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Honors Thesis

“That glorious fire it kindled”: Extremes of (un)Righteous Sexuality in Books I and III of Spenser’s
Faerie Queene

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Abstract

Edmund Spenser's epic romance, *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596), claims to glorify Queen Elizabeth I, but the author hides an underlying critique of the queen throughout the poem. At the same time that Spenser openly praises the English monarch, he also reveals the faults and contradictions present in her image through how he presents the main characters in the story.

In *Faerie Queene*, Spenser establishes a sexuality spectrum that features the lechery of Redcrosse Knight and the hypersensitive purity of Britomart; this demonstrates the various extremes of immoral sexuality. Studying both these characters reveals that the success of each knight's mission relies heavily on his or her ability to navigate issues of temptation and purity. Through his presentation of Britomart's inadequacies, Spenser censures Elizabeth's choice to remain a virgin with no heirs.

“That glorious fire it kindled”: Extremes of (un)Righteous Sexuality in Books I and III of
Spenser’s Faerie Queene

Stories told in the epic tradition often feature accomplished, masculine heroes performing mighty deeds involving great prowess and skill. Odysseus wars with the forces of nature to return home, Aeneas defies the odds to battle his way to form a new settlement, and warriors such as Achilles brawl with feisty courage for their country. Just as often, however, these stories include women who only receive a marginal place in history and an unsympathetic ear. Penelope waits faithfully while her husband fornicates his way home, Dido possesses a relationship that finally betrays and kills her, and Helen serves as the ultimate object of desire, the cause of wars, and the slave of lustful princes. Men achieve lasting fame and victory while women merely survive to live and breathe another day. Mihoko Suzuki stresses the importance of reading these tales with an emphasis on women’s roles in giving writers and poets a place to assert independence from authority: “A focus on female subjects and readers will lead us not only to an understanding of the way woman functions as a figure of difference from patriarchal authority and institutions in these epics but also to a new appraisal of ‘the meshing of a definition of women and a definition of the world’” (2). The ways that women find their freedom mimics the means that poets use to defend their autonomy.

Even though women often seem to hold insignificant roles, however, they play a central role in most epic stories. According to A. Bartlett Giamatti, “The epic is often concerned with exile and the way back, and woman is always at the center. She is often both the goal and the obstacle. She is Penelope who waits and Circe who delays. She is Dido, who slows us, and Rome—Roma, the feminine place—who calls us on. Sometimes she

is both the reason we wander and the object we seek, because only where she is are we at home” (20). When men and women find areas of mutual understanding, beautiful partnerships help erode old forces of misogyny, even if marriages of reciprocal devotion still struggle with habits of chauvinism. Many writers, such as John Milton in *Paradise Lost*, attempt to create unions that display tenderness and fidelity, though these marriages still display problems and struggles for equality.

One work of epic poetry that uses Protestant tradition in a unique attempt to examine the complex issues surrounding relationships and chaste behavior is Edmund Spenser’s poem, *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 96). The book interacts with both the historical and contemporary circumstances surrounding it and follows in the Christian tradition supporting it to create a complex, intricate story lasting in its appeal of double meanings and political and religious allegories. Spenser started as an aspiring civil servant during the reign of Elizabeth I under the patronage of Sir Walter Raleigh. In a letter he wrote to Raleigh, Spenser sums up the concept and main objective of his poem as being, “the general end therefore of all the book is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline” (Spenser 714). The structure of *Faerie Queene* lends itself quite nicely to this because there are six books, each highlighting one virtue of the Christian life as modeled by a knight; the featured qualities include the Biblical and traditional principles of holiness, temperance, chastity, friendship, justice, and courtesy.

The political climate surrounding the book also greatly affects the resulting product. Spenser named his poem *The Faerie Queene* in honor of Elizabeth I, the English monarch at the time. According to Susanne L. Wofford, “By making Elizabeth I both a muse and the absent but desired centre, Spenser imports a powerful and disruptive set of political

leanings into his poem, insisting on both Elizabeth's presence as the very condition of the poem and yet stressing the impossibility of ever representing her, praising her rule yet giving her advice about policy, and satirizing her court" (109). The absentee influence of Elizabeth I echoes the manner in which God works in the poem. He does not directly intervene in circumstances or dictate what the characters should do, but he remains a constant authority figure worthy of fearful veneration.

Spenser begins *The Faerie Queene* with Redcrosse Knight, who accepts a challenge to free the maiden Una's parents from a deadly dragon. Instead of fulfilling his duties as the Christian knight of holiness, however, Redcrosse allows the sorcerer Archimago to deceive him and abandons Una when he thinks she has been sexually unfaithful. He meets Duessa, a temptress who leads him into licentiousness, and while they fornicate, the giant Orgoglio captures Redcrosse. After his rescue by Una and the knight Arthur, Redcrosse learns "celestiall discipline" at the House of Holiness and goes on to defeat the wicked dragon that plagues Una's village. Redcrosse and Una become betrothed, but he must return to his queen after the completed mission, and this parts the couple once more.

Book III employs Britomart, the female knight of chastity, as she seeks to find and wed a fellow knight, Artegall, while simultaneously taking up the cause of the innocent and oppressed. In the final scenes of the book, Britomart travels to the house of Busirane to rescue Amoret from her captor. She witnesses a mysterious display of vices and finally Busirane's violent treatment of his prisoner. She forces the sorcerer to release his spells and free Amoret. The book has two separate endings, one which appeared in the original 1590 edition and a revised conclusion that replaced the earlier one in the 1596 printing; in the first ending, Britomart brings the betrothed lovers back together and envies their

happiness and in the amended text it changes so that Britomart returns with Amoret and Scudamor has vanished.

