seekes to enlarge his lasting progenie.[39]

Plato thinks that man accomplishes his purpose through the "law of succession by which all mortal things are preserved, not absolutely the same, but by substitution." In this way "the mortal body, or mortal anything, partakes of immortality."[40] The conception of Plato is elaborated by Spenser in "Two Cantos of Mutabilitie" or Cantos VI and VII of Book VII of *The Faerie Queene* and in "The Garden of Adonis" in Canto VI of Book III of the same work. Like the souls on the shores of the Acherusian lake "waiting an appointed time" to be "sent back to be born again as animals,"[41] Old Genius, the porter of the double gates of "The

---

[34]*Phaedrus,* 248; Jowett, I, 252.
[35]"An Hymne in Honour of Beautie," 135-138; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems,* I, 208.
[36]*Phaedrus,* 249; Jowett, I, 253.
[37]*The Faerie Queene,* III, VI, 33; Greenlaw, III, 88.
[38]*Symposium,* 208; Jowett, I, 332.
[39]"An Hymne in Honour of Love," 103-105; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems,* I, 198.
[40]*Symposium,* 208; Jowett, I, 332.
[41]*Phaedo,* 113-114; Jowett, I, 497-498.

Garden of Adonis," returns souls to live in mortal state. Upon their return to Adonis, the souls are replanted and

> Daily they grow, and daily forth are sent
> Into the world, it to replenish more,

but

> The substance is not changed nor altered,
> But th'only forme and outward fashion.[42]

"Universal nature which receives all bodies," Plato says, "must be always called the same; for, while receiving all things, she never departs at all from her own nature, and never in any way, or at any time, assumes a form like that of any of the things which enter into her."[43] Thus Spenser says:

> Then gin I thinke on that which Nature sayd,
> Of that same time when no more *Change* shall be,
> But stedfast rest of all things firmely stayd
> Vpon the pillours of Eternity.[44]

So that there may be no more mutability, in both Plato and Spenser the individual soul seeks to ally itself to the world soul.

Various ethical conceptions forge together the works of Plato and those of Spenser. The seven virtues which form the subjects of the seven books of *The Faerie Queene* are generally accepted as having prototypes in the twelve private virtues of Aristotle; but the six virtues of the six complete books of *The Faerie Queene* are found also in the works of Plato.

Truth or Una of the first book is allied to Holiness or Red Cross much as Plato considers Truth to be one of the elements of Goodness.[45] Spenser then expounds the Platonic theory that Holiness is loved because it *is* holy and dear to God; it is not holy simply because it is loved.

The second book of *The Faerie Queene* has as its leading character Sir Guyon or Temperance, described by Spenser as comely, upright, demure, and temperate.[46] His model is Plato's Charmides or Temperance, the most handsome youth of his time. Plato, like

---

[42]*The Faerie Queene,* III, VI, xxxvi and xxxviii; Greenlaw, III, 89.
[43]*Timæus,* 50; Jowett, II, 30.
[44]*The Faerie Queene,* VII, VIII, ii; Greenlaw, VI, 181.
[45]*Philebus,* 64; Jowett, II, 399-400.
[46]*The Faerie Queene,* II, I, vi; Greenlaw, II, 4.

Spenser, conceives of Temperance as a part of virtue. But Spenser, possessed of Christian hostility to compromise with intemperance, in the second canto requires Guyon to destroy utterly the Bower of Bliss. Plato, much more temperate in his battle with intemperance, goes even so far as to say that Temperance is an invention of the weak to protect themselves against the strong.[47]

Chastity, with which the third book concerns itself, is not stressed so much in Plato as in Spenser, who wrote under the influence of Christian Puritanism. Plato considers wantonness to be a municipal menace rather than a matter of strict morality. He says, as does Spenser in effect in the third book of *The Faerie Queene,* that the one who reverences the soul "wishes to live chastely with the chaste object of his affection."[48]

