

## Of Lords and Stars

### Spenser's Paradoxical Praise of Essex in the *Prothalamion*

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**Abstract** The essay argues that glittering tribute to Essex in the *Prothalamion* is ambivalent and paradoxical. The author focuses on the Ovidian and Virgilian intertexts of the praise and brings to light Spenser's hidden references to Lucifer and Phaethon, mythical emblems of pride. For the generic and stylistic inconsistencies, explicit notes of personal and political concern, and the moral seriousness that run through the poem, the *Prothalamion* is not a mere nuptial song and does not mark Spenser's return to courtly poetry. On the contrary, under its epithalamic façade the poem hides a reflection and meditation on the vainglory of this world. Spenser's last poem, like *Four Hymns*, is a poem of exit that marks the crisis of the Tudor poetics of praise and patronage, as well as Spenser's own project of paidea.

Iam suus inferno processerat Hesperus orbi:  
ducitur in thalamum virgo.  
(Claudianus, *De raptu Proserpinae*)

## 1

Edmund Spenser wrote the *Prothalamion* while visiting London from Ireland in 1596 to celebrate the betrothal of the Earl of Worcester's daughters, Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset to Henry Gifford, and William Peter, two gentlemen of the Inns of Court. The ceremony took place in the fall of 1596, at the London residence of Robert Devereux, the second earl of Essex, formerly Leicester House. In the course of his stay Spenser most likely wrote also the dialogue *View of the Present State of Ireland*, not published until 1633, and saw through the press, with the reprinting of the *Daphnaïda* and the expanded second edition of *The Faerie Queene*, the *Prothalamion* and the *Fowre Hymnes*.<sup>1</sup>

Since the 1950s readers of the *Prothalamion* have brought to light the poem's stylistic and generic incongruences with its shifts from the elegiac to the pastoral and epic with the eulogy of Essex. For its generic inconsistencies, the explicit notes of personal and political concern (ll. 5-10, 131-

1 All quotations to the shorter poems are from McCabe 1999. All quotations from *The Faerie Queene* are from Hamilton 1977.

140, 145-158), the moral seriousness and the allusiveness that run through the poem, the *Prothalamion* remains elusive.<sup>2</sup> This essay argues that the mystifying allegorical representation of the marriage ceremony hides a paradoxical encomium of Essex the hero of Cadiz.<sup>3</sup> Under its ambiguous epithalamic façade Spenser hides a dark poem of *exit* that marks the crisis of the Tudor poetics of courtly praise and his own exalted project of *paidea*: «to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline».<sup>4</sup>

## 2

An erudite poem, rich in literary self-consciousness that belongs to a sphere of its own, Spenser's prenuptial song has been described as more «auto-referential» and «meta-poetical» than epithalamic and celebrative.<sup>5</sup> The *Prothalamion* displays almost all the formal characteristics of the classical epideictic, laudatory *epithalamium*, described by rhetoricians from Menander Rhetor to Scaliger. It features a simple plot, a pastoral setting, the choral praise of the nuptial pair, the choice of divinities and the celestial bodies of the zodiac appropriate for the occasion, all arranged, as brilliantly demonstrated by Alastair Fowler, in a coherent «chronographia», or time description, of the «daytime course of the half the circle of the heavens and the zodiac».<sup>6</sup> Yet, at odds with the classical tradition, the *Prothalamion* does not begin with the *proemium* stating the specific occasion for the nuptial poem, but with a complaint, familiar to Spenser's readers, concerning the state of literary patronage and his own servile condition.<sup>7</sup> Like the Roman poet Ovid, he laments his isolation and double exile, London and Ireland, but also admits that the celebration of nuptials is not a

2 On the genre of the poem and its supposed tradition see: Norton 1951; West 1974; Smith 1959, p. 175.

3 On Spenser's skillful, ambivalent political representations see the seminal essay by Montrose 2002, and 2006.

4 On patronage, dissimulation and secrecy in Spenser, see: Rambuss 1993; Knapp 2003; Labreche 2010; Brown 1993; Montrose 1986.

5 On Spenser's poetic career and related bibliography see Cheney 2006, and 1993; Woodward 1962; Smith 1959; Fowler 1975, p. 61; Eriksen 1993; Prescott 2001.

6 «Chronographia» as «the counterfeit of time» is the term used by Puttenham 1589, p. 200. See Fowler 1975, pp. 66 ff.; Hieatt 1960 had first pointed out that the twenty-four Stanzas of *Epithalamion* correspond to the twenty-four hours of the wedding day and other readers have found new symmetries in the arrangement of the Stanzas. The *Prothalamion's* chorography has been discussed in Van Es 2002.

7 Spenser begun his career in 1579 in the Leicester-Sidney's orbit and remained deeply bound by the constraints of patronage and courtly politics throughout his life.

fit occasion to relate «old woes».<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the sense of urgency and near physical illness – «empty shadows, did afflict my brain» (*Prothalamion* 1.9)<sup>9</sup> – introduces a persistent elegiac tone. Likewise, the haunting refrain «sweete *Themmes* run softly, till I end my song» implies the temporal postponement of elegy and undermines the supposed epithalamic genre of the poem. The invitation to Thames/Time to linger substitutes the classical choral chanting *Hymen o Hymenaeae* and inverts the temporality of Catullus's programmatic *epithalamium* 61 (ll. 195-196), where the lyric 'I' spurs the youths to action: «sed abit dies: | Perge, ne remorare» (the day departs: do not linger, move on). In Catullus the acceleration of rhythm denoted the groom's impatience for the beginning of the hymeneal song and the consummation of marriage.<sup>10</sup> In the *Epithalamion*, written for his wife Elizabeth Boyle, as in Catullus, time moves forward, but never too fast for the impatient bridegroom and poet (a rare identity of roles) who, citing Propertius, complained in ll. 265-273 about the long summer hours: «How slowly does sad Time his feathers moue?».<sup>11</sup>

In the *Prothalamion*, instead, against the prescriptions of Catullus 61, with 62 the most influential lyric model for the Renaissance revival of the genre, the lyric 'I' begs Time/Thames for postponement and delay.

