

Britomart's Meteorological Wound*

By REBECCA TOTARO (Florida Gulf Coast University)

Abstract:

When on 6 April 1580 an earthquake struck in the Straits of Dover, it set off a wave of literal tremors as well as reactions to it. In literature in particular, earthquakes and their meteorological siblings, volcanoes, proliferated and served flexibly as markers for memory, signs of jest, representations of amplified physical power, indicators of body-shaking trauma, and didactic statements on the Lucretian nature of things. In this paper, Totaro examines several meteorologically charged characters in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* of 1590, including Spenser's Knight of Chastity, Britomart, whose love-wound throbs with the forces that drive change in the sublunary system. In creating these characters, Spenser uniquely draws from three competing paradigms for the interpretation of meteorological phenomena, and he challenges readers, now as then, to re-imagine the relationship between all generative bodies and Earth, as well as between early modern meteorology and physiology. In the years since S. K. Heninger concluded that "Spenser's individual images drawn from meteorology fail to evoke any profound response," scholars of the early modern body, wonders, and the environment have broadened our perspective on the cosmology of the period, making especially fruitful a return to Spenser's appropriation of meteorological theories.

Keywords:

Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, Britomart, meteorology, earthquakes

When on April 6, 1580 an earthquake struck in the Channel, it set off a wave of literal tremors as well as reactions to it.¹ In England, the quake was the

* A note of thanks to reviewers of this essay, including Susan Staub, Kathryn Moncrief, and Robert Reid, members of the 2012 Renaissance Society of America panel, titled "A little world made cunningly": Generative Bodies and Early Modern Scientific Discourses; Kimberly Jackson and Delphine Gras, colleagues and members of our research writing group; and graduate students Jamie Gillhespy and Krista Townsend.

¹ For current geological assessment of the 1580 quake, see, P.M. Varley, "Seismic risk assessment and analysis" in: *Engineering Geology of the Channel Tunnel*, ed. Colin S. Harris *et al.*, (London: Thomas Telford, 1996), especially pp. 195–204. Among this quake's features were "sea swell in the Channel sinking 25 to 30 British, French and Flemish vessels," a tidal wave striking Calais, damage to London and Paris churches, and indirectly related deaths (due to roofs and chimneys falling in several Continental cities, including Calais and St. Amand-les Eaux (196–97). Varley concludes that "A reassessment of the reported impact on the southeast of England by the largest recorded earthquake (1580) suggested that this event may have had a Richter magnitude of 5.3 to 5.9 and an epicenter beneath the Channel" (p. 194).

subject of dinner conversations; it was considered by the queen and her privy council, as they debated the appropriate actions to take to calm the nation; and it provided a reason for the queen to work together with her church ministers to call all of England's practitioners to worship for additional church services.² Among these and many other responses to this natural wonder were cheap print pamphlets and broadsides determined to account for the event. These inexpensive forms of printed news spread word of the quake to regions of England that had not felt the ground move. The ideas they advanced moved minds to consider anew all marvels and wonders. Some of the pamphlet writers considered the earthquake a supernatural occurrence, a warning directly from God about future doom that awaited those who did not take immediate action to safeguard their souls and thereby England. Others, including Gabriel Harvey, in a letter to Edmund Spenser, drew from Aristotelian meteorological theory, which was gaining new attention in university and court circles, to claim that the earthquake was primarily a natural event, caused by wind trapped in the hollows of the earth and rumbling about to the point of rupture; it was nothing to be feared let alone considered portentous. In the decades following the 1580 quake, the quake-related inquiry continued. In literature in particular, earthquakes and their meteorological siblings, volcanoes, proliferated and served flexibly as markers for memory, signs of jest, representations of amplified physical power, indicators of body-shaking trauma, and didactic statements on the Lucretian nature of things. In this paper, I examine several meteorologically charged characters in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* of 1590. Specifically, Spenser strongly associates the earthquake and volcano with the giant, Orgoglio, and with the dragon of book 1 as well as with Britomart of book 3, whose love-wound throbs with the forces that drive meteorological change in the sublunary system. In creating these characters, Spenser uniquely blends the two competing paradigms for the interpretation of meteorological phenomena mentioned above, and he adds to them a third view of natural wonder. His appropriation of meteorological theory challenges readers, now as then, to reimagine the relationship between all generative bodies and Earth, as well as between early modern meteorology and physiology. In the years since S. K. Heninger concluded that "Spenser's individual images drawn from meteorology fail to evoke any profound response" (p. 171),

² Church of England, *The order of prayer, and other exercises, vpon Wednesdays and Frydayes, to auert and turne Gods wrath from vs, threatened by the late terrible earthquake: to be used in all parish churches and housholdes throughout the realme, by order giuen from the Queenes Maiesties most honourable priuie counsel* (1580). This order of prayer was based on the model for plague prayers, first commissioned by Queen Elizabeth I in 1563; on the plague prayers, see Rebecca Totaro, *The Plague in Print: Essential Elizabethan Sources, 1558–1603, Medieval & Renaissance Literary Studies* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010).