"Friendship and orderliness and temperance and justice," Plato says, "bind together heaven and earth and gods and men," and "this universe is therefore called Cosmos or order."[49] Spenser's interest in friendship appears not only in the fourth book of *The Faerie Queene* but in many other places; in one of his hymns, for instance, Love took "contrary dislikes and loued meanes" and placed "them all in order," and created cosmos and friendship.[50] The Platonic identification of souls through friendship is used by Spenser in making the soul of Priamond enter the body of Diamond, and that of Diamond enter the body of Triamond, who is friend of Cambell, champion of Friendship.[51] The three brothers, strong and stout and "like three faire branches budding farre and wide," were allied with such affection that it was as if "but one soule in them all did dwell."[52] In appearance the brothers are much like Plato's Lysis, or Friendship, who was "not less worthy of praise for his goodness than for his beauty."[53]

Justice in the Platonic system is a component of virtue and the essential virtue of the state. It is more democratic than that in the fifth book of *The Faerie Queene* and is to be shared by all citizens: "he who has no share in the administration of justice is apt to imagine that he has no share in the state at all."[54] It must

---

[47]*Gorgias,* 492; Jowett, I, 551.
[48]*Laws,* VIII, 837; Jowett, II, 587.
[49]*Gorgias,* 508; Jowett, I, 569.
[50]"An Hymne in Honour of Love," 86-87; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems,* I, 197.
[51]*The Faerie Queene,* IV, III, xxii; Greenlaw, IV, 17 *et seq.*
[52]*Ibid.,* IV, III, xlii-xliii; Greenlaw, IV, 27.
[53]*Lysis,* 207; Jowett, I, 34.
[54]*Laws,* VI, 768; Jowett, II, 529.

be accepted that "justice is the excellence of the soul, and injustice the defect of the soul" and that "the just soul and the just man will live well, and the unjust man will live ill."[55] With Plato, justice is a gentle thing; if it is not, the soul will "become bad and corrupted."[56] In Spenser, justice, frozen in a Christian mold, is regal and impartial but austere:

> Most sacred vertue she of all the rest,
> Resembling God in his imperiall might;
> Whose soueraine powre is herein most exprest,
> That both to good and bad he dealeth right . . . .
>
> Dread Souerayne Goddesse, that doest highest sit
> In seate of iudgement, in th'Almighties stead,
> And with magnificke might and wondrous wit
> Doest to thy people righteous doome aread.[57]

Spenser's last complete book of *The Faerie Queene,* that on courtesy, contains many Platonic ideals and emphasizes the one which assigns honor and respect to age and to parents. With Spenser, Plato says that every man should be valiant but also gentle. Fully aware as he was of the "power of appearance . . . that deceiving art which makes us wander up and down and take the things at one time of which we repent at another,"[58] Plato would agree with Spenser that courtesy is

> But Vertues seat . . . deepe within the mynd,
> And not in outward shows, but inward thoughts defynd.[59]

The duality of the nature of love was of great interest to both Plato and Spenser. Plato believed that there are two kinds of love: the vulgar love of the body, represented by the younger Aphrodite, daughter of Zeus and Dione, and the elder or heavenly Aphrodite, motherless but the daughter of Uranus.[60] Spenser recognizes the two kinds of love. Earthly love, he says, fills one with envy, doubt, and jealousy, which

> Doe make a louers life a wretches hell,[61]

---

[55]*Republic,* I, 353; Jowett, I, 620.
[56]*Gorgias,* 511; Jowett, I, 572.
[57]*The Faerie Queene,* V, Prologue, x-xi; Greenlaw, V, 3-4.
[58]*Protagoras,* 356; Jowett, I, 125.
[59]*The Faerie Queene,* VI, Prologue v; Greenlaw, VI, 2.
[60]*Symposium,* 180; Jowett, I, 309.
[61]"An Hymne in Honour of Love," 265; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems,* I, 202.

but celestial love is constantly

> Lifting himself out of the lowly dust,
> On golden plumes vp to the purest skie,
> Aboue the reach of loathly sinfull lust.[62]