In Stanza 2 the poet enters an idyllic pastoral grove, the classic earthly paradise of Venus, where he «espies» like any *pastor* a group of mossy river nymphs gathering flowers and tying them in garlands. In Stanzas 3 and 4 the poet in an ornate *encomium* praises the two «brides» and represents them as «swans», punning on «brides» and «birds». In Stanza 5, as the allegorical «swans» come down from the River Lee to row up the river's stalled flow to Essex House, they are welcomed not by a chorus of maidens but by «nymphs» with gifts of flowers and «two Garlands bound | Of freshest Flowres» (ll. 83-84).<sup>12</sup> In Stanza 6 one of the nymphs sings the classical *allocutio sponsalis*, with its prayers for happiness, peace, wealth and illustrious progeny. Stanza 7 is choral and, as prescribed by Menander Rhetor, concludes the *ékphrasis of the nymphs* with echoes of their «under-

8 See Rambuss 1993. Ovid's 'exile' in Spenser's time was a current literary *topos*. See, for instance, *As you like it* 3.3.5-6 (c.1600) where Touchstone compares his sylvan exile to Ovid's («I'm here with thee and thy goats as the most capricious poet honest Ovid was among the Goths» ll. 5-6); see Brink 1996. On Spenser and Ovid see Lyne 2001.

9 Probably a discontented suitor, in 1596 Edmund Spenser was about to return to Ireland.

10 All references to Catullus poems are from Goold 1988. On Catullus and Renaissance English poetry see: McPeck 1939; Blevins 2004.

11 «tu quoque, qui aestivos spatiosius exigit ignes, | Phoebe, moraturae contrahe lucis iter»: Gould ed. 1976, 3.20,11-13. On the sinister undertones of Spenser's *Epithalamion* see e.g. Greene 1957 and Bates 1992.

12 In Catullus 64, ll. 280-285, garlands of mixed flowers are offered at the wedding of Thethys.

song» (l. 110) accompanied by the 'affectionate' murmur of the River Lee.<sup>13</sup>

This allegorical *nymphæum*, as critics have noted, works as a metapoetical *prosopopeia*. The gathering flowers and tying them in garlands mimes the process of writing an epideictic poem from invention and disposition to delivery.<sup>14</sup> As the weavings of Arachne and Athena in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, or the wool-spinning of Cyrene's nymphs in the *Georgics*, the garlands of the nymphs made of *flores rhetorici* collected in pretty baskets of «fine twigs entrayled curiously» (l. 25) are a metaphor for Spenser's own arrangement of Shakespeare's «odoriferous flowers of fancy».<sup>15</sup> The significance of the *nymphæum* as a *prosopopeia* of the act of writing celebrative poetry appears to be further complicated by dark mythological allusions to deceptively idyllic landscapes that preface Ovidian tales of metamorphosis and loss. The *Peneus* mentioned in conjunction to the forest of *Tempe* recalls the personification of the river in Catullus 64 (l. 285) on the marriage of Tethys, but also alludes *in malo* to the Ovidian location of the tales of the rape and transformation of Daphne, Io, and the suicide of Cycnus.<sup>16</sup> Allusions to violent sex can be found in classical epithalamia as well. Catullus in 62 addresses the ritual and legal background of marriage and alludes to the violent force of Hymenaeus who carries off (*rapis*) the tender virgin. In the Latin poem a chorus of youths and one of maidens sing alternately the praise and the blame of Hesperus and of marriage. The maidens express their fears and sorrows of separation and defloration and intone: «Hesperus what more cruel fire than thine moves the sky?» (l. 20).<sup>17</sup> Spenser's allusions to Leda, Echo, Proserpina and Eurydice with their tales of violence, rape and death, embedded contrapuntally in the *Prothalamion*, resonate the fears of the maidens of Catullus 62, but they appear to be more literary self-conscious and didactic.<sup>18</sup>

13 Spenser might have read Menander in Latin or Italian. On the first reception and translation of Menander Rhetor Περί ἐπιδεικτικῶν in the Latin West from 1400 to 1600 see Harsting 1992.

14 On the metapoetic use of «garland» and «stanzas» as baskets in the *Prothalamion* see Fowler 1975.

15 *Love's Labours Lost* 4.2.116. On the leitmotif and wordplay on «Thames» and «time» see Wine 1962. On classical sources and metapoetic use of rethorical 'flowers' in the poem, see Eriksen 1993.

16 For the fable of Apollo's mad wooing of Daphne see *Metamorphoses* 1.452 ff.; for Jove's rape of Io, mother of Epaphus, Phaëthon's friend see *Metamorphoses* 1.568-779. On the references to Leda, Echo, Proserpina and Eurydice see Eriksen 1993; «Tempe» in *Metamorphoses* 7.371 is *Cycneia Tempe*, the locality of the suicide and transformation of the spoiled boy *Cycnus*, lover of Phylis.

17 «Hespere, qui caelo fertur crudelior ignis?»: Goold 1988.

18 The *ékphrasis* of the myth of Ariadne embroidered on the nuptial coverlet on the marriage bed of Peleus in Catullus 64 has the same function.