Readers often classify Spenser's poem as an allegorical work, but the lack of consistent one-to-one correlations between object and symbol make this classification problematic. Often Spenser will set up a seemingly obvious analogy, but then use details that directly contradict the object lesson. Also, one element can represent a limitless number of ideas. For example, Una represents various things in different readings. She can represent truth, honorable living, religion, or the Protestant church. In addition, Spenser's text lends itself to many different psychological and political interpretations, and even insight into the nature of art and the meaning of the artistic endeavor. Because of this complex interweaving of plot, religious lessons, and cultural references, scholars must read carefully and work hard to develop meaning and truth from the text. Harry Berger Jr. explains how Spenser crafts this experience as a lesson to the reader by explaining, "Because Spenser keeps us as well as the hero off balance, we are forced to follow the narrative more intently, and indeed we come to realize that the hero is our scapegoat: he errs, sins, suffers, is alienated from the world of common day *so that* we may interpret" (*Revisionary Play* 61).

Reading Book III particularly shows Spenser's opinions about the reigning monarch, Queen Elizabeth I. He invokes her as the ultimate embodiment of sexual morality at the beginning of the book, but his language, plot and conclusion all seem to undercut this possibly insincere flattery while the story furthers a different notion of ideal chastity than Elizabeth actually follows. Reading the story in the context of the historical moment sheds light onto the complexity of illustrating chastity and the shortcomings present in the cast of

characters called to represent such an unmanageable virtue. The climactic episode of the book contains the most disturbing and contradictory evidence pertaining to the true nature of chastity and its implications. The closing scenes of *Faerie Queene* Book III highlight the problematic nature of chastity and its inadequacy as a primary ruling virtue for Elizabeth.

Examining the patterns that exist across the first three books of *Faerie Queene* corresponds with the experience of the book's original readers and logically agrees with a literary and historical standpoint. The first three books were published together in 1590 as the only existing unit of *Faerie Queene* for readers until the next three books were printed in 1596. A rough "spectrum of sexuality" emerges in study of the first half of the book. *Faerie Queene* opens with the story of Redcrosse Knight, a man who prominently manifests lust and sexual unrestraint. He abandons the woman under his protection to chase a temptress and his debauchery at a woodland glade nearly costs him his life. Redcrosse consistently chooses to engage in sinful activities and maintain his wanton relationship with Duessa until he receives a proper education at the House of Holiness. In contrast, Britomart exhibits behavior antithetical to her fellow knight. Instead of showing the lewd and promiscuous behavior of Redcrosse, she has a hermetically sealed chastity that stays perfectly impenetrable and whole. Joanna Thompson acknowledges the patriarchal influences that directly affect Spenser's construction of Britomart's chastity; she claims that Spenser "fashions Britomart upon an exclusively feminine ideal that has been designed by men to regulate female sexuality and confine women within a socially subordinate role" (63). Redcrosse engages in profligate and wild revels, while Britomart remains virginal and celibate, fulfilling societal expectations of purity.

“Fraile, Feeble, Fleshly Wight”: Redcrosse’s Promiscuity and Fall to Temptation

Early on in *Faerie Queene* Spenser not only reveals Redcrosse’s biggest weakness but also gives him a model of appropriate behavior with which to combat his shortcomings. The poem immediately informs the reader that Redcrosse Knight struggles with sexual temptation; the inaugural line of the narrative states that “A Gentle Knight was pricking on the plaine” (1.i.1.1). The sexual connotations associated with the term “pricking” suggest that this amateur warrior struggles with carnal desires. To help overcome his deficiencies, Redcrosse has a role model in the story to encourage his success. Arthur, the knight from traditional literature, serves as an example of ideal behavior that a knight should follow. He rescues the person in distress, avenges the lovely maiden and has all the abilities of polite social discourse that show him to be an accomplished, quintessential knight. Following Arthur’s example could help Redcrosse avoid mistakes that result from his naivety and inexperience, but Redcrosse rejects this model in favor of his own flawed decisions.

Redcrosse’s first battle reveals his weakness of impulsivity and lack of good judgment. When he and Una arrive at the den of the dragon Errorr, “The Champion stout / Eftsoones dismounted from his courser braue, / And to the Dwarfe a while his needlesse spere he gaue” (1.i.11.7-9). A common literary image in the Renaissance is that of the knight on his horse being reason governing the passions. Hence, a knight dismounting off of his horse means allowing passions to rule without reason to restrain them. Redcrosse also makes an even greater mistake by venturing into the den without his spear. Una and the Dwarf both warn him about the folly of this move, but Redcrosse ignores their advice and impulsively advances into battle. The text notes that “full of fire and greedy hardiment, / The youthful knight could not for ought be staide, / But forth vnto the darksome hole he

went" (1.i.14.1-3). Instead of the easy victory the knight hopes for, he instead endures a stunning battle in which he almost dies twice; his recklessness nearly leads to his defeat. Although Redcrosse defeats the literal dragon Errour, he falls victim to the error of being unable to see the true nature of his enemy. This episode also includes a phrase that prefigures Redcrosse's impending immorality. Spenser states that Redcrosse goes into "the darksome hole" and this yonic image suggests that Redcrosse is not only inexperienced in areas of sexuality, but also that he will soon impulsively choose to explore unadvised sexual encounters that will endanger his life and mission. This episode shows Redcrosse traveling into a literal unknown and threatening hole that will soon appear as a sexual temptation in the form of Duessa.