Love, says Plato, is the child of Poverty and Plenty: "When the feast was over, Penia or Poverty . . . came about the doors to beg. Now Plenty, who was the worse for nectar, . . . went into the garden of Zeus and fell into a heavy sleep; and Poverty . . . plotted to have a child by him, and accordingly she lay down at his side and conceived Love."[63] Spenser likewise says that Love was

> Begot of Plentie and of Penurie.[64]

Plato tells us that "after Chaos, the Earth and Love, these two, came into being."[65] Spenser slightly varies the order: out of Chaos crept Love, who created the world.[66] Love, Plato says, is "a mighty god, and wonderful among gods and men, . . . for he is the eldest of the gods."[67] Spenser apostrophizes Love,

> Great god of might, that reignest in the mynd, . . .
> And yet the eldest of the heauenly Peares.[68]

True love, Plato says, is harmonious, and "thus music, too, is concerned with the principles of love in their application to harmony and rhythm."[69] Spenser likewise says,

> For Loue is a celestiall harmonie.[70]

As love is sprung from God, naturally heavenly love transports the lover back to God, and, "beholding beauty with the eye of the mind," through true virtue may "become the friend of God and be immortal."[71] Spenser believes that "louers eyes more sharply sighted bee" than those of other men and that the lover

---

[62]*Ibid.*, 177-179; Greenlaw, I, 200.
[63]*Symposium*, 203; Jowett, I, 328.
[64]"An Hymne in Honour of Love," 53; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems*, I, 196.
[65]*Symposium*, 178; Jowett, I, 307.
[66]"An Hymne in Honour of Love," 58-75; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems*, I, 196-197.
[67]*Symposium*, 178; Jowett, I, 306-307.
[68]"An Hymne in Honour of Love," 43 and 56; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems*, I, 196.
[69]*Symposium*, 187; Jowett, I, 314.
[70]"An Hymne in Honour of Beautie," 197; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems*, I, 209.
[71]*Symposium*, 212; Jowett, I, 335.

may see upon the forehead of his beloved "A thousand Graces masking in delight" and on her lips "many millions of chaste pleasures" at play.[72] Both authors, therefore, believe as certainly as do the Italian Renaissance Neo-Platonists that love beautifies — often even the unlovely — and exalts both the seer and the seen.

The attitude of the Italian Neo-Platonists, inherited by Spenser, differed sharply from that of Plato regarding woman, as has been stated previously. But there is comity of thought between the two, and it may be well to endeavor to find rapport between them regarding the beautiful and the good in woman.

No sentimentalist, Plato satirizes woman as an educator of children[73] and says that she is "prone to secrecy and stealth"[74] and that, without proper training, she will be cowardly in time of danger and not protect her young as the bird does.[75]

Even though Spenser was impelled artistically to encrust woman with Italian Renaissant gold, he says that beauty is not an "outward shew of things, that onely seeme," and that the white and red with which "the cheekes are sprinckled, shal decay," the "rosy leaues" of "the lips, shall fade and fall away . . . euen to corrupted clay," and the hair or "golden wyre" and the eyes or "sparckling stars" must "turne to dust."[76] As though unable to escape the warning of Plato that beauty is inferior to virtue,[77] Spenser's Duessa becomes a hideous monster, indicative of Spenser's similar belief that goodness is superior to beauty. The good, Plato says, is also the beautiful.[78] "For all thats good," Spenser says, "is beautifull and faire."[79] When man, Plato says, "sees the beauty of earth" — in which seemingly divine woman is included — he "is transported with the recollection of the true beauty; he would like to fly away but he cannot; he is like a bird fluttering and looking upward and careless of the world below; and . . . I have shown this of all inspirations to be the noblest and highest and the offspring of the highest to him who has or shares

---

[72]"An Hymne in Honour of Beautie," 232, 253-254, and 259; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems*, I, 210-211.

[73]*Laws*, III, 694; Jowett, II, 469.

[74]*Ibid.*, VI, 781; Jowett, II, 540.

[75]*Ibid.*, VII, 814; Jowett, II, 568.

