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4/14/14

Elizabeth and the Women of *The Faerie Queene*

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2014

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

English Department

2014

Abstract

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In Book III of *The Faerie Queene* Spenser discusses chastity as the primary female virtue, since it is one exemplified by Queen Elizabeth I, and he struggles to reconcile the male-dominant social hierarchy of Renaissance England with the reality of a female monarch. The connection between Elizabeth and Book III of *The Faerie Queene* is especially relevant given that Merlin has prophesied that Britomart--the central female heroine of Book III--will marry Artegall and produce a line of heirs that culminates in Elizabeth, who ends this line due to her failure to marry and produce an heir to the throne. Throughout the text, Spenser makes references to female sexuality not merely from a morality standpoint but as a way of discussing the methods women use to harness their sexuality and use it as a weapon. Elizabeth used her alleged virginity as a way to control the men of court and maintain her authority, but the women of *The Faerie Queene* deal with their sexuality in different ways. Gloriana, who obviously represents Elizabeth due to their shared name, never physically appears in the poem and this absence is powerful because of the relationship between *The Faerie Queene* and Elizabeth. Britomart is the powerful female knight who goes on a quest to rescue Artegall, the man whom Merlin foresaw to be her husband; she represents unmarried chastity, a much more aggressive form of chastity since she does not wait for Artegall but instead searches and fights for him. Amoret represents married chastity since she has been claimed by Scudamour, yet when she and Britomart are united in the House of Busirane Spenser introduces the hermaphrodite image in the canceled ending of Book III. In 1590 Spenser published Books I-III of *The Faerie Queene* with this ending, but in 1596 he published Books I-VI with a different conclusion to Book III and the hermaphrodite image removed. The epic poem blends classical and modern styles to create something quintessentially English, something that captures a moment in history when the authority of women confronted the male-dominant hierarchy upon which the stability of Renaissance society depended.

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Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge my adviser, Dr. Rusche, for helping me during every step of the process; this thesis would not have happened without you.

I also want to thank my friends, Adam Cantor and Abby Weisberger, for being a constant source of encouragement and support.

Table of Contents

Introduction: Page 1

The Elusive Gloriana and the Issue of Women's Rule: Page 8

The Aggressive Britomart and the Issue of Women's Unmarried Chastity: Page 16

The Passive Amoret and the Issue of Women's Unmarried Chastity: Page 33

Conclusion: Page 50

Works Cited: Page 55

I. Introduction

The Faerie Queene blends the traditional with the early modern in order to become a truly English epic poem. It uses the classic romance style, the epic structure, and the popular legend of Arthur all combined to discuss contemporary issues of Elizabethan England. At the heart of the poem lie issues of feminism since Spenser must flatter Elizabeth by lauding her virtues, yet he must keep the hierarchical structure of Renaissance England intact by showing how women are allegedly inferior to men, with the exception of Elizabeth. By showing that Elizabeth is exceptional among women and that God has selected her to rule England, Spenser can accomplish these things. As a man who aspired to be Elizabeth's court poet but never achieved that goal due to incompatible political views, Spenser found himself in a position in which he must necessarily speak well of both his queen and her court, but this superficial layer of flattery only serves to obscure his real meaning in the poem. Furthermore, he has a very apparent need to reconcile the fact of Elizabeth's authority as a female monarch with the hierarchy upon which Renaissance England stood. As part of his flattery of Elizabeth Spenser writes at length about the virtues she embodies, yet in doing so he also writes about the inadequacies of women in order to maintain the hierarchical structure necessary for the prosperity of English society and specifically of Elizabeth's court.

Any flattery of Elizabeth in the poem could be read as mere justification of her rule as a female monarch, and any criticism of her focuses mainly on how she did not marry or produce an heir. This is an obvious failure as a woman since that is a woman's primary purpose in Renaissance England, but more importantly it is a failure as a ruler since she ended the Tudor line, which had been a time of relative peace and prosperity for England. The role of the poem as the great English epic therefore takes on something of a mournful tone since it pays homage to

the golden age of England that Spenser presumes will end with Elizabeth since she has failed to marry and produce an heir who will continue the Tudor line. Elizabeth's reign marks the beginning of the end for of England's most prosperous age not only because of her failure to continue the line of the Tudors but also because she has changed the way the courtly hierarchy works. Though Elizabeth managed to keep the men at court beneath her by using her alleged virginity as a weapon. Like a nun, she entered into a symbolic marriage with England as her husband, which allowed her to receive "the adulation of her subjects as the universal object of a Petrarchan religion of love, one that pervaded ballads, pageants, and dramatic entertainments" ("Queen Elizabeth I: Representations of the Queen" 30). There was something of a renewal of classical culture under Elizabeth so that these men at court could write poetry to honor their virgin queen, but Spenser took that to a whole new level with *The Faerie Queene*.