The sustained metaphorical mode of the poem, the wordplay and allusions seem to signify a contrary song as the pun on «brides»/«birds», in the «swan» personification allegory, and the allusions to Leda progressively take us from the literal sense to the metaphorical and the moral (Bull 1958). The references to Leda's mythological scandal, in Stanzas 3 and 10, with the comparison of the Earl of Worcester's two swanlike daughters and the «gentle Knights» (l. 169) to Gemini, the stellified twins of Leda mystify us.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, the personification allegory of the brides as white swans brings to mind that the *Cygnus* is a traditional symbol of lascivious love never used to signify virginal purity.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the highly artificial outdoing on the whiteness of brides/swans, originally from *Metamorphoses* 7.373 is overwrought and like the infelicitous word-play in Stanza 3 on fowl/birds and foule/dirt suggests double entendre.<sup>21</sup>

In Stanza 8, the poet's attention shifts from the riverbanks to London's urban skyline, and – viewed from below – to Essex House. Formally in classical epithalamia, as in Spenser's own, this should have been the time of the bride's home return (*deductio domum*): «Now al is done; bring home the bride againe» (l. 242). Here instead, the lyric 'I' relapses to melancholy and turns the feverish anticipation of the classical **return** into an elegiac retrospection. The poet does not describe the joyous arrival of the brides but the poet's own homecoming, his *nostos* after many peregrinations. Like the exiled Ovid, Spenser recollects the illustrious origins of his noble ancestors, his *gens* (*Tristia* 2.111-120):

At length they all to mery *London* came,  
To mery London, my most kyndly Nurse,  
That to me gaue, this Lifes first natiue source:  
Though from another place I take my name,  
An house of auncient fame.  
(ll. 127-131)

and the memory of **his** lost home. A sense of distance and loss of family and friends in Stanza 8 elicits the memory of the past with the elegiac *ubi sunt*:

19 The indirect comparison of the Somerset brides to the sons of Leda and Jove «in guise of the bird with gleaming plumage» (*Amores* 1.10.3) may suggest that the brides who come down the river are twins just like Leda's sons.

20 On the erotic swan and Erato in painting and epithalamic poetry see Baxandal 1965.

21 Perhaps also a reference to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 8,372-8,373: «[...] not yet set in the starry heavens they came riding up [...] both on horses *whiter than snow* [...]». On «foules» (l. 48), «fowles» (l. 61), «foules» (l. 119) see Crossan 1977. The overwrought play on the whiteness of the 'swans' pageant and brides/birds brings to mind, by contrast, the humility of the «lowly Asse more white than snow» upon which rides **much whiter** Una, hidden under a veil in *Faerie Queene* 1.1.4.

There when they came whereas those bricky towrs  
 The which on Themmes' brode aged backe doe ryde,  
 Where now the studious Lawyers haue their bowers,  
 There whylome wont the Templer Knights to byde,  
 Till they decayd through **pride**:  
 Next whereunto there standes a stately place,  
 Where oft I gayned giftes and goodly grace  
 Of that **great Lord**, which therein wont to dwell,  
 Whose want too well, now feeles my **friendless** case:  
 (ll. 132-140; my emphasis)

This second complaint is not entirely personal since the *descriptio* of the Inns of Court and the contrast of the Nation's historical past to the present introduces an element of historical and political criticism. As the «friendless» poet reaches what used to be the residence of his long time patron and friend, the «great lord» Leicester, the slow flowing temporality of the poem halts and past and present are contrasted in the description of the Inner Temple.<sup>22</sup> The description, that only apparently is a digression, introduces a note of moral criticism and mutability. Elicited by the vision of the brick towers of the schools of law built on the ruined buildings of the proud knights of yore, the sense of ineluctable passing of time reverberates on the description of the «high towers» of the «stately palace» (10.1). Like the Inns, the palace is also viewed in the temporal dimension of a 'before' an 'after': built on the ruins of what used to be the garden of the Outer Temple, the palace that **once** was Leicester's residence is **now** Essex House.<sup>23</sup> Closer attention to space-time mapping of the description in the context of the remark «Till they decayd through **pride**» (my emphasis) will reveal the deeper moral level of signification of what should have been, as in classical *epithalamia*, the rhetorical *descriptio* of the bride's home.<sup>24</sup>

22 In 1588 Essex was admitted at the Inner Temple on whose grounds still stands Temple Church.

23 Essex begun to appropriate Leicester's estates in 1591 and the London residence on the Strand became the heart of his domestic establishment. See Hammer 1999, p. 131.

24 The *Prothalamion* was written in the vein of Leland's *Cyanea Cantio*, Camden's *De Conubio Tamis et Isis*, Vallans's *Tale of Two Swans*, and Warner's *Albion's England*. Topographical river-marriage poetry was a genre that had aroused Spenser's interest in the 1580s when he promised Harvey to write an *Epithalamion Themesis*. He never published such a poem, but used parts of it in *Faerie Queene* 4.11.11-53.

In the *Prothalamion*, as in *Ruines of Time*, *July the Aegloga Septima* and *An Hymne of Heavenly Love*, the allegorical subject of pride is framed by a moralised space-time mapping: before vs after, high vs low. In *July*, for instance, the ‘Aristotelian’ moral debate between the ‘good’ Thomalin and ‘proud’ Morrell is framed within a vale and dale perspective meant to allegorise the hazards of personal ambition and the dangers of ‘climbing’ (Figure 1). Similarly, the *paysage moralisé* of St. Albans with the scattered remains of fallen Verulamion frame the subject of «pride». In *Ruines* (ll. 34-42), pride, the root of all sins, is viewed as the cause of historical and political degeneration and the ultimate cause of decadence of civilisations, whereas in *An Hymne of Heavenly Love* the reference to the fall of Lucifer has an universal relevance. Spenser’s consistent moral use of spatial and temporal perspectives (before vs. after; high vs. low) in his symbolic representations of pride suggests that he understood it as *superbia* (hauteur) in the scriptural and etymological sense of *altitudo cordis* (literally ‘haughtiness of heart’) as found in *Isaiah* 9:9 on the prophetic judgment of Israel for their pride:<sup>25</sup> «Et sciet populus, omnes Ephraim, et incolae Samariae, | qui dicunt in **superbia et altitudine cordis**» (Calvin 1996). That Spenser understood the sin of pride as *superbia*, both scripturally and etymologically is also apparent in *The Faerie Queene* 1.7.7-9, where the giant *Orgoglio*, personification of pride, before we are told his name, is described in detail as the personification of ‘height’ or ‘tallness’. He is a creature that grew to become

An hideus Geant horrible and hye,  
That with his **tallness** seemd to threat the skye,  
(1.7.8, my emphasis)

Taller than the Titans who also challenged Olympus, *Orgoglio* personifies *superbia et altitudo cordis*; tall and stout he is persistently associated with earthquakes from birth to death. *Orgoglio*’s Medusa-like death is a *nemesis*: blinded by the shield of Arthur/Perseus, he crumbles down in a heap of rubble like a castle «reared high and round» that has been shaken to the foundations: «Such was this Gyaunts fall, that seemd to **shake** | the steadfast globe of earth, as for feare did **quake**» (VIII.xxiii.8-9; my emphasis). *Orgoglio*’s imagery, in the poetical allegory, owns to the myth of the

25 «Superbia et altitudine cordis» is translated in the Geneva Bible as «pride and presumption of the heart». Isidore of Seville ethymologised *superbia* from «super» (above, upwards, high up): «superbus dictus quia super vult videri quam est; qui enim vult supergredi quod est, superbus est» (Lindsay 1962, 10.248). See the seminal essay on *superbia*: Testard 1987; on Scripture and Spenser see Gless 1994. For an overview of Spenser’s religion see King 2006.



