

The beneficence of despair

[Environment](#), [Air](#)



The consequence that Spenser faces in casting the Redcrosse knight as the obvious hero of *The Faerie Queene* is that all who oppose him throughout the poem are immediately branded as inherently evil figures. Such is the case with Despaire, whose encounter with the Redcrosse knight on the surface looks like a cruel and conniving attempt to make the hero of the story commit suicide. Upon closer analysis, however, Despair can be seen as “that cursed man” (I, ix, 308), not because he embodies evil, but rather because he is himself cursed and endures a more miserable fate than those who stumble upon him. Spenser sets Despair apart from characters such as Duessa or Archimago, who actively pursue the Redcrosse knight for the sake of bringing him to ruin, as well as from Errour and the Dragon, whose horrendous physical appearance and prowess suggest their potential to do great harm to the knight. Despair, unlike the knight’s other opposition, neither pursues him nor poses immediate physical danger. Rather, the knight comes seeking Despair at his cave, and at a purely physical level, the only threat to him comes from his own hand (since Despair does not do the actual killing). When Despair is first introduced, the description of his physical appearance resonates with that of the knight only one canto earlier, when he was in the dungeon of the Giant (I, vii, 357-369). Particularly when Spenser describes how Despair’s “raw-bone cheeks through penurie and pine, / Were shronke into his jawes, as he did never dine” (I, ix, 314-315), he sounds very much like the picture of the malnourished knight, “whose feeble thighs, unhable to uphold / His pined corse, him scarce to light could beare, / A ruefull spectacle of death and ghastly drere” (I, viii, 358-360). This resonance has the affect of reminding the reader that the fate Despair faces

could have fallen upon any man, including the knight himself. Having brought Despair to the same level of humanity as the knight, Spenser further nullifies the notion that Despair is a malicious enemy and emphasizes his doomed state on Earth with the description of his surroundings. The image of him confined to a cave where “ beside there lay upon the gras / A drearie corse, whose life away did pas, / All wallowd in his owne yet luke-warme blood, / That from his wound yet welled fresh alas” (I, ix, 319-322) paints a vivid picture of his miserable situation. It is hardly the portrait of a bloodthirsty villain who triumphs over every life ended by his rhetorical power, or over the sight of his latest visitor’s fresh blood. His act of persuading people to commit suicide somehow reduces the evil attributed to him, as opposed to if he were presented physically murdering his visitors. Spenser somehow finds a perfect balance between the craftiness of Duessa and Archimago and the physical brutality of the Dragon or Errour. Despair cannot be blamed for craftiness or deceit because he does not disguise his intent to drive people to suicide. At the same time he cannot be blamed for inflicting physical harm on people. Spenser cleverly created a character who could be admired for his rhetorical ability and who cannot be wholly blamed for the destruction of lives. Despair also escapes blame because he does not do nearly as much harm to the knight as any of the other “ villains.” In fact, the knight escapes from the cave unscathed. Despair’s response to the knight’s departure is also crucial to the portrayal of his character. When the knight leaves, he does not pursue him because the knight is not the true victim in this scene. What ensues the knight’s departure reveals the true victim: Despair, who “ when...[he] saw his guest / Would save depart, for all

his subtill sleight, / He chose an halter from among the rest, / And with it hung himselfe, unbid unblest. / But death he could not worke himselfe thereby; / For thousand times he so himselfe had drest, / Yet nathesle it could not doe him die, / Till he should die his last, that is eternally” (I, ix, 479-486). The sense of comfort in human companionship invoked by the use of the word “ guest” suggests the loneliness of Despair in the midst of his interminable life in the cave. Despair’s response upon the knight’s departure reveals his belief that suicide truly is the best escape from the despair that he suffers. Given this conclusion, the fact that he persuades others to take their lives no longer appears as an act of evil, but rather an attempt to spare others from his own miserable fate. If it were his passion to ensnare men and persuade them to take their lives, he would be outside of the cave pursuing after victims, possibly wearing an effective disguise such as Duessa and Archimago, that would win him credibility. Instead he sits in a hollow cave with festering corpses. Surely anyone who stumbles upon him would be suspicious of him, thus making his job of luring them to suicide more difficult. His condition, his dwelling, and his candidness suggest that he is not doing this job out of his own volition or zeal, but rather because this is the fate that has been allotted to him by some unmentioned, greater supernatural power. This sense is strengthened by the mention of his numerous unsuccessful suicide attempts. If his fate were in his hands, then he should have no problem taking his own life; instead, “ death he could not worke himselfe thereby” (I, ix, 483). There is a sense that Despair operates under the authority of a greater power which spares his life in each suicide attempt and propels him into the continuous doom in the cave. His role as an advocate

for suicide suddenly turns into a life that he has been unfortunately fated with rather than a malicious endeavor of his own volition. As the canto comes to a close, Despair's grim fate invokes far more pity than the knight's momentary danger, from which he escapes unharmed.