It had not escaped Spenser's notice that Elizabeth used her virginity as a weapon, and so he presents a wide spectrum of women in *The Faerie Queene* that also use their chastity in various ways. In doing this, Spenser can explore the main virtue of the Renaissance woman—chastity—that is applicable both to Elizabeth and to the everywoman of Elizabethan England. The importance of Elizabeth's virginity had at this point transcended politics and leaked into literary circles. Elizabeth's "maidenly chastity was therefore interpreted not as a sign of political or social deficiency, but rather as a paradoxical symbol of the power of a woman who governed despite...patriarchy and masculine supremacy, and who remained unwed at a time when official sermons favored marriage and attacked the monastic vow of celibacy and the veneration of the Virgin Mary" ("Queen Elizabeth I: Representations of the Queen" 30). Elizabeth's virgin status bore unpleasant connotations of Catholicism at a time when Catholicism stood counter to the stability and prosperity England had enjoyed under its Protestant rulers. Placing the Virgin

Queen on a pedestal was reminiscent of idolizing the Virgin Mary, and so the Protestant English needed to come to terms with her virginity in a way that was neither treason nor Catholic idolatry. Therefore Spenser rather pointedly uses the term “chastity” to describe the female characters in the poem rather than “virginity,” which is one of the ways in which he sets his female characters apart from Elizabeth while simultaneously presenting them as representations of her. The allegory of *The Faerie Queene* operates on many different levels, yet for the purposes of this paper I am primarily looking at the historical layer; this allegory is especially important in Book III, which is the focus of this paper since it discusses chastity and feminine virtues that pertain to portrayals of Elizabeth.

The most obvious female character to represent Elizabeth in *The Faerie Queene* has to be Britomart, the virgin female warrior who displays a more aggressive version of chastity as she goes into the faery world to find Artegall, the man Merlin foresaw to be her husband. She gets her power from her chastity, and it is what enables her to be a female warrior of considerable military prowess. She is so pure of heart that she fears “no euill thing...[since] no euill thing she ment” (III.i.19.9). The important difference here between Elizabeth and Britomart is the distinction between virginity and chastity: Britomart’s is a temporary virginity, one that still enables her to go in search of Artegall, marry him, and bear a child who will begin a line of prosperous monarchs culminating in Elizabeth. Britomart represents unmarried chastity, chastity that is still actively searching for a mate. Elizabeth’s virginity is therefore implied to be more passive, since by the time *The Faerie Queene* was first published in 1590 she has stopped actually searching for a husband and makes her suitors come to her with their courtships purely as a strategy with which to control the men of court. This is mostly because of her status as the

Queen of England, yet if Britomart is Elizabeth's literary ancestor according to Merlin's prophecy, then Elizabeth has failed to carry on Britomart's legacy.

Like Elizabeth, Britomart is an unlikely combination of the feminine and the masculine wrapped up in a title that focuses on her sexuality. Throughout *The Faerie Queene* chastity is considered an exclusively feminine characteristic, and yet Britomart fights with a magically potent spear that creates a phallic symbol and undermines any notion that Britomart's power might come from her femininity. She is a challenging protagonist for a Renaissance audience because of her partial masculinity, since at this time women were still expected to conform to purely feminine roles and remain within the household, with the exception of Elizabeth. She is still challenging to a modern audience because her power comes from her chastity and a phallic symbol rather than from anything that could be construed as female power. However, her chastity is not equal to the repression of her sexuality; rather, searching for Artegall as a female warrior is Britomart's way of expressing her unmarried chastity. She is still an active, self-possessed woman, just in a way that is non-traditional for both a Renaissance audience and a modern one.

Another woman who represents another facet of Elizabeth's character, and another side of chastity, is Amoret. She represents the virtue of married love and remaining true to one's spouse despite separation. Amoret is kidnapped the night of her wedding before she can consummate her marriage to Scudamour, and when she is trapped in the house of Busirane it is Britomart who comes to her rescue. Scudamour cannot pass through the flames Busirane has made and is forced to retreat, "all scorcht and pitifully brent" (III.xi.26.9). Any discussion of Amoret also brings up the issue of the canceled ending to Book III. When *The Faerie Queene* was first published in 1590 it contained only the first three books of the poem, and Spenser had

written an ending that included the image of a hermaphrodite when Britomart comes to rescue Amoret. When the second edition of *The Faerie Queene* was published in 1596 it included all six books of the poem, and Spenser had re-written the ending of Book III to exclude this image of the hermaphrodite. This image is important due to the fact that a union between Britomart and Amoret would also serve as the union between married and unmarried chastity, creating one pure, perfect woman.

Upon being rescued by Britomart, Amoret's gratitude is so great that the female warrior replaces Scudamour in Amoret's affections, at least temporarily. Scudamour had won Amoret from Venus by proving himself to be the most worthy of her suitors. Winning Amoret therefore had more to do with sport than love for Scudamour, and he treats her as a literal trophy rather than a wife and partner. In contrast, when Britomart and Amoret are united in the house of Busirane the traditional gender roles morph into something resembling a perfectly balanced individual. They establish a relationship with Britomart as Amoret's hero and Amoret as Britomart's damsel in distress. Furthermore, if one considers these female characters as representing Elizabeth in some way, the union of married and unmarried chastity would be particularly powerful to an Elizabethan reader. What Britomart can accomplish alone is impressive; yet it is only when she is joined to married chastity that she reaches her full potential. This way, Spenser can further indicate his belief that Elizabeth should have married and borne an heir to the throne to continue the Tudor line without being so obvious as to insult her honor.