Figure 1. Illustration from *The Shepheardes Calender*, from the John C. Nimmo facsimile (London, 1895) of the British Museum copy of the first edition of 1579.

rebellious Titans, but in the scriptural allegory his «tallness» suggests that the horrible giant personifies pride in the scriptural sense of *superbia et altitudo cordis* of *Isaiah* 9:9. The terms used to describe the destructive effects of *Orgoglio*'s proud rebelliousness and self-righteousness, to himself as to the world, are also scriptural and derive from *Isaiah* 14:4b-21, the taunt-song in five strophes against the exalted pomp of a nameless tyrant of Babylon, compared to Lucifer, the mythical Helel ben Shahar:

They that see thee, shall looke vpon thee and consider thee, saying,  
Is this the man that made the earth **to tremble**, and that did **shake** the  
kingdomes? (14:16; my emphasis)

As in the passage on the fall of Lucifer, «the Child of Light» in *An Hymne of Heavenly Love* (l. 83), the remark «Till they decayd through *pride*» in the *Prothalamion* alludes to scriptural *superbia*. The comparison of the ruins of the proud Templars' towers to the humbler bricks of the Inns of Court and the vision of Essex's high towers and stately palace seem to



allude to the myth of the fall from pride and the ineluctable cyclicity of change. Its tone is monitory and the reference to brick echoes God's reproaches to the Israelites for having thrown down their brick houses to build the magnificent palaces of *Isaiah* 9:10: «The bricks are fallen, but we will build it with hewn stones: the wild sycamores are cut down, but we will change them into cedars» (Geneva Bible). If the description in the *Prothalamion* is moralised and its intertext is *Isaiah* 9:10 then the comparison of Essex's stately palace to the brick towers of the Inner Temple is not favorable. The lodgings of the «studious Lawyers» (l. 134) would not stand, as some argue, for the diminution of the chivalric to the commercial (see Smith 1959, p. 177; Owens 2007, pp. 79-106). On the contrary, the Inns of Court placed temporally and spatially in between the proud Templars' dwellings, now ruined, and the **high Towers** of Essex's **stately palace**, morally stand in the middle between two excesses, just like the Aristotelian virtue of magnanimity, praised in the *July Glosse*: «the meane and lowly state, as that wherein is safetie without feare, and quiet without danger, according to the saying of olde Philosophers, that vertue dwelleth in the midst» (McCabe p. 95 ff.).

The elliptical reference to pride in the *Prothalamion* is not therefore a casual remark on the end of proud chivalry nor a prelude to the conclusive epic subject, but, as in *An Hymne of Heavenly Love*, it refers to Isaiah's definition of 'pride' as *hauteur* and haughtiness of heart. Pride, as scriptural *superbia*, imports in the *Prothalamion* the transcendent vision of the *Hymns* and, as we shall see, it is the key that opens *Prothalamion's* secretoire.

#### 4

Introduced by the insinatory «yet» and the emphatic «now» in Stanza 9 (l. 145) the poet, as if awakened from his dreamlike state of temporal suspension, arrives at Essex House and sees the «noble lord» descending the river steps to receive the brides:

From those high Towers, this noble Lord issuing,  
Like Radiant *Hesper* when his golden hayre  
In th' *Ocean* billowes he hath Bathed fayre,  
Descended to the Riuers open vewing,  
With a great traine ensuing.  
(ll. 163-167)

As in Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger's (c. 1597) full length portrait of Essex wearing the dress and ensigns of the Order of the Garter, Spenser's «Magnificke Lord» (see the dedicatory sonnet to Essex in *The Faerie*



Figure 2. Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, *Robert Devereux*, Montacute House, Long Gallery (c. 1597); NPG 4985

*Queene*) is shown in the colours of the setting sun: the blue mantle of the Order of the Garter over a silk gown in the radiant Devereux-orange-tawny (Figure 2).<sup>26</sup>

The *catasterism* of Essex as Hesper at the literal level of interpretation is unambiguous: Robert Devereux is compared to the star *Venus* that in its evening aspect of Hesper/Vesper welcomes the brides.<sup>27</sup> The sun is setting

26 Essex was very tall and favoured full length portraits. Known for his sartorial taste he liked to dress in the Devereux colours of the sun. In 1581 he paid for a costly «tawney velvet hose & cloke laid on with flames of fiery gold and a doublet of tawney saten [...]». See Hammer 1999, p. 30.

27 Ben Jonson, perhaps remembering the *Prothalamion* in *Cynthia' Revels* 4.3.5-6, wrote: «Hesperus entreats thy light, | Goddess excellently bright» (Rhys [1910] 1915). Performed at court in 1601 on the very eve of the catastrophic events that led to Essex's execution, and meant as an appeal to the Queen on behalf of his patron, Jonson's reference to Essex as the lesser star at the side of the radiant body of Elizabeth, Cynthia the moon, if meant in earnest,

and Hesper (Latin *Vesper*), the appropriately auspicious deity for nuptials, returns to preside over the celebrations and Spenser, like Catullus, sings his praise.<sup>28</sup> In its proper epithalamic context, the formulaic **radiant Hesper** is in fact a formal requirement of the genre. The auspicious star of nuptials in classic poetry usually appears side by side with Hymenaeus, the other epithalamic divinity and officiant of the evening rites of marriage. Essex is also represented as both Hesper and Hymenaeus: like the Evening star he descends to the river to welcome the maidens, but like Hymenaeus he also escorts the grooms.<sup>29</sup> However, «Hesper», an epithet rarely used in Elizabethan poetry, is not used in its epithalamic function only. Because of the double identity of the planet Venus, otherwise known to the Romans as *Vesper* (or *Hesperus*) when seen in the evening in the west and as *Lucifer* (or *Eous*) when it appears at dawn in the east, the catasterism of Essex as Hesper for its intertextual allusions is paradoxical.