Redcrosse's incompetence in properly responding to his desires inhibit his ability to complete his quest, harming his sense of purpose and mission. He first begins to make serious mistakes when he does not resist the machinations of his host, a sorcerer. First, Archimago sends Redcrosse a dream that "made him dream of loues and lustfull play, / That nigh his manly hart did melt away, / Bathed in wanton blis and wicked ioy" (1.i.47.4-6). These highly erotic images suggest that Redcrosse receives sexual stimulation from the dream; the fact that his "hart did melt away" indicates that the dream results in sexual climax and release. This makes Redcrosse restless and uncomfortable and Archimago capitalizes on the knight's initial doubts and distress by forging a scene to suggest Una's infidelity with a stable boy. Archimago wakes the knight from a sound sleep to show him a scene of disguised sprites in a sexual tryst. Still reeling from the anxiety of his nightmare, Redcrosse reacts without rational thought, only grabbing his sword and following Archimago without questioning him. The phallic representation of the knight's state of

mind, "grabbing his sword," vividly describes the dominance of sexual response over reason in his mind. He does not stop to process the images and use logic to separate fact from fiction, nor does he even pause to recover from the confusion of sleep. Instead, Redcrosse immediately leaps to action; the same impulsivity that nearly led him to defeat at Error's cave now moves him instantly to respond without the proper time to think. Following such a sexually charged and disturbing dream, Redcrosse's first reaction, to grab his sword, shows that he submits to the temptation before him and chooses to follow his lustful impulses rather than his duties. Redcrosse's response to the confusing situation shows only the imprudence and rashness of youth, not the wisdom and gravity he should display. He only reacts unreasonably to experiences involving sexuality. The dream had led him to potentially homicidal anger because he was "All cleane dismayd to see so vncouth sight, / And halfe enraged at her shamelesse guise, / He thought haue slaine her in his fierce despight" (1.i.50.1-3). This time the poem states that "he burnt with gealous fire / The eie of reason was with rage yblent" (1.ii.5.6-7). Instead of being furious with righteous indignation or standing horrified at the supposed sin he sees, Redcrosse only experiences a furious selfish jealousy and would have killed the sprites in misguided wrath without Archimago's interference. Having figuratively lost his way, at dawn the knight literally flees the hermitage.

Redcrosse makes his most fatal mistake after he escapes from the House of Pryde; even though he leaves the House's wicked influence, Duessa's sexuality still affects him and causes him to capitulate to temptation. As the knight reaches a glade, he repeats his earlier error by dismounting from his horse and disarming in order to rest. The knight's previous impulsive decision to alight from his horse made his battle against Error more grueling. In

this circumstance, Redcrosse further increases his vulnerability by also removing his armor. Duessa finds him and the two decide to “bathe in pleasaunce of the ioyous shade” (1.vii.4.2) and enjoy their dalliance away from the heat of the day. Diana has cast a spell on the fountain, however, so that it effeminizes and dulls drinkers such as Redcrosse Knight. According to Hester Lees-Jeffries, “It can be seen that Duessa becomes the fountain, and that Redcrosse’s drinking stands for his fornication...this elision of Duessa with the fountain reflects Protestant commentary on the Whore of Babylon, which typically conflates physical and spiritual fornication” (157). Redcrosse’s infidelity leads to a captivity that nearly kills him and the inappropriate expression of his libido leads him to abandon his quest. His unfaithfulness to Una and his ultimate act of fornication damage his ability to defend himself until he cannot fight off his attacker. According to Biblical instructions that Redcrosse should have followed, a Christian must put on the full armor of God to stand against the wiles of the devil (Eph. 6.11) and guard against temptations and traps. Redcrosse’s final sexual sin most reveals his weakened moral state and the repercussions of abandoning his quest.

The consequences of Redcrosse’s fornication cause him to become physically and mentally injured; when Arthur and Una finally rescue the knight, they find his body and spirit emaciated and nearly destroyed.

He found the meanes that Prisoner vp to reare;
 Whose feeble thighs, vnhabable to vphold
 His pined corse, him scarce to light could beare,
 A ruefull spectacle of death and ghastly dreere.
 His sad dull eies deepe sunck in hollow pits,

Could not endure th'vnwonted sunne to view;
 His bare thin cheeks for want of better bits,
 And empty sides deceiued of their dew,
 Could make a stony hart his hap to rew. (1.viii.40.6-41.5)

The once brave and ruddy knight who embarked on this quest has changed into a skeletal, barely recognizable person since his body has shriveled during his imprisonment and his former vitality and physical prowess have disappeared. The adjectives Spenser chooses to describe Redcrosse—feeble, pined, ruefull, hollow, bare and empty—not only outline his desperate physical state, but also his drained and unfilled spiritual need. His eyes, “deepe sunck in hollow pits” (1.viii.41.1) can no longer recognize holiness. He has a sad and pitiful predicament and cannot save himself; the recipient of his protection must rescue him. By showing the reader the extent of Redcrosse’s impairment, Spenser explicitly narrates the evils caused by unrighteous sexual indulgence.

The extensive mental damage still leaves Redcrosse emotionally suffering after he has been physically healed; Spenser shows that Redcrosse’s recovery depends not on his physical health, but on his eventual decision to follow traditional Protestant morals. When talking with Despair, Redcrosse nearly kills himself. He shows remorse for his life of sin as he contemplates, “The vgly vew of his deformed crimes, / That all his manly powers it did disperse / That oftentimes he quakt, and fainted oftentimes” (1.ix.48.6,7,9). To help him find healing, Una takes him to the House of Holiness to rest and recuperate. There he learns Christian respectability and vigor to replace the lethargy of his time at the fountains of sexual pleasure.

Fayre *Vna* gan *Fidelia* request,

To haue her knight into her schoolehous plaste,
 That of her heauenly learning he might taste,
 And here the wisdom of her wordes diuine.
 She graunted, and that knight so much agraste,
 That she him taught celestiall discipline,
 And opened his dull eyes, that light mote in them shine. (1.x.18.3-9)

Redcrosse Knight started off his journey naïve and inexperienced and fell instantly into disaster and trouble. These lessons give him his first opportunity to learn wisdom, discipline, and religious principles. Redcrosse's ignorance of traditional morality left him unable to react appropriately to Archimago's deceptions and instead susceptible to the distracting allure of Duessa's sexuality. Once he has properly acquired Biblical wisdom, however, his physical prowess returns as his formerly "dull eyes" now shine with energy and vitality.