The most obvious representative of Elizabeth in *The Faerie Queene* is obviously Gloriana, since sometimes Elizabeth was also called by that name; however, the queen of the faerie realm operates as more of a plot device than an actual character since she never physically appears in the poem. Since Spenser uses *The Faerie Queene* to reconcile the reality of a female

authority with the male-dominant hierarchy of Elizabethan society, the absence of Gloriana from the poem is very telling. He cannot thoroughly describe Elizabeth as a woman or as a queen because he cannot come up with a way for the two ideas to peacefully coexist. When we first hear of Gloriana, it is when Arthur tells us “that he has been brought to faeryland to seek Gloriana and to save Una” (Cunningham 102). She exists more to set the male lead on his path than as an individual character, and thus she is subjugated to the more important male story line. However, there are other female characters who outshine Arthur and relegate him to the background. The only mentions of Gloriana that occur throughout the poem are in reference to her crown, throne, or royalty rather than of her as a person; as such, we can presume that Spenser’s interest in Elizabeth is based on her royal status rather than in her character. Elizabeth as a monarch is of much greater interest to a male Renaissance poet than Elizabeth as a woman, after all, and the reality of a female ruler is difficult for a male-dominant hierarchy to swallow.

In this paper, I seek to analyze the ways in which Spenser uses female characters to comment on issues of feminism, particularly how a male dominant society copes with a female monarch who has been made queen by divine right. Obviously her virgin status is very frustrating to Spenser because she has failed as a woman and as a ruler by not producing an heir to the throne, but some of this frustration may also come as the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation. Attitudes about marriage and female sexuality were slowly changing, and this is captured in *The Faerie Queene*: especially in Book III, the book of the poem that focuses on chastity. Though she fought for a certain degree of stability and peace, Elizabeth’s reign was a time of overwhelming change for England, since she undermined the hierarchy of the society she ruled simply by being a woman, yet to question her capability as a female monarch would have been treason. In *The Faerie Queene*, all of these historical issues come to a head, and I hope to

sort them out and reveal the ways in which early modern poetry deals with feminist issues. In this epic poem Spenser reverts to the classic romance style to depict the beginning of this golden age of England that Elizabeth has ended by failing to marry and produce an heir.

II. The Elusive Gloriana and the Issue of Women's Rule

One of the central figures of *The Faerie Queene* never physically appears in the poem, yet she still has a very distinct presence. Spenser writes the poem about Elizabeth and about women in general, and uses the other female figures of the poem to create an image of Gloriana in lieu of the lady herself, yet there are still significant mentions of Gloriana throughout the poem. Spenser attempts to describe Elizabeth and attach the proper labels to her partly in an effort to pay homage but also to reconcile the issue of women's rule. The vocabulary and the attitude of aristocratic men beneath a female monarch had not yet been established, and so this poem at its core deals with issues of feminism and authority. Arguably, one way Spenser minimizes the authority of Elizabeth is to maintain her absence from the poem, though his preoccupation with the issue of women shows through since most books of the poem have central female figures that operate as a kind of parallel to Elizabeth. Each woman represents a particular aspect of Elizabeth's character, yet the mentions of Gloriana as a character are just as revealing as metaphoric references through the other female characters. These mentions of Gloriana typically occur in reference to a quest or goal or in relation to Arthur, so even when Gloriana appears it is only as a background figure used in Arthur's larger story in the foreground.

One of the principal functions of the text is Spenser's attempt to adequately depict Elizabeth's character in a way that is both flattering and accepting of her authority, yet also keeps the average Elizabethan woman in her place. The ultimate quest of *The Faerie Queene* is "the poet's unsuccessful effort to nominate Elizabeth" (Bellamy 1). When we accept that this was Spenser's purpose, it provides a lot of explanation for Spenser's highly calculated, self-conscious writing style. It also makes the poem even more complex than it appears at first

glance; “his poetry must work to achieve the moment of perfect synchronization of poetic voice and image, the quasi-mystical moment when Speaking and Being merge” (Bellamy 1-2). The pressure of being Elizabeth’s poet and to represent Elizabeth’s court is intensified when one considers the role of the poet and how a poet under these circumstances writes specifically for the men of court. The poem discusses many different aspects of Elizabeth’s court since her role as a female monarch and as a woman are deeply entangled in the politics of court, and so the “tracing of Spenser’s self-conscious professionalism remains incomplete unless we consider, as the poet himself must have, the paranomasic quality of the very word ‘vocation,’ suggesting as it does an important link to the syntactical case ‘vocative’ and thus a further challenge to Spenser’s shaping of his poetic craft” (Bellamy 2). In attempting to describe Elizabeth, Spenser must also address the issues of courtly life, feminism, female authority, and the changing values of English society as it made the transition from Catholicism to Protestantism.