The name Hesperus/Vesper became a favorite conceit of classical poetry and poets made good use of it. Callimachus (*Hecale*, 291, 3) refers to Hesperus/Vesper as tomorrow's Lucifer, the morning star hated by all lovers; in Seneca's *Agamemnon* (820-822), Venus is surprised to be saluted in the morning as Hesper and not as Lucifer; Catullus also plays with the double name of the star and its ambiguous behavior when he represents Hesper as thief of girls in the evening and discoverer of buglers in the morning as Lucifer: «Hesper, the same but with changed name, Eous» (Catullus, 62, l. 35; Goold 2005). Cicero in *De Natura Deorum*, 2.53 lists the various names of Venus: «stella Veneris, quae Φωσφόρος Graece Lucifer Latine dicitur, cum antegreditur solem, cum subsequitur autem Ἐσπερος». Giovanni Gioviano Pontano, the neo-Latin poet known to Spenser, in his epigram *De Stella*, dedicated to his last lover, also played on the different positions and denominations of Venus (*Phosphoron*, *Hesperon*, *Lucifer* and *Vesper*) (Pontani 1514, f 158ab). John Donne, in *Problem XI* (1590 ca.), «Why is Venus Starre multinominous called both Hesperus and Vesper», anatomised the paradoxical and 'ominous' moral meanings of the star Venus, the monarch of love and lust; and in *The Second Anniversary* (ll. 197-198) with Hesper he signified the Morning star (Lucifer).<sup>30</sup>

appears now over optimistic.

28 In Catullus 62 (ll. 1-2) when Hesper arrives the young men sing the hymeneal song to usher in the bride, «Vesper adest, iuvenes, consurgite: Vesper Olympo | expectata diu vix tandem lumina tollit».

29 On the identification of *Hesperos* and *Hymenaeus* and their similar myths as handsome youths connected to Venus who were cut off in their prime and disappear mysteriously see Diggle 1968.

30 See Peters 1980. Written in the early 1590s, when Donne was a law student, for a small coterie, they were not meant to be circulated outside Lincoln's Inn. Cf. Grimaldi-Pizzorno 2007, pp. 96-101. On the paradox epidemics in Elizabethan London in the 1590s following the publi-

Before him John Lydgate had used the name in its truncated form to refer alternatively to the Morning and Evening Star, as we can see in *The World is Variable*: «Esperus [is] namyd the day sterre» (l. 66; MacCracken 1934). The consistent ambiguity of the name returns also in Spenser who in *Epithalamion* (l. 95) refers to *Hesperus* as the morning star, but in *Mutabilitie Canto VI* (l. 9) he identifies it clearly with the page at the side of Cynthia, «whom we the Euening-starre intend».

As in that enigmatic passage of *The Faerie Queen* (1.7.29 ff.) Spenser in the *Prothalamion* alludes to the expanded mythology of Hesperus. That the metaphorical epithet *Hesper* in Essex's catasterism is used paradoxically seems suggested by the textual allusion in lines 164-165 to *Aeneid* 8.589-591: «Qualis ubi Oceani perfusus Lucifer unda | quem Venus ante alios astrorum diligit ignis | Extulit os sacrum caelo tenebrasque resolvit».<sup>31</sup> Here Vergil compares Pallas, the brave but impatient Arcadian youth, to Lucifer the Morning star. Spenser undoubtedly saw that Vergil's oblique reference to the ephemeral rise and sudden disappearance of Lucifer throws on the doomed Arcadian youth a dark shadow.<sup>32</sup> The vocabulary of the premonitory catasterism of Pallas as Lucifer therefore carries into the catasterism of Essex/Hesperus the variants of the cosmological myth of the multinominous star of Venus, a myth that, as Claude Lévi-Strauss teaches (1958, p. 240), is after all the sum of its variants which may range very broadly. One of such variants is the myth of the semi-god Phaëthon identified, since the 6th century B.C. with the cosmological myth of Hesper and whose appearances signify the morning star and evening star respectively, as his alternate names *Heosphoros* (or Phosphorus) and *Hesperos* testify.

If we turn once more to the glowing description of Devereux descending to the water steps to receive the brides,

From those high Towers, this noble Lord issuing,  
Like radiant Hesper when his **golden hayre**  
in th' Ocean billowes he hath **Bathed** fayre,  
Descended to the Rivers open vewing,

cation of Ortensio Lando's *Paradossi* in 1593 as *The Defence of Contraries Paradoxes against common opinion* see Grimaldi-Pizzorno 2007.

31 «A sight as brilliant as the Morning Star | Whom Venus loves above all stellar fires | When from the bath of Ocean into heaven | He lifts his holy visage, [...]»: Fitzgerald trans. 1983. For Lucifer as a nickname for Essex at court, see McCabe 1999, note to ll.164-165.

32 Note that Seneca in *Agamemnon* plays with the double parable of the planet Venus to hint at the Argive's death. On the connection of the Morning-Evening star and Venus that as his lover kills him in her fiery embrace, see Diggle 1968. Diggle suggests also the identification of Hesperos and Hymen both closely connected to Venus, described as handsome youths cut off in their prime and translated to heaven by her (p. 180).