[76]"An Hymne in Honour of Beautie," 91-98; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems*, I, 206.

[77]*Laws*, V, 727; Jowett, II, 495.

[78]*Symposium*, 201; Jowett, I, 326. *Lysis*, 216; Jowett, I, 45.

[79]"An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie," 133; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems*, I, 226.

in it, and that he who loves the beautiful is called a lover because he partakes of it."[80] By communion with earthly beauty, Plato says, one comes closer to divine beauty, and eventually may be able "to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities."[81] In similar vein, Spenser adjures the "almightie Spright"

> To shed into my breast some sparkling light
> Of thine eternall Truth, that I may show
> Some little beames to mortall eyes below,
> Of that immortall beautie, there with thee,
>
> Which in my weake distraughted mynd I see.[82]

Then Spenser admonishes one to look on "this wyde *vniuerse*" and see the countless creatures "with admirable beautie deckt"; this beauty, he says, will grow more fair until to "purest beautie" it will "at last ascend."[83] Of his votaries of heavenly beauty Spenser says:

> So full their eyes are of that glorious sight,
> And senses fraught with such satietie,
> That in nought else on earth they can delight,
> But in th'aspect of that felicitie,
> Which they haue written in their inward ey."[84]

Plato says that by possessing absolute beauty and "bringing forth and nourishing true virtue" one may "become the friend of God and be immortal."[85] Spenser's ultimate goal is to cease to grieve

> And looke at last vp to that soueraine light,
> From whose pure beams al perfect beauty springs.[86]

It may be said in general that neither Plato nor Spenser attempted a thoroughly organized or congruous philosophic system; that Spenser seems at times to have followed Plato closely, indicating that he was familiar with his work directly, but that he was also greatly influenced by the Italian Platonic school, some of the works of which he seems to quote from memory, and by

---

[80] *Phaedrus*, 249; Jowett, I, 249.
[81] *Symposium*, 212; Jowett, I, 335.
[82] "An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie," 10-14; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems*, I, 222.
[83] *Ibid.*, 31-35 and 46-47; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems*, I, 223.
[84] *Ibid.*, 281-285; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems*, I, 230
[85] *Symposium*, 212; Jowett, I, 335.
[86] "An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie," 294-296; Greenlaw, *The Minor Poems*, I, 230.

Christianity which also embodied Platonism; that both authors believed that he who would live nobly must think nobly; and that one is inspired to think nobly by the beauties of Nature, which, having their origin in God, lead one back to God.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chang, Hain-chang. *Allegory and Courtesy in Spenser; a Chinese View.* Edinburgh, 1955.

Crane, Thomas Frederick. *Italian Social Customs of the 16th Century and Other Influences on the Literature of Europe.* New Haven, 1920.

Fletcher, J. B. *The Religion of Beauty in Woman.* New York, 1911.

Greenlaw, Edwin; Osgood, Charles Grosvenor; Padelford, Frederick Morgan; and Heffner, Ray. Ed. *The Works of Edmund Spenser, A Variorum Edition.* 8 vols. Baltimore, 1932-1949.

Hamilton, A. C. *The Structure of Allegory in the Faerie Queene.* Oxford, 1961.

Harrison, John Smith. *Platonism in English Poetry of the 16th and 17th Centuries.* New York, 1903.

Jowett, B. Ed. and trans. *The Dialogues of Plato.* 2 vols. Reprinted from the third and last edition of Jowett with an introduction by Raphael Demos. New York, 1937.

Merrill, Robert Valentine. *The Platonism of Joachim du Bellay.* Chicago, 1925.

Pater, Walter Horatio. *Plato and Platonism.* New York, 1905.

Santayana, George. *Platonism and the Spiritual Life.* New York, 1927.

Stewart, J. A. *Platonism in English Poetry.* Oxford, 1912.

Taylor, Alfred Edward. *Platonism and Its Influence.* New York, 1963.

Winstanley, Lilian. Ed. *Edmund Spenser, The Fowre Hymnes.* Cambridge, 1916.