The figure of Gloriana, therefore, necessarily holds a very complex role within the plot and themes of *The Faerie Queene*. Arthur’s search for Gloriana creates the structure of the poem, but “we may surely go one step further and claim Spenser’s parallel, and equally futile, search for Elizabeth as the epic’s ultimate quest” (Bellamy 3). Indeed, the poem’s very title indicates some search for the right label with which to nominate Elizabeth. What with Gloriana’s absence from the poem, we can conclude that Elizabeth’s real significance, at least to Spenser and courtiers like him, lies in her title rather than in her physical presence as a person. The title of the poem and the absence of Gloriana as a character serves as a reminder that “not only is Elizabeth in some sense not found, but she is also quite simply not named anywhere in the epic” (Bellamy 3-4). Naming Elizabeth becomes much more complicated as the poem goes on; although the structure of the poem begins with Arthur’s search for Gloriana, it then unravels into a broadly

sweeping series of side characters and adventures that have little or nothing to do with Gloriana as a character. Throughout the poem, she is named by all kinds of titles and descriptive phrases that are “mere approximations of the absolute vocative that stop short of achieving a metaphoric totalization by which the name could be the thing itself, Elizabeth” (Bellamy 5). The effort to name Elizabeth therefore cannot properly succeed without an appearance by Gloriana herself, and so try as he might Spenser cannot accomplish the purpose of a poet.

In dedicating his poem to Elizabeth, Spenser set himself up for the politicization of his themes and characters. There is no way to address the issue of a female monarch and the transition from Catholicism to Protestantism without getting entrenched in the politics of the time. Readers of Spenser’s time “had recognized the thorough identification of Protestant ideals with monarchist principles that is implicit in Spenser’s politicization of romance in *The Faerie Queene*” (“The Faerie Leveller” 298). Given that the structure of the poem endeavors to discuss Protestant morals one at a time, that indicates either a deep-rooted monarchist zeal or a desire to pander to Elizabeth and her court. Still, although “Spenser’s moralism and Protestant zeal made him a favorite of seventeenth-century Puritans, he was anything but a nonconformist” (“The Faerie Leveller” 298). Throughout the poem Spenser has a tendency to choose the safer option, whether it is to flatter Elizabeth or discuss the importance of womanly virtues she exemplifies. However, he hides some criticisms of women and even of Elizabeth herself beneath these superficial compliments of her character.

Our main introduction to Gloriana as a character is as a method to introduce the main plot of the poem. From the get-go, Gloriana has existed to create the setting or the plot of *The Faerie Queene* rather than to be an independent presence in the poem. Arthur tells us “that he has been brought to faeryland to seek Gloriana and to save Una” (Cunningham 102). The whole higher

purpose of the poem is to find Gloriana, yet she is never officially found. *The Faerie Queene* is supposed to be unfinished, yet it is quite clear that Spenser has already said everything that he needs to say. In claiming the status of the poem as incomplete, Spenser refuses to admit defeat in his aim to define Elizabeth in terms that are acceptable to a Renaissance poet. Arthur's tale seems intentionally bland, however. As a character he is "a most important allegorical figure," but his tale "does little to contribute to meaning" (Cunningham 102). It is little more than a starting point for the larger issues of the poem, a way for Spenser to set up a platform on which to pontificate about the virtues of women. Although by itself "the story is dull and formulaic, it serves as a contrast to the other tales" and Arthur's main purpose is to "tell the story of a perfectly virtuous knight" (Cunningham 102). He shows us the merits of male virtue through Arthur, but that is such a small part of his overall goal because the majority of the poem is dedicated to the feminine virtues, and so this relationship between Arthur and Gloriana appears to be focused far more on the female virtues of Gloriana because the women in the poem personify them.

Arthur and Gloriana are necessary tools for Spenser to set up a discussion about Elizabeth, female authority, and feminine virtues. Spenser also uses a very classic, traditional writing style in his discussion of these topics yet does them in a more modern way. Arthur's story, in particular, is a history and "a romance without the usual tragic elements of the other stories and with less than its share of allegorical import" (Cunningham 102). The first book of *The Faerie Queene* sounds as if it is attempting to set the stage for larger issues of searching for Gloriana and naming Elizabeth, but it then splits up into different stories featuring different women who stand in the place of Elizabeth. These individual stories "serve as a formulaic review of the larger story, but a new piece is always added to the puzzle" (Cunningham 102). Gloriana

herself only exists as a method for Spenser to begin the discussion of female authority and virtue. In this sense she is a mere mechanism for Spenser's larger goal of dissecting and analyzing the issues behind the rule of a female monarch, rather than truly a primary focus of the poem named for her.