With a **great traine** ensuing (ll. 163-167; my emphasis)

we may notice that Spenser refers not only to the vocabulary of *Aeneid* 8. 587-591 but also to that of *Metamorphoses* 2.319-322, Ovid's account of Phaëthon's fall. If «ocean» and «billowes» translate Vergil's words «oecani» and «unda», «golden hayre», «bathed» and «great traine ensuing» translate Ovid's «rutilos flamma populante capillos», «abluit», and «longoque per aera tractu»:

At Phaëthon **rutilos flamma populante capillos**  
 volvitur in praeceps **longoque per aera tractu**  
 fertur [...].  
 Etsi [...]  
 quem [...]  
 excipit Eridanus fumantiaque **abluit** ora.<sup>33</sup> (my emphasis)

In the encomium of Essex Spenser entwines the epithalamic image of flaming Hesperus, with the tragic image of Pallas as he comes brilliantly «blazoned in arms among the horsemen of Aeneas» (8, l. 588) like Lucifer rising from the ocean. The reference to Pallas/Lucifer is in turn entwined with the highly pathetic image of Phaëthon's catastrophe and headlong downfall into the Eridanus, as the flames ravage his red hair leaving a streaming trail of light in the evening sky.<sup>34</sup> Playing both Maro and Naso, Spenser paradoxically projects on Essex's epithalamic descent to the watersteps on the Thames the images of the ascent and short-lived brightness of Lucifer/Pallas and the disastrous fall of Hesperos/Phaëthon into the Eridanus.

The *Prothalamion* contains other allusions to the vocabulary of Ovid's account of Phaëthon's story. In Stanza 2 the «louely Daughters of the Flood» (l. 21), in the *ékphrasis* of the nymphs, are in fact described in terms of the Ovidian Nereids, daughters of Doris, or Doridas, born of Oceanus and Tethys (*Metamorphoses* 2.11-12). Ovid represents them sitting in the sun to dry their «green hair» in the marine tableaux on Vulcan's doors of the palace of the Sun, admired by Phaëthon before he enters the *regia solis*. The pun on «Somerset»/«bred of Somers-heat» in Stanza 4 is also Ovidian and comes from «Sole satum» or «bred of Sun-heat» referred to Phaëthon

33 «But Phaëthon, fire ravaging his ruddy hair, is hurled headlong and falls with a long trail through the air [...] Eridanus receives and bathes his steaming faces»: Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 2.319-324, in Miller 1984.

34 Reference is to Arthur Golding's translation (1567): «But Phaeton (fire yet blasting still among his **yellow haire**) | Shot headlong downe, and glid along the Region of the Ayre | Like to starre in Winter nights (the wether cleare and fayre) | Which though it doe not fall in déede, yet falleth to our sight», (my emphasis).

who, after Epaphus's insult, asks his mother Clymene as to his divine parentage (*Metamorphoses* 1.760-771) and she confirms that he was gendered by *Sol*. The reference to Peneus and Tempe, discussed above, contextually refer also to Phaëthon: raped by Jove, Io mothered Epaphus, Phaëthon's friend and indirect cause of his ruin (*Metamorphoses* 1.749-756).

## 5

If we return to the extended epic praise of Essex's martial deeds at Cadiz in Stanza 9

Yet therein now doth lodge a noble Peer,  
Great **Englands** glory and the Worlds wide wonder,  
Whose **dreadfull** name, late through all **Spaine** did **thunder**.  
And **Hercules** two **pillors** standing neere,  
Did make to **quake** and **feare**:  
Faire branch of Honor, flower of Cheualrie,  
That fillest **England** with thy triumphes fame,  
(ll. 145-151; my emphasis)

we may notice other discordant allusions to pride and hear echoes of the vocabulary of the *Orgoglio* episode of *The Faerie Queene* (1.8.7 ff.) where the awful giant, blinded and beheaded – like Medusa – by the new Perseus crumbles down like a castle as the «noble Pere» Arthur is saluted by the «royall Virgin» as the «Faire braunch of noblesse, flower of cheualrie» (*FQ* 1.8.26). Quoting himself, Spenser hails Essex as the new Arthur, however the vocabulary of the praise is the same used for the damnation of *Orgoglio's* mastodon might in *FQ* 1.7.7-8 and disastrous fall (*FQ* 1.8.23). The name of the hero of Cadiz is like *Orgoglio's* dreadfull and thunders through Spain with such a might that the pillars of Hercules quake and feare. Yet, the discordant quotes from the *Orgoglio's* episode are hushed by the citation of a more sonorous salute, reserved in *The Faerie Queene* for Arthur, the hero of national greatness.<sup>35</sup>

Critics and historians have linked the elaborate eulogy of Essex in the *Prothalamion* to Spenser's personal concerns and interests in Ireland and to the political dialogue *A View of the present state of Ireland* which he wrote – or at least revised for publication – in late 1596. Spenser at the time was certainly angling for preferment and hoped to better his position

<sup>35</sup> Spenser's dedicatory sonnet to Essex gives some reason to believe that after Leicester's death, he transferred the compliment to Elizabeth's new favorite in the hope that as a new Arthur he would be a generous patron like his stepfather. Whether Spenser's pursuit of patronage from Essex ever brought any reward has not yet been proved.

in Ireland. In *A View*, hoping perhaps to gain from Essex a prominent position in the political management of the Irish question, he pressed for the total suppression of Irish resistance and complete imposition of Protestant English culture in Ireland and urged the government to appoint a suitable Lord Lieutenant. Irenius's criptic remark, «Suche a one I coulde name upon whom the ey of all Englande is fixed» (Spenser 1596), perhaps alludes to Essex himself. His failure to see his radical *View* through the press while in London in 1596 may suggest that Spenser's pleas to Essex to take an active part in Irish affairs made no impact. As Hammer points out, Essex at the time was eager to control and «establish dominance of military administration and patronage in Ireland, but did not seek any direct entanglement in what he considered a 'miserable beggerly [...] war'; Ireland in his eyes was no fit place for a man who aspired to play a part upon the *stage of Christendom*» (Hammer 1999, p. 137). Spenser must have returned to his estate in Ireland empty-handed: with the controversial *View* unpublished he had gained little or no hope for social and professional advancement in Munster where he held land and a government post (in Hadfield 2001). He was to return to London after the loss of his possessions in 1598 to die indigent «for lake of bread in King Street», on 13 January 1599; and according to William Camden, his first biographer, he was buried at the expenses of the Earl of Essex. However, it seems, Spenser had refused twenty pieces sent to him by Essex, saying «he was sorry he had no time to spend them» (Patterson 1923, p. 17). It is perhaps not without significance that in 1596, in a famous letter to Essex, dated October 4, Francis Bacon had cautioned Essex openly against his *hybris* and military dependence and warned him that hankering for military greatness was bound to offend the Queen: «I demand whether there can be a more dangerous image than this represented to any monarch living [...]».<sup>36</sup> It was only after the execution of Essex that in his infamous *apologie* Bacon at last identified that dangerous image with Icarus whose: «two wings which were ioyned on with waxe, and would make him venture to soare too high, and then faile him at the height» (Bacon 1604, p. 19).