Redcrosse's recovery ultimately results in victory over the dragon and completion of his original quest, but the state of married happiness that he desires remains impossible as he must return to his queen and leave Una behind. Spenser seems to suggest that even the sexual ideal of married chastity is not a perfect solution and this model for decorum has flaws. As Redcrosse completes his quest, Spenser describes the couple's contentment and their subsequent separation.

Her ioyous presence and sweet company
 In full content he there did long enioy,
 Ne wicked enuy, ne vile gealosity
 His deare delights were hable to annoy:

Yet swimming in that sea of blisfull ioy,
 He nought forgot, how he whilome had sworne,
 In case he could that monstrous beast destroy,
 Vnto his Faery Queene backe to retourne:

The which he shortly did, and *Vna* left to mourne (1.xii.41.1-9)

Spenser demonstrates Redcrosse's happiness quite clearly as he experiences "full content" and he "did long enioy" his betrothed; the knight not only is finally fully capable of partaking in Una's invigorating holiness, but he also no longer feels irrational sexual temptations against her or toward other women as he does not face "wicked enuy" or "vile gealosity." Ironically, his renewed sense of duty disturbs his satisfaction and he must return to serve the queen, receiving little time for domesticity as he "shortly" leaves. Although chaste matrimony appeared to be Redcrosse's sexual ideal, it remains elusive, as he must return to service for his queen and cannot enjoy wedded bliss. Spenser delineates human inadequacy to form a correct response to sexuality and also shows that reaching one's supposed ideal sexual state often falls short of expectations. After a long journey, Redcrosse Knight fulfills his quest only to find himself still unable to commit; he must return to his duty to his queen, leaving his betrothed behind mourning. Redcrosse completes his grueling adventure, only to feel the call of duty and turn his back on the rewards waiting for him. Giamatti points out that this is the way of epic, "We are taught that all human enterprise and endeavor involve a long, weary way. That to get *there* means going a long, long distance, a long space in time. We cannot escape epic's long view: that rest will come by never resting, that peace will come only by war, that all your future will be devoted, despite yourself and at best, to finding a memory from the past" (20). Spenser uses the

difficult, heart-wrenching journey of Redcrosse Knight to demonstrate how even ideal behavior can be inadequate for finding lasting happiness.

“O dredd Souerayne”: Spenser’s Covert Critique of Queen Elizabeth I

Throughout her reign in 1558-1603, Queen Elizabeth I worked to promote herself as pure and impenetrable and she attempted to symbolize herself as the Virgin Queen to her people. Elizabeth prided herself on her chastity and it came to represent the independence and autonomy of England. Many of her portraits contain emblems of purity, virginity or self-sacrifice, including a pelican, an ermine, or pearls. In her portraits, her fair, white complexion highlights her purity and the structure of her garments and positioning of her jewelry often accentuate the guarded nature of her sexuality. Her chastity came to represent England, its impenetrability, its individuality, and its freedom from bondage and subjugation. In Elizabeth’s reign and personal life, she demonstrates her form of chastity as virginity with a choice to never marry or produce heirs. Within the first year of her reign, the new queen even told Parliament that in the case of her death, “this may be inscribed upon my tomb: Here lies interred Elizabeth, A virgin pure until her death” (Marcus 60). From her very first months in office, Elizabeth expressed her desire for a life of celibacy to her court; even though she occasionally entertained the idea of taking a husband, she specified that she personally desired to live as a single woman.

Throughout Elizabeth’s reign, writers and artists glorified her continual state of virginity and compared her to famous mythological virgins to emphasize her power and appeal. John King summarizes some of the prominent comparisons of the day by noting, “celebration of her virginity was a synchronic phenomenon noticeable in works of

literature and art that flattered her as a new Judith or Deborah, Eliza Triumphans, Astraea, Cynthia, or even Venus-Virgo” (30). This Cult of Elizabeth essentially had two phases, celebration of Elizabeth’s purity for the stainless reputation of a future marriage with heirs and, after it became clear that the queen could no longer bear children, the eventual veneration of her perpetual virginity as a symbol of her dedication to her sovereignty. At the beginning of the second phase, after English citizens became resigned to their queen’s decision for sterility, King states that the portraiture reflects this change as it “begins to incorporate esoteric virginity symbols into arcane allegories that may be impenetrable to casual observers” (58). Many portraits of the queen, especially during the latter half of her reign, featured symbols of her purity and virginity, some of them even using emblems from mythology or legends to emphasize her chastity.

The Siena “Sieve” portrait of Queen Elizabeth I, possibly painted by Cornelius Ketel sometime around 1580-83, demonstrates the advantages of Elizabeth’s chastity by highlighting her ruling ability and clear thinking. The portrait features the Queen in a simple mostly black dress with a string of pearls casually holding a sieve in her left hand and leaning against a column covered in medallions. Behind the Queen there rests a globe and in the background of the painting, several of the Queen’s gentlemen pensioners carry halberds. The primary image of the painting, the sieve, celebrates Elizabeth’s chastity by recalling the legend of Tuccia, the Roman Vestal Virgin, who carried a sieve full of water from the Tiber River to the Temple in order to clear her name from accusations of immorality (Strong 96). The column to the Queen’s right is made of jasper and features nine medallions detailing the tragic story of Dido. John Watkins claims that this story specifically appears in the portrait to highlight the queen’s chaste lifestyle: “By contrasting

Elizabeth with Dido, the portrait also honors her virginity for protecting her from Dido's fate as a queen undone by passion" (126). According to Roy Strong, people believed that jasper had "the power to quench the flames of passion" (105). The portrait's artist chose the composition of the pillar and its legendary context deliberately to honor Elizabeth's virtue.