Most references to and discussions about Gloriana center on her crown rather than on her as a person, which points to Spenser's preoccupation with female authority. Though Spenser tries to excuse this by equating her royalty with nobility and chastity, the truth is that the connection between these figures has more to do with flattering Elizabeth than the relationship between royalty and feminine virtues. Her very name, Gloriana, is used to signify her grandeur, yet "the essence of that royal grandeur remains problematic; she is named because she is fair and noble and surpassing in grace and learning" (Woods 148). These are all characteristics that it is nice for a woman to have, particularly if this woman is a ruler; however, these are not exactly the virtues of rule so much as they are the virtues of any aristocratic lady of court. Though the name seemingly heralds a great monarch as being glorious, it could actually be seen as a way of undermining the authority of a lady monarch. This topic is clearly central to *The Faerie Queene* since references to Gloriana "are primarily to her royal authority" and set her crown and royalty at the "moral and political center of Faery Land" (Woods 148). What really matters to her situation in the realm of faerie is her "kingdomes seat *Cleopolis*" (I.vii.46.7). In writing an English romance Spenser continues this notion of Elizabeth as a courtly lady, full of feminine graces, rather than attempting to establish a picture of her as a capable ruler.

This poem evidently written to honor Elizabeth is a far cry from the usual portrait of a ruling monarch. It is, however, a portrait of Elizabeth, and in Arthur's pursuit of her "Spenser has confronted the problem of female rule in an ingenious, if not entirely original manner"

(Woods 149). All of these female characters who compositely represent her create an image that is more womanly, not less. He pays homage to Elizabeth the woman rather than Elizabeth the ruler, and writes at length about the glory of her feminine virtues, since “womanly virtues were idealized and praised in the courtly tradition” (Woods 149). However, the reality of a female monarch had not confronted male sensitivities in a powerful and lasting way until Elizabeth ruled as the virgin queen, and so the notion of honoring Elizabeth as a ruler would have been difficult to achieve without resorting to the type of language typically reserved for kings. As such, Elizabeth “is able to rule because she embodies the courtly Platonic tradition of the beautiful and virtuous lady” (Woods 149). Her nature did not change when she made the transition from princess to queen, and because of the import of marrying and conceiving an heir it was also not appropriate to desexualize her or put her on the same pedestal as the Madonna; this would have been doubly inappropriate since doing so would have harkened back to Catholicism. For a reigning queen, “the virtues of the body politic are therefore an extension and transformation of the virtues of the body natural” (Woods 149). Discussion of chastity and beauty in *The Faerie Queene* are therefore the best Spenser can reasonably do in attempting to paint a portrait of his queen as a woman and as a ruler.

Since Spenser had an apparent obsession with power, he would have had all the more reason to flatter both Elizabeth and her court, but this only makes it all the more interesting when he lapses in his flattery to display any degree of ambivalence or unease. For instance, in his letter to Raleigh Spenser identifies Belphoebe, not Britomart, as the mirror in which he will reflect his queen’s glory and chastity. Britomart is the hero of Book III, but “to present Britomart as representative of the queen and her chastity is awkward, since Britomart, unlike Elizabeth, is only a temporary virgin; Britomart is destined to marry, and in history her importance will lie not

so much in her martial prowess” as in the offspring she provides through her union with Artegall (Villeponteaux 54). When Books I-III were published in 1590 it was far too late to urge the queen to marry, but it was not too late to insult her by suggesting that she should have married and borne an heir, something Britomart has the potential to do which Elizabeth does not. Perhaps even more dangerously, comparing Britomart and Elizabeth too closely might raise questions about “the way authority is constituted and the way that a woman on the throne threatens to unveil authority as constructed rather than innate” (Villeponteaux 54). In keeping with her role as the embodiment of chastity, Elizabeth’s special virtue, Britomart initially exemplifies complete authority, as seen when she easily unseats Sir Guyon at the start of Book III. Her potent magic spear creates a powerful phallic symbol that simultaneously harkens back to her female chastity, yet she is wounded by Malecasta’s knights by the end of the first canto. No other knight in *The Faerie Queene* suffers such a rapid downfall, so this raises important questions about the nature of power.

Spenser links Britomart back to Elizabeth in a more tentative way when he draws natural comparisons between his virgin warrior and his glorious queen Gloriana. In justifying women’s rule, he argues that only specific women who have been approved by God are fit to rule. Most women are corrupted by power: “Lucifera, Malecasta, and especially Radigund are unfit and unsanctioned rulers, but Mercilla, Britomart, and Gloriana are virtuous and anointed exceptions” (Villeponteaux 56). This places Elizabeth in the category of women who have been especially nominated by God to be rulers, which naturally supports and flatters the queen, yet it also brings back comparisons to Britomart that do not necessarily put Elizabeth in a positive light. Spenser cannot universally condone the rule of women since that would weaken the whole hierarchical structure upon which the Renaissance society stood. As such, he describes “a Golden Age in

which women did accomplish great things in the traditionally masculine arena, but when he readily accepts the fact that those days are gone and that a new order reigns, he in effect comes to the...conclusion [that] women are the weaker sex now; therefore (it is implied) Elizabeth's rule is exceptional" (Villeponteaux 56). Glorifying Elizabeth, then, might have less to do with flattering her and more to do with providing an adequate explanation for women's rule that a male poet could tolerate.