We do not know the reasons behind Spenser's encrypted blame of Essex in the *Prothalamion*, but those behind Bacon's warning are well known. The year 1596 had witnessed the successful naval expedition against Cadiz,

36 Spedding 1862, pp. 40-45. Around that time Essex was criticised for his ambition and desire for popular renown: Edward Guilpin, in *Satire I of Skialetheia: Or A shadowe of truth, in certaine epigrams and satyres* (1598), sig. C3v, offered evidence that Essex courted popularity: «[...] Signior Machiavell | Taught him this mumming trick, with curtesie | T'entrench himself in popularitie | And for a writhen face and bodies moue | Be Barricadode in the peoples loue». Guilpin also attacks him as «Great *Fœlix*», see Gajda 2012, p. 204. The Cecils had also had nicknamed Essex «Felix», with pun on Devereux/'hereux', happy, used also in the *Prothalamion* (l. 153); George Chapman, who tried to become a client of Essex, dedicated to him his translation of the first seven books of the *Iliad* and addressed him as «most true Achilles» (1598, sig. A4r).

and was a point of no return for Essex. Cadiz had a strikingly divisive effect on English politics and the public campaign Essex orchestrated to gain full advantage from the venture, win popular support for his long-term military plans against Spain, and achieve political pre-eminence in the Privy Council polarised factionalism at court even further.<sup>37</sup> His ambition grew excessively and his demands for political supremacy at court and for leadership of the military became increasingly pressing. As dedications, both authorised and unauthorised, were showered on him, his commitment to literary patronage became erratic and undependable, as both Bacon and Watton suggest. Moreover, his proud cult of lineage and blood, the literalist pursuit of power through honourable conduct and dedication to military honour in the brittle world of the Elizabethan court and among civil servants whom he considered as less than *reptilia*, turned out to be a liability.<sup>38</sup> As a type of Rinaldo, he stood, and eventually died for, the exalted martial and aristocratic code of honour that was essential to knight errantry, and believed the law of nature and a knight's oath of honour to be above civil and common law.<sup>39</sup>

## 6

Spenser's paradoxical representation of the political and military *cursus* of the brightest star of Elizabeth's firmament not as a successful drive through the sky but as the downward derailment of the *carrus* from the middle course appears to be the secret and prophetic subject of the *Prothalamion*.<sup>40</sup> Through the centuries the morally negative significance of the tragic destiny of Phaëthon as a tale on *hybris* dominated the reception of the myth. To Lucretius, Seneca, Martial and Lucian, and the exegetical tradition of the myth up to the Renaissance, Phaëthon was the negative hero of failed *magnanimitas* and emblem of sinful *temeritas*.<sup>41</sup> It was with Svetonius that the

37 On the circulation of Essex's notorious «True relacion» and rival narratives of the victory in the propaganda battle over Cadiz and his attempts to find support outside the court for a new campaign against Spain, see Hammer 1997, and 1999, pp. 252 ff. On the public sale of prints of equestrian portraits of Essex and his associates after Cadiz see Montrose 2006, ch. 15.

38 On sycophancy at court see Hammer 1999, p. 335; Loades 2007.

39 With the younger generation of courtiers born in the 1560s, Essex challenged the demands of obedience and duty to the female monarch and flouted the Queen's authority. See Esler 1966, pp. 87-99. On the comparison of Essex to Tasso's Rinaldo see Helgerson 1991.

40 On the implications of the term 'career' see Laird 2010.

41 In *Tristia* 3.4.19-30, Phaëthon is used as an exemplum for the danger of ambition. The myth becomes the exemplum of pride to Arnulf of Orleans (c.1175), John of Garland, the anonymous author of the *Ovide Moralisé* and to Pierre Bersuire in *Ovidius Moralizatus*. On the reception of the myth in art and literature from antiquity to the Renaissance see Marongiu 2008.



Ovidian *fabula* acquired a political significance that humanists used in their mirror for princes. Erasmus in the *Institutio principis christiani* was the first to use the fable as a monitory exemplum for the future Charles V. After him, editors and illustrators of the *Metamorphoses*, the mythographers of the Renaissance, Andrea Alciati and the many authors of *emblemata* and visual eloquence represented the *ambustus* Phaethon as the allegory of the *stulti principes*.<sup>42</sup> Arthur Golding followed this didactic tradition, and in the long dedicatory epistle to the Earl of Leicester wrote on the necessity of a sound education for the sake of the commonweal:<sup>43</sup>

In Phaetons fable vntoo syght the Poet dooth expresse  
The natures of ambition blynd, and youthfull wilfulnesse.  
The end whereof is miserie, and bringeth at the last  
Repentance when it is to late that all redresse is past.  
And how the weaknesse and the want of wit in magistrate  
Confoundeth both his common weale and eeke his owne estate.