Other portraits also include symbols that strongly suggest the image of Elizabeth as a Virgin Queen. The "Ermine" portrait from 1585 features a pale ermine as "an emblem of purity, a creature which guarded its white fur" (Strong 115). In this same painting, the abundance of pearls and topaz jewels enhances the concept of virginity (Pomeroy 55). In the "Armada" portrait (ca. 1588) some critics have suggested that the appearance of the "virgin-knot" implies a cause and effect relationship between Elizabeth's chastity and England's military victory, although not all scholars have accepted this view (King 59). The prominent bow in the painting, however, does draw the viewer's eye and attract attention to the queen's sealed and packaged virginity. In the "Rainbow" portrait (ca. 1600-1603) King indicates that "jeweled crescent moons symbolic of Diana appear...at the apex of the headpiece" (59, 61) to illustrate his earlier point that comparisons of the Queen and Diana explicitly praised Elizabeth's chastity by comparing her to the "classical protectress of virginity" (43). By comparing the queen to the moon goddess, artists specifically invoked the idea of Elizabeth as the divinely appointed guardian of chastity.

As a politically savvy artist of this time, Edmund Spenser also writes in a way that appears to praise and glorify the Queen's chastity; unlike some of his fellow writers, however, he embeds critiques of the queen and doubts about her decisions in his poetry. At face value, Spenser seems to adore and admire England's reigning monarch. He invokes

Elizabeth I at the beginning of Book III by saying that she perfectly embodies chastity and that other women should try to emulate her if possible. He says that chastity is “shrined in my Soueraines brest, / And formed so liuely in each perfect part” (III Proem I.5-6).

Looking more closely at Spenser’s writings, however, it becomes difficult to believe that he could worship Elizabeth wholeheartedly. Spenser envisions chastity as a fruitful, faithful enterprise while Elizabeth imagines chastity as renunciation of marriage and its conjugal benefits. These conflicting ideas lead to textual and narrative uncertainty while at the same time mirroring the contention in the surrounding society. Spenser hints at possible skepticism and sarcastic thoughts when he entreats his queen,

But O dredd Souerayne

Thus far forth pardon, sith that choicest witt

Cannot your glorious pourtraict figure playne,

That I in colourd showes may shadow itt,

And antique praises vnto present persons fitt. (III Proem III.5-9)

The slight puns that appear in the passage unfavorably slight Elizabeth, but remain subtle and nearly unnoticeable. The word “dredd” to describe the Queen’s sovereignty sounds similar to the word “dead”; potentially Spenser alludes to Elizabeth’s eventual demise and the heirless state of the country if she continues in her sterile form of chastity.

Furthermore, since the term “playne” can mean either “easy to perceive” or “ordinary and unremarkable,” Spenser potentially disparages her appearance; he seems to write that he will show Elizabeth more clearly to her people, but possibly uses the term as an ironic rebuttal to the previous adjective “glorious.” In the critical notes to this stanza, the editors observe that the term “shadow” invokes the Platonic ideal where “the shadow is related to

reality as the phenomenal world to the heavenly world of ideas” (Spenser 288). By referring to Plato’s concept that earthly entities are mere shadows of more perfect things, Spenser casually alludes to the inadequacy of his ability to accurately represent his Queen, but also he likely intends to show that her use of chastity as an idea is itself an imperfect depiction of the concept. Spenser’s mostly obsequious language, however, shows that he realizes his subject position to the ruler and his lack of power. He uses flattery throughout the proem to Book III, but this nod to Elizabeth’s power shows that he recognizes the danger of his enterprise and the advantages of avoiding open criticism of the queen.

Elizabeth never married and did not even name a successor for most of her reign, but her fiercely independent spirit punished those who tried to control her actions or instruct her as to the “correct” way to live and reign. Elizabeth often punished subjects who wrote to her suggesting or discouraging a match or who gave her advice about marriage; possible sanctions included removal from the Queen’s favor, imprisonment, or physical punishment. Susan Doran notes that most writers of the time only published opinions about Elizabeth’s marital choices anonymously or in code after the queen had John Stubbs’ hand cut off for openly producing a pamphlet that attempted to advise her (273). Spenser uses a much more clever technique, however, to critique his monarch’s choices and unmarried status. He praises Elizabeth in his book *The Faerie Queene* and creates characters to represent her; through these fictional strengths and weaknesses Spenser indirectly implicates Elizabeth and attempts to teach her proper choices and modes of behavior.

Britomart, the heroine of Book III and the emblematic knight of chastity, reveals Spenser’s opinions regarding appropriate sexual purity. How he constructs this virtue

through his main character reveals the strengths and weaknesses that he considers to be in an “ideal” form of this quality. Spenser’s construction of Elizabeth through his characters in this story allows a more extensive picture of her by using the narrative art form and can give a better idea of public perception of her reign through the eyes of the author. Some scholars even claim that Spenser’s use of Britomart to portray and critique the queen gives a more complete picture of her than the body of portraiture does. In fact, Julia Walker posits, “Spenser’s Elizabeth portrait surpasses all the painted panels, however richly encoded with meanings, because through the force of epic narrative it can present a changing image, one confronted by physical and political realities and altered by those confrontations” (173-4). No matter what definition of chastity Spenser invokes in his story, the proem indicates that the goal of studying this challenging virtue is to examine the queen. The key to understanding Spenser’s enigmatic critique and confounding analysis of Elizabeth lies in his Book III heroine, Britomart. Walker continues by saying, “Spenser—through Britomart’s struggles with various manifestations of fleshly force—undertakes to depict the sexual as well as the political implications of Elizabeth’s evolving transformation from queen and virgin to Virgin Queen” (176). Although Spenser cannot overtly critique Elizabeth, he can use his fictional, removed character to reveal Elizabeth’s shortcomings in an indirect manner.

