



**“Bathing [...] in origane and thyme” (I.ii.40):  
The Ambivalence of Baths in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*.**

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**Abstract:**

In *The Faerie Queene* (1590-96), images of water, and particularly of baths, are recurrent, but their properties seem as fluid as water itself. Spenser mentions the “secret vertues” (II.ii.5) of fountains and lakes, and refers to several famous waters in I.xi.30, including “th’English *Bath*”, praising their healing properties, apparently so tremendous that they can raise the dead. The example of Bath is taken up again in the following book in which the “boyling Bathes at Cairbadon” (II.x.26) are first described with words reminiscent of the fire of hell (“Brimston”, “secret fire”, “entrails”, etc.). Yet this seemingly negative vision of the warm waters is soon superseded by a focus on their healing properties.

I will address this duality in a first part where I will show that baths, in *The Faerie Queene*, often simultaneously weaken and strengthen. That is the case at different points of the Red Cross Knight quest for example. Interestingly, to these baths are sometimes added flowers and herbs, some associated with lust and syphilis, while others suggest love and virginity. I will then turn to another type of contrast present in the poem, since Spenser’s baths both conceal and reveal, as the account of Duessa bathing in I.ii.40-43 makes clear: “Her neather partes misshapen, monstrous, / Were hid in water, that I could not see”. Baths, in other words, allow the poet to play with the perception of his readers and characters alike. This will finally lead me to study them in connection with the representation of the female body. The poem’s bathing scenes are often tinged with eroticism, and the combination of concealing and revealing tropes is reminiscent of the allure and threat of Spenser’s female creatures. It is significant that, while the voyeuristic tropes used by the poet make the reader and the male protagonist part of the scene he describes, they are nonetheless kept on the margins, as outsiders looking in. As a result, the complex and shifting imagery of baths as well as their ambivalent properties seem to defy consistency in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, but I would like to argue here that this is not only inherent to water, but also quite representative of a more general approach to baths in early modern England.

## **Biography:**

Alix Desnain is a doctoral fellow at Université Clermont Auvergne, where she also teaches. A specialist of English literature, she wrote a master's thesis on the transformation of the Arthurian legend throughout the Middle Ages. Her dissertation now focuses on its resurgence in the literature and the culture of early modern England. She is currently working on Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*.