Golding's words echo Johannes Spreng's moralisation of Ovid's fables in which the fable of Phaethon is turned into a political allegory and given an extended interpretation and three illustrations.<sup>44</sup> This elegant octavo had immediate European circulation and one extant copy comes from the library of Gabriel Harvey with his signature and notes.<sup>45</sup>

As in the *Ovide moralisé* tradition, Spenser's paradoxical representation of Essex as Hesperos-Lucifer-Phaëthon is meant, «vntoo syght» (Spenser's Letter to Raleigh, in Hamilton 1977, p. 583), as a meditation on the consequences of blind ambition. Similarly, his encrypted representation of the hero of Cadiz as *Orgoglio* marks a point of no return for his life-long project

42 On the allegory of Phaëthon see Natalis Comes (1520-1582) *Mythologiae Liber VI*, ll. 364-365 In the books of emblems of Raphael Regius (1450-1520), Giorgius Sabinus (1508-1560), Jacobus Pontanus (1542-1626) and notably in Alciati (*Emblematum Liber*, Venice 1553) the moral fable was used politically (see Marongiu 2008, pp. 12-13, 22). Horace (*Carmina* 4.11.25 ff.; Shorey, Laing eds. 1919) instead mentions the grave exemplum of *ambustus* (scorched) Phaëthon in connection with the dangers of unrealistic ambition.

43 Golding 1567, p. 3v For the political readings of Ovid in England and related bibliography see Heather 2003.

44 *Metamorphoses Ouidii / argumentis quidem soluta oratione, enarrationibus autem & allegorijis elegiaco uersu accuratissimè expositae, summa[ue] diligentia ac studio illustratae, per M. Iohan. Sprengium Augustan; unà cum uiuis singularum transformationum iconibus, à Vergilio Solis, eximio pictore, delineatis. Impressum Francofurti: Apud Georgium Coruinum, Sigismundum Feyerabend, & haeredes VVygandi Galli, 1563*; Harvey's copy is preserved in Harvard Library (Houghton A1447.5.10); cf. Stern 1972, p. 41. The woodcuts are by Virgil Solis and are based on those by Bernard Solomon for the same text.

45 The allegory of the Phaëthon episode is heavily marked in red by Harvey; see for instance p. 24v.

of courtly didactics. It expresses Spenser's own final disillusionment with his exalted project: «to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline» (Spenser's Letter to Raleigh, in Hamilton 1977, p. 583). It has been argued that there is a paradox at the heart of Spenser's didactic project: his deeply set Protestant pessimism about human condition clashes against his desire to educate the virtuous person through poetry. To him, not even the best human beings can avoid without divine intervention, the mortal consequences of weakness and errors. Robert Devereux failed to become a new Arthur because he was unfashionable. His *hubris* and radical notions of magnanimous leadership and aristocratic honour excluded any middle path or *medietas*. As the motto «DUM FORMAS MINUIS», in fashioning you diminish, carved around the rough diamond on his *impresa* in Hilliard's portrait (1594 ca.) boldly intimated, he was unfashionable (Figure 3).<sup>46</sup>

The paradoxical eulogy of Essex in the *Prothalamion* is perhaps Spenser's last concealed message to the understanding few and adds another piece to the puzzle of his life and works. Secrecy, as it has been claimed, lies at the heart of Spenser's life as a subject in itself and as I have demonstrated, the secret subject of Essex's exalted and dangerous *hubris* lies under the veil of the paradoxical catasterism. In *Letter to Raleigh* Spenser had paradoxically claimed that his allegorical method of «wrapping» would enlighten, but his allegories shed an opaque light for the common reader and mystify us. His overwrought allegorical devices at times work like literary paradox and go against common opinion – as he specifies in the Letter («commune sence») – other times they are internally contradictory like logical paradoxes and the medieval amphiboly. The syntactical ambiguity of Spenser's paradoxical catasterism of Essex, like the many «allegorical devices» disseminated throughout his writings, results in the simultaneous revelation and maintenance of secrets and endows the poet's utterance with the aura of hermetic knowledge and prophecy.<sup>47</sup> The encrypted reference to the fall from pride in Spenser's last poem, written at a critical time and probably after *An Hymn to Heavenly Love*, is monitory. The *Prothalamion* therefore does not express Spenser's desire to return

46 This *impresa*, or emblematic device, in the form of diamond was described by Camden 1870, pp. 384-385): «[...] the late Earl of Essex took Diamond only amidst his shield, with this about it, 'Dum formas minus' [that is] diamonds as we all know are impaired while they are fashioned and pointed». See Piper 1957; Strong 1969, p. 297.

47 *Prothalamion*, a word of Spenser's invention, literally means 'pre-wedding' song. However, knowing his penchant for word play and puns, it is possible that he is playing here with *talamos* (nuptial chamber) and *protéleion*, translated in Scapula's Greek-Latin lexicon as «tirocinium, & initiativum [...] et generaliter, omne primordium rei divina faciendæ». Listed among the 'composita' of *téle*, 'mysteria, sacra' *protéleion* carries into Spenser's neologism 'prothalamion', its mysteric, Orphic and hieratic connotations that reverberate on the poet as the divinely inspired vates or prophet.



Figure 3. Nicholas Hilliard,  
Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex  
(c. 1594); NPG 6241

to service at court and to celebrate a national epic, as it has been claimed (Cheney 1993). On the contrary, under its epithalamic and celebratory veil, the *Prothalamion*, not unlike *Complaints* (1591), marks Spenser's turning away from courtly preferment and pursuit of laureateship and prospects the return to the pastoral spirituality of the *Calender* (1579) and to Colin who sings «rymes» that urge his fellow shepherds to set their hopes not in «earthly things» but on «heavens hight» (Knapp 2003; McCabe 1999; Bates 1992).<sup>48</sup>

As T.S. Eliot clearly saw, the *Prothalamion* has the tinge of death. Its prophetic amphibologies, the elegiac *ubi sunt*, and the *pietas* are pronounced as if from the underworld, and the poet's voice is a *vox* from the dead. The nymphs, the brides, Essex and the lyric 'I' himself suddenly appear to be insubstantial, netherworld 'doubles' of original existences on earth.

48 Legend of Courtesy in book vi of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser meditates on the relations between a poet and his patron, and while celebrating the patronage system he subtly reviles it. See Bates 1992, p. 146.

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