Spenser first begins his condemnation of Elizabeth through the structure of his story; he specifically sets up Elizabeth’s lineage so that Britomart is an ancestor of the queen. Since Elizabeth relies on the line of royal succession for her position, Britomart’s decision to procreate controls Elizabeth, who would supposedly not exist without her predecessor’s determination to produce heirs. Spenser also clarifies the Queen’s faults by

setting up his story so that the central feature of Britomart's journey is her choice to wed a fellow knight. Using these details, Spenser creates a preliminary definition of chastity in opposition to Elizabeth's. While the queen supports chastity as the idea of stark sexual purity, virginity and maidenhood, Spenser defines it as fidelity and faithfulness within the bonds of marriage and the prerogative to produce children¹.

The culminating episode of the book reveals the antagonism that Spenser feels toward Elizabeth. Susan Frye examines Book III's conclusion and proposes that the complex relationship between the two compelling figures should be read with regards to Spenser's feelings about Elizabeth and her power over him. Spenser seemed to define chastity as "male possession of the female body" (49) and Elizabeth chose instead to redefine her chastity in terms of an "empowering virginity" (53) that ran against the common notion of this virtue. Frye posits that the main contention in Book III of *Faerie Queene* is merely emblematic of these conflicting definitions of chastity between Spenser and his queen and she says "I see Busirane as the figure of all the displaced frustration and violence that Spenser feels toward his queen" (69). As an author unable or unwilling to empathize with Elizabeth's way of ruling, he appears to take out his revenge through his art. Spenser allows Britomart the potential to live and govern a different way than Elizabeth; by making his title character free to marry and produce children, he implicitly criticizes the choices of his monarch.

¹ Other critics theorize that Spenser defines chastity to include many other virtues and character qualities. Lesley Brill suggests that Britomart embodies chastity as a type that "Insofar as chastity involves love, it is love of a certain kind. But it also comprehends a passionate desire to achieve honor, a warlike and knightly type of living, fidelity to "kind," and gentleness and gentility" (16). This claim remains largely unsupported, however, and I do not think the text verifies such a broad definition of chastity.

“Perfect hole, prostrate she fell”: Britomart’s Too Perfect Chastity and Its Failure

Spenser directly critiques the problems inherent in using chastity as a ruling virtue during the last scenes of Book III. Cantos 11 and 12 contain the most critically debated and challenging episode of Book III, where Britomart attempts to save Amoret from the House of Busirane so she can return to her betrothed husband Scudamor. Scholars Thomas P. Roche Jr. and Harry Berger Jr. both interpret the final scene in light of the sexual struggles that form the essence of it. Many details in the text highlight the ambiguous nature of chastity and produce indistinct meaning at best. Berger shows that both the decorations and setting of the House of Busirane and the fight scene between Busirane and Britomart highlight the main problem revealed in this canto—the inherent combative struggle between men and women. Thus, he focuses on gender in this particular reading of Book III. When Scudamor and Amoret reunite at the end of the story, “The lovers attempt to abolish the pain of separateness by headlong convergence, not by the slowly and painfully won knowledge of self and other” (120). To Berger, this ending does not provide a happy solution to a painful problem, but instead serves as another piece of evidence revealing the primary dilemma. Gender roles and conflicts between Scudamor and Amoret only foreshadow those of Artegall and Britomart later in the text.

Most of the critical scholarship on this incident focuses on the details surrounding Amoret—her “dying hart”, the spells cast in her blood, her marital consummation anxiety, her hermaphrodite status with Scudamor, or her relationship with Busirane. This episode, however, reveals Britomart’s behavior in such a way that her chastity is the main issue being explored. Roche asserts that Britomart’s chastity qualifies her as the only one who can save Amoret. Roche claims that Amoret’s deep seated fears about marriage center on

Scudamor and that Britomart's chastity makes her the ideal figure to save Amoret from the House of Busirane since, "as a woman she understands Amoret's attitude toward the physical side of love, and as the exemplar of chastity she is able to make the moral distinction between marriage and adulterous love" (343). Britomart's chaste nature qualifies her to save Amoret, but paradoxically the insufficiencies in the very quality that grants her agency also undercut her initiative and ability to fulfill her mission. Britomart's outburst of violence in the House of Busirane links her to Guyon's fit of destruction at the end of Book II and her abrupt savagery necessitates analysis of the limitations of chastity.

In the culminating episode of Book II, Guyon, the titular knight of temperance, defeats Acrasia in the Bower of Bliss. As the knight of temperance, it falls to Guyon to keep control of his passions and tempers and to practice moderation at all times. When he reaches his destination, however, he destroys the Bower in a fit of fury that levels the whole space.

But all those pleasaunt bowres and Pallace braue,
 Guyon broke downe, with rigour pittillesse;
 Ne ought their goodly workmanship might saue
 Them from the tempest of his wrathfulness,
 But that their blisse he turn'd to balefulnesse;
 Their grous he feld, their gardins did deface
 Their arbers spoyle, their Cabinets suppressse,
 Their banket houses burne, their buildings race,
 And of the fayrest late, now made the fowlest place. (II.xii.83.1-9)

Guyon's anger in this scene does not only destroy the sensual excess, but also the elements of goodness that exist in this place. The things he destroys are "pleasaunt bowres" and "goodly workmanship" as well as groves, gardens, trees and buildings. The language of the passage gives no reason to believe that the nature of these things is inherently evil—in fact the only phrases written in negative language are Guyon's "rigour pittillesse" and the variety of verbs used to describe his actions including "deface", "spoyle" and "burne". These verbs describe harmful actions and none of his exertions appear to improve the bower. In fact, Spenser notes that the garden was "the fayrest late" and became something worse and loathsome as "the fowlest place." Lauren Silberman claims that Guyon's virtue, temperance, lacks any ability to cope with a situation such as the verdant bower. "Guyon and the Palmer can bind Acrasia and ravage the Bower of Bliss, but they cannot truly defeat the witch...temperance offers no alternative to Acrasia's perverse sexuality, no creative engagement with the sensual, merely defense" (20). Guyon's angry outburst goes much farther than merely solving the problem of wickedness—he feels that he cannot remove the taint of evil by merely capturing the villains so he responds by destroying anything that might be considered sensual excess, but in so doing, he also razes anything good.