Gloriana's absence from *The Faerie Queene* is an even more significant symbol than the character herself, since Spenser uses the whole poem as a way to come to terms with the reality of a female monarch, however unsuccessful he may be. The issue of female authority can be justified to the male Renaissance poet's mind if he is convinced that Elizabeth is exceptional in some way, that her power comes from God rather than from her nature, since women were considered to be inherently inferior both in the mindset of Renaissance England but also within the context of *The Faerie Queene*. Nearly all mentions of Gloriana are merely in reference to her royalty, her crown, or her throne rather than to her as a woman. In fact, if Arthur makes any mention of Gloriana at all it is mostly to explain his quest to find her, to justify the purpose of this story or indeed of the poem as a whole. Gloriana is also a much safer representative of Elizabeth in the poem than any other female character in the poem, especially Britomart, though one cannot help but make certain comparisons between the two characters that were certainly created intentionally by Spenser. Any flattery of Elizabeth in the poem could be read as mere justification of her rule as a female monarch, and any criticism of her focuses mainly on how she did not marry or produce an heir. This is an obvious failure as a woman since that is a woman's primary purpose in Renaissance England, but more importantly it is a failure as a ruler since she ended the Tudor line, which had been a time of relative peace and prosperity for England.

III. The Aggressive Britomart and the Issue of Women's Unmarried Chastity

Spenser is hardly the first epic poet to use the medieval romance structure to preach morality, yet he adapts this format to create an early modern text. *The Faerie Queene* is deeply entrenched in expected Renaissance male thought yet also open to new possibilities, most of which had first been introduced by Queen Elizabeth. Prior to Elizabeth, the primary option for a female warrior would have been a figure like Joan of Arc: a tragic hero or a wicked blasphemer depending on the perspective, and ultimately burned at the stake for her trouble. Spenser, however, has the freedom to create the character of Britomart: a female warrior of “constant mind” (III.i.19.1) who pursues her predestined lover at a “perlous Pace” (III.i.19.7). Spenser lauds Britomart for her courage, as she does not sit in an ivory tower awaiting her lover but instead goes on a brave quest to find him; yet even Britomart has limitations in keeping with the standards for female behavior in the Renaissance. Chastity is Britomart’s defining trait, a quality which is much more aggressive than mere abstinence since she channels her energy into her skills as a warrior. Although chastity is valued by everyone in the Renaissance, Spenser presents it as an exclusively female quality that can, nevertheless, lead to a woman’s triumph should she harness her sexual energy into a virtuous quest such as the search for a man. The differences between Britomart’s chastity and Elizabeth’s virginity show Spenser’s apparent belief in the untapped potential in women, but also in their responsibility to maintain certain womanly duties such as marriage and childrearing.

The importance of virtue in women has been overstated in many medieval romances, yet Britomart twists this notion to suit her own needs in Book III of *The Faerie Queene*. It is her own purity that allows her to become such a great warrior, since she is pure of heart and deed. Her purity enables remarkable deeds, yet some point out that her power is located “outside herself in

a magical spear, sword, or god-imbued talents” whereas the male hero’s power typically “comes from inside himself and whatever magical help he receives in his quest enhances his already remarkable strength” (McCall 5). The distinction McCall makes here between the male hero’s intrinsic power and Britomart’s use of external power is valid, but only to a certain extent. Britomart lacks the brute strength of a male hero, perhaps, and she does carry the magical yet phallic sphere, but she has the same pure heart expected of all knights according to the code of chivalry. This is where her power truly lies, and her skill as a warrior derives from her goodness of heart rather than from years of physical training like a typical, male knight.

However, should Britomart reach her full and untamed potential, she would become the corrupted version of herself—Radigund—and so it is essential for Britomart to destroy Radigund in order to complete her quest. Merlin prophesied that Britomart would bear a long line of monarchs that would end in Elizabeth, and so Britomart’s real mission is a husband quest that will end in marriage, should she succeed in maintaining her chastity and virtue. Radigund represents uncontrolled femininity, the kind of femininity that has the power to take over the lives of men such as Artegall. Radigund, and likewise Britomart’s own femininity, must be “defeated and controlled in the completion of the husband quest” (McCall 16). Such a fragile balance between chastity and femininity was believed to be inherent in every woman, even Elizabeth, so it was crucial that Britomart defeat Radigund with her self-control. By imbuing her offspring—including Elizabeth—with the ability to limit their femininity, Britomart also gave them the ability to become good monarchs. Thus, the story of Britomart serves to simultaneously flatter Elizabeth and offer her a cautionary tale: a woman is a better authority figure if she balances her femininity with more masculine behaviors.

Whether it comes from her physical strength or her magical spear, Britomart's ability as a warrior equals that of Guyon; Spenser immediately sets the two as equals, abolishing any inherent inferiority on Britomart's behalf as a woman. When Britomart and Guyon first meet they are established as equals in prowess, since Britomart unseats him and then "ran a pace / Vnto his reskew" (III.i.22.7-8). This moment sets up "the female's greater power: this opposition between Temperance and Chastity not only ranks their respective virtues, it also ranks, at least for the moment, female and male sexual values in a hierarchy" (Quilligan 186). In fact, Spenser admonishes his fellow men for refusing to credit women with "prowesse martial" (III.ii.1.6) or allowing women to take part in "armes and chevalrie" (III.ii.1.4). This seems to overturn many readings of *The Faerie Queene* that see Spenser as strictly upholding patriarchal values and writing about the need for subservient women. Far from being a cutting-edge, progressive thinker, however, Spenser uses ancient examples to prove that women such as Britomart, and Elizabeth by extension, can be capable rulers. He observes that the societal inferiority of women is a fairly recent invention and that "by record of antique times I find, / That women wont in warres to beare most sway" (III.ii.2.1-2). At most, Spenser is challenging the norms of Renaissance society by professing the merits of women; at least, he is acknowledging the possibility that women have greater potential than they are allowed to realize.