Guyon's temperance fails because it cannot manage an excess of uncontrolled elements. By its very nature, temperance works by avoiding too many delights and employing moderation in sensual images. When confronted with excess, as in the Bowre of Bliss, however, temperance proves insufficient to eradicate evil. Guyon's resulting destructive streak shows how in this case, temperance cannot solve the problem he faces and he resorts to a frenzied assault on an enemy he does not know how to defeat as a final solution. According to Wofford, "Throughout the book we are in a place of dualities – no

absolutes, no single one thing that sums everything up, but a constant balancing between two extremes or two alternatives in order to find the proper human place in the middle...In the Bower of Bliss, Guyon could be said to fail because he cannot keep his balance, cannot maintain the middle way in the face of a serious erotic temptation" (119,122). Guyon's failure partly comes from a weakness in his embodied virtue. When his guiding principle, temperance, cannot protect him from temptation, Guyon responds with a fit of aggression and brute force. The knight responds not by merely destroying the evil aspects of the bower, but by making the place uninhabitable. Guyon entered the garden that was "the fayrest late" and did not stop at capturing the enchantress and freeing her captives, but must turn the space into "the fowlest place." His rage did not seem to serve a useful purpose as his capturing the wicked people and freeing the enslaved people did. Guyon's ruinous anger was unnecessary and not part of his virtuous practices since he "broke down" before leveling the bower.

Just as Guyon's morality fails him in the Bower of Bliss, Britomart's inability to complete her mission correctly in the House of Busirane links her to Book II and the similarities between Guyon and Britomart here show that they suffer from comparable weaknesses. When Britomart sees Busirane torturing Amoret, she transforms into a murderous fighter in her craze to kill him. Just as Guyon had no moral resources in his moment of need, Britomart's bloodlust and reluctance to save her enemy reveal a lack of moral aptitude and competence. Both Guyon and Britomart seem to "fail" the final test, the culminating episode exploring their embodied virtues. Each of them attempts to destroy the situation that acts as a direct foil to their virtue instead of attempting a moderate, less destructive solution.

Britomart's aggression shows the failure of her moderating virtue specifically because the rage rises out of an attack on her virginity. Busirane commits the first act of aggression when he takes his knife and wounds Britomart: "Vnwars it stroke into her snowie chest, / That litle drops empurpled her faire brest" (III.xii.33.4,5). Busirane's attack can be seen as an assault on her purity both in terms of the location of the wound, her "snowie chest" and the staining of her innocence when it "empurpled her faire brest". Britomart's resulting homicidal fury shows that her chastity cannot manage the situation and she reacts in a manner similar to Guyon. Britomart's desire for Busirane's death shows how she would rather eradicate an impossible problem than work to find a manageable solution.

The virtue chastity is a problematic one to exemplify in text for many reasons. Both Spenser's and Elizabeth's models are difficult to achieve and include inherent problems for both the subject and others around them. Elizabeth's representation of ideal chastity is more obviously unfeasible because its whole execution hinges on the woman remaining a virgin and thus unable to continue the family line. Spenser's model centers on the woman as faithful wife² and this only defines her in terms of the man, her husband, and removes her subjectivity. His ideal definition, however, relies on the husband and wife as equal partners in a marriage relationship.³ Spenser shows in Book III Canto 10 through the example of Malbecco and Hellenore that when the husband undermines the subjectivity of

² This only covers issues of female chastity. I choose not to address issues of male chastity because this is tangential to Spenser's main point, Elizabeth, and in his book the focus is on female chastity. Chastity as it relates to the male characters is within the scope of the topic, but too broad to cover for the purposes of this paper.

³ While men clearly have agency in marriage in Spenser's works, it is not always clear that women do. Spenser addresses this disparity in his poem *Amoretti* (1595), which was published between the two printings of *Faerie Queene*. According to John Bernard, "A major theme in Spenser's love poetry, at least from the first appearance of Britomart in the *Faerie Queene*, is the difficult struggle a woman must face in entering into the sexual bond. *Her* liberation is an essential prerequisite to his own if they are to regain the earthly paradise of mutual love" (428).

the wife, he undermines the purity of the relationship, which destroys the marriage. Sexual purity and fidelity are choices, so ignoring the woman's voice paradoxically undercuts her capacity to choose for herself the decisions that the virtue requires. Writers also have a difficult time using analogies to portray chastity because examples of sexual impurity more clearly reveal truths about the virtue than correct cases do; a faithful and pure person is more difficult to show than a promiscuous one.

Although Britomart seeks a very specific form of chastity, she also confuses such a definition, primarily because at the end of Book III she does not yet have a husband and has not even found Artegall. If it seems that Spenser chooses to define chastity as fidelity within marriage, then Britomart's failure to achieve the "correct" form of this virtue mirrors Elizabeth's closely. "Chastity" seems to be an unattainable ideal that Spenser can only demonstrate through instances of its failure. Malecasta illustrates how chastity should not be blind to gender or circumstance, Florimell shows how it should not remain fearful and distant towards others, and Hellenore exemplifies a persona antithetical to appropriate chastity with her wanton and promiscuous behavior.

It becomes more difficult, however, to make conclusive statements about what chastity is in actuality because every aspect of this perplexing virtue that Spenser seems to condone, he actually undercuts in various details of the text. One example lies in the seemingly safe assertion that Spenser defines chastity within the confines of marriage. Belphoebe appears in the text as a complete contradiction to this as she is both representative of chastity (since she represents Elizabeth as commissioned in the Proem to Book III) and she actively seeks to remain single, even when given the chance to marry Timias. This seems to contradict the example of Britomart, yet Spenser remarks of

Belphoebe, “To whom in perfect loue, and spotlesse fame / Of chastity, none liuing may compayre” (III.v.54). Spenser praises Belphoebe’s chastity, but it is much closer to coinciding with Elizabeth’s ideal than Britomart’s. The layers of meaning continue, however, as the suggestion that no one alive can compare to Belphoebe’s level of chastity could mean that Spenser implicates Elizabeth’s ideal as impossible for her to live up to. Thus the idea that Spenser presents, he undercuts and undercuts again, making it difficult to accuse him of inconstancy to the queen. He writes in such a way that it would be hard to accuse him of misrepresenting chastity or Elizabeth, since it is difficult to even state his claims with any certainty.

Britomart, the agent of chastity in Book III, dedicates herself to the quest of saving Amoret. Her central virtue makes this task difficult to accomplish since chastity is a highly personal attribute. Some virtues such as friendship, justice, and courtesy, the themes of Books IV, V and VI respectively, prompt good conduct towards other people and involve interaction with individuals. In contrast, chastity merits individual agency, personal choice, and regulating one’s own behavior. Britomart’s exemplary chastity cannot save Amoret—she can reach the prisoner’s room and attempt to murder the villain, but her purity cannot break the spells that hold the woman captive. In fact, when Britomart attempts to slay the offender Amoret stops her.

And fiercely forth her mortall blade she drew,
 To giue him the reward for such vile outrage dew.
 So mightily she smote him, that to ground
 He fell halfe dead; next stroke him should haue slaine,
 Had not the Lady, which by him stood bound,

Dernly vnto her called to abstaine,
 From doing him to dy. For else her paine
 Should be remedillesse, sith none but hee,
 Which wrought it, could the same recure againe.
 Therewith she stayd her hand, loth stayd to bee;
 For life she him enuyde, and long'd reuenge to see. (III.xii.33.8-34.9)

The poetics of the passage mirror Britomart's unprecedented anger; the second, fifth, sixth, eighth, and eleventh lines in the section have irregular meter. Spenser places special emphasis on the words "abstaine" and "enuyde" which are both spondees. Britomart's central virtue is supposed to be chastity, a quality marked by abstaining. Spenser stresses Amoret's request that Britomart renounce her destructive anger to show how Britomart's virginity remains inadequate in this situation. The intentional emphasis on her envy also shows how she has strayed away from righteous behavior and reactions to the situation around her.

Britomart's chastity also reveals its inadequacy through her inability to save Amoret. Only Busirane can free the woman from his torturous magic and he alone has the power to release the trapped woman. When Britomart tries to act in a manner that will free Amoret, the captive has to forcefully ask her to refrain, as Britomart's attacks on Busirane can only harm her. Chastity as a quality of sexual purity causes the individual to repel sexual temptation, but Britomart's case reveals the insufficiency of this ability. Her chaste actions give Britomart enough agency to protect herself, not other people. She can only attack Busirane because he assaulted her purity, but she is helpless to complete the final act of liberation that ultimately rescues Amoret.

Spenser shows that chastity is insufficient as the primary virtue of a protector or a ruler. Chastity does not within itself contain sufficient agency to protect other people; the chaste individual can only rescue him or herself. Thus, in the final and culminating episode of Book III, Spenser reveals his ultimate critique of Elizabeth's self-fashioning as a sovereign. She constructs her reign on the idea of her virginity and tries to manage her country through the power of her chastity, but through Britomart's example, Spenser shows how this is an inadequate basis for rule or power. Britomart cannot control and rule the situation with her chastity—she can only repel evil circumstances, not negotiate good solutions. In the same way, Spenser suggests that Elizabeth will never be a truly effective ruler by creating her image with a virtue that allows for no assertive agency.

In the House of Busirane, Spenser highlights the uncertain nature of chastity and thus Elizabeth's questionable decision to use such a motif to define her reign. Once again, however, Spenser shows how even the concept of married chastity that he established as the ideal remains inadequate not just for Redcrosse Knight, but also for Britomart. At the end of Book III, she still has not found Artegall and remains far from the marriage she seeks. Although Britomart frees Amoret and reunites her with her betrothed (in the original 1590 ending), the knight herself stays single and has not found herself a husband. Although Spenser appears to encourage chastity within matrimony, he also recognizes the shortcomings and problems potentially associated with such unions.

Ultimately, Spenser raises a different standard for Elizabeth—throughout *Faerie Queene*, Spenser uses many Marian images and ascribes several comparisons between the Virgin Mary and characters such as Britomart and Belphoebe who are explicitly described as representing Queen Elizabeth. Robin Headlam Wells lists many of these textual

descriptions and concludes by stating the increased importance of these Spenserian metaphors.

Only in the cult of the Virgin Mary do we find the full complex of powers, attributes and privileges that Spenser accords Elizabeth in *The Faerie Queene*. It is the special and unique nature of the relationship between Elizabeth and Mary which distinguishes it from the many classical parallels that Spenser draws in the poem. Whereas the analogies with pagan deities are simply metaphoric, those with the Virgin Mary are typological, having a prophetic and providential application concerning the destiny of the Queen and her nation. (101-2)

The concept of chaste fruitfulness that Mary embodies most closely describes the implicit suggestions that Spenser seems to give his queen. Spenser appears to desire a certain combination of virtuous and fruitfulness in Elizabeth. He occasionally hints that this could be found in marriage, but this is a complicated solution as matrimony combines the agencies of two people, which can be problematic, especially if one of them has allegiances to another cause. As Redcrosse Knight demonstrates, sometimes one's loyalty to country must come before personal desires. Britomart reveals, however, that remaining unmarried can be objectionable as well; when the knight sees the happiness of Amoret and Scudamor in the 1590 ending to the book, she "oft wisht like happinesse" (III.xii.46.8). So Spenser reveals a more perfect solution to the challenging problem of female monarchical power and line of succession—he recommends that Elizabeth embody the traits of the Virgin Mary as closely as is humanly possible.

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