Spenser does not go so far as to threaten the patriarchal structure of Elizabethan society, but he does use the poetic tradition to legitimize the rule of a woman through his role-defying character, Britomart. Since he sets Britomart "at the core of contradictory statements about women's rule," he is "genuinely subversive of patriarchal assumption" (Woods 150). Spenser has obviously been inspired by Queen Elizabeth, and he certainly does attack several popularly held patriarchal assumptions, but he does not rock the boat enough to put all women on an equal

playing field to that of men: only exceptional women such as Queen Elizabeth and, of course, Britomart. Yet it is not only Britomart's chastity that makes her special; Spenser, like most poets of romance, makes a special note of Britomart's physical beauty. He remarks that "Such was the beautie and the shining ray, / With which faire Britomart gaue light vnto the day" (III.i.43.8-9). Not only is Britomart a beautiful woman, but she also contains some of the traditional female values that are not necessarily in keeping with her role as a warrior, such as "amiable grace" (III.i.46.1). Still, it is Elizabeth's royal status that even enables such a character, since "the tradition of the woman warrior acquired particular contemporaneous relevance from her existence" (Jackson 105). Spenser challenges the roles of Renaissance women in *The Faerie Queene*, but only to a certain degree. Spenser exposes the untapped potential of exceptional women, women who possess strength and courage in addition to grace and beauty, but does not make wide generalizations about how the standard roles of women should be broken.

In fact, with the perversity of Artegall's captivity under Radigund, Spenser seems to condemn women's rule; or at least, to caution against its more extreme forms. Artegall and Radigund had agreed that whoever lost their battle would be subject to the will of the other. When Artegall loses, Radigund strips him of his masculine clothes and forces him into the role of a woman, which is the most degrading position in which she could possibly have put him. Spenser remarks that "such is the crueltie of womenkynd" (V.v.25.1) in a rather offhand way, when in fact he has just pointed out the ways in which a woman's rule is unnatural—depraved, even—and at any rate should be avoided at all costs. Still, Spenser is Elizabeth's poet and cannot close the subject without backtracking a little and offering a contradictory example: "But vertuous women wisely understand, / That they were borne to base humilitie, / Unlesse the heavens them lift to lawfull soveraintie" (V.v.25.7-9). Spenser therefore manages to sneak in

another compliment of the queen's virtue, and hopefully curry favor with her in doing so; however, this exception is "very much an aside buried beneath the weight of the episode's moral" (Woods 145). Spenser makes distinctions between good and bad rule, but not in a general way: he specifically divides the ability to rule into feminine virtues and weaknesses, personified by Britomart and her perverse alter-ego Radigund. Doctrines of male supremacy are so entrenched in Renaissance society that male rulers are the norm and there is thus no need to analyze them by their "maleness." Still, by dedicating such time and effort to this discussion of the merits of women, even if they are the merits only of exceptional women, Spenser "creates a vision of female power that is well beyond usual for his time" (Woods 146). To even open up the possibility that women have untapped potential is decent progress for a courtly poet like Spenser regardless of the conclusions he draws, or appears to draw.

Britomart has long been considered to be exceptional because she personifies chastity in a way that is apparently intended to encourage heteronormative marriage as the ideal variant of sexuality, but more recently feminist and queer readings have sprung up as an alternative to more traditional criticism. She is not classically feminine, and indeed the androgynous Britomart is representative of "an original heroic and free womanhood entitled to rule and adjusted to forceful action" (Davies 34). Critics have not always seen it this way, and until quite recently, critics took it for granted that Spenser "embraced patriarchal values and condoned only married, reproductive sex" (Sanchez 497). However, more critics have recently been examining Britomart's fluid sexuality as a possible exception to the endorsement of heteronormative marriage. Although Malecasta represents homosexual desires and is presented as evilly unchaste, a woman who "bent / Her crafty engins to her close intent" (III.i.57.4-5), upon realizing that Britomart is a woman her would-be seduction dissolves. Britomart is an object of desire to both

men and women, yet she takes a much more active role than that of an object, and this is what separates her energetic chastity from mere abstinence. For this reason, many feminist and queer readings of *The Faerie Queene* have proposed that Spenser “offers female homoeroticism as an alternative to the violence and moralism of patriarchy, and many have focused on Britomart, Spenser’s female Knight of Chastity, as an emblem of female strength and autonomy” (Sanchez 497). An important distinction must be made here, however, that when comparing homoerotic and heteronormative desires, that good and healthy sex is devoid of lust and power. Rape in *The Faerie Queene*, or in any context, cannot be fairly compared to any loving encounter.

While most sexual encounters of *The Faerie Queene* are steeped in patriarchy, that is only one angle that must be considered to fully understand the role of women in the poem. Patriarchy is not the be-all and end-all of femininity in *The Faerie Queene*; it is merely a color that tinges the portrayals of women in the poem. When we “treat patriarchy as a monolithic system that structurally preempts and co-opts any seeming deviations from its norms, we miss the power of perversity to expose the insufficiency, indeed the dishonesty, of past and present ideals of good and healthy sex” (Sanchez 494). Rather than pitying female characters put in positions that modern female readers find undignified or disempowering, it is important to look for discrepancies in patriarchal norms so that we can understand the range and fluctuations within this frame of mind. Particularly in Book III, where Spenser addresses the virtue of chastity at length, the concept of heterosexual, married love is given precedence over all other kinds of love. This virtue is especially important for women, though this may be more an excuse to lavish Queen Elizabeth with praise for her virgin status than with any real belief on Spenser’s part that men and women should be held to different standards regarding sexuality. However, both feminist and queer theory tend to agree that power and lust are fundamentally male

qualities, and therefore relationships involving these traits are going to endanger women “regardless of the genders of the partners involved” (Sanchez 495). Therefore, although Britomart’s encounter with Malecasta involved no men, Britomart was still threatened by masculinity and so she fled. The concept of analyzing relationships based on their genders instead of their sexes is a helpful way of disentangling the descriptions of sexuality Spenser makes throughout the poem, and becomes increasingly important when assessing Britomart’s relationship with Artegall.

Rape can only take away from the soul, and so Britomart’s role as a warrior serves two purposes: to find Artegall comes first, but she also must maintain her chastity. Britomart was born with her virtue, and so a considerable element of her quest is to hold onto that virtue and thereby keep her power. This is no small mission since Britomart’s balance between chastity and desire is as fragile in her as it is in anyone, since Britomart is a mortal woman and no more divine than anyone else, apart from the fact that she is on a mission to display godly virtues. Britomart’s chastity “could not withstand an outside force,” (Carvajal 71), and so it is especially important that Britomart display prowess as a knight. Should she fail in her chastity, her entire quest would fall in turn. An impure woman may reclaim part of her good name, but not all; as such, Britomart’s behavior “is designed to protect her good name and her physical body from diminishment” (Carvajal 71). She is entirely dependent upon her skill with a weapon. As the women of *The Faerie Queene* demonstrate, women’s typical lack of weapons and strength leaves them “susceptible to kidnapping, torture, sexual aggression, and various other ways of losing their good name and/or purity” (Carvajal 72). Britomart, as a warrior, is never completely defenseless except in the first canto of Book III when she undresses for bed and is temporarily accosted by Malecasta, who believed her to be a man until that moment.

Britomart is neither a blushing virgin nor a sexually crazed maniac, and this more moderate version of female sexuality is evidence of Spenser's support of Protestantism in Elizabethan England. Traditionally in England before the Protestant Reformation, a woman's virginity was held at a premium. The emphasis of sexual purity was so strong that "women, supposed to be celibate, were admonished from seeking sex, not only before they were married, but also afterwards, for an avid sexual appetite—especially in a woman—was an indication of vice" (Carvajal 68). Britomart fits into neither category. She maintains her chastity, but she also goes actively in search of marriage and sexual encounters with her predetermined husband so that she might begin a long line of heroic English monarchs as Merlin had foretold that she would. Before the Protestant Reformation, "women were to remain virginal for as long as possible, only stepping forward sexually if marriage required them to do so" (Carvajal 69). Whether this shift in women's sexuality actually occurred after the Protestant Reformation, or if it simply appeared to occur to the Protestant Spenser, the existence of a female warrior on a sexual quest is still noteworthy. The emphasis on virginity began to wane during this time, and the focus on a woman's virginity only held until she was married; through Britomart Spenser offers chastity as a more Protestant alternative, one perhaps more palatable to Elizabeth as the head of the Church of England.

Further evidence of Spenser's awareness of his audience comes from a potential explanation for Britomart's repulsion and rejection of Malecasta's advances: it is another illicit variation of sexuality that could corrupt the much-valued chastity in our lady knight. When Britomart foils Malecasta's attempted seduction, she establishes "incest as the antithesis of her sexual purity" (Lenhof 216). A Renaissance audience would remember King Henry VIII's accusations that Anne Boleyn committed incest with her brother. Since *The Faerie Queene*

presents Britomart as Elizabeth's royal ancestor, "her opposition to the illicit sexuality of Malecasta...potentially expunges the embarrassing reputation of Anne Boleyn, allowing Elizabeth a supremely virtuous mother instead of an allegedly incestuous one" (Lenhof 216-217). Spenser vilifies Malecasta for her incestuous intentions but also for being unchaste, which helps him to place Britomart on a pedestal above Malecasta and any other women who do not practice perfect chastity. Any sexual transgressions are thereby removed from Elizabeth's ancestry, making her own status as the Virgin Queen all the more pure and justified.

Though Spenser clearly identifies incest as an immoral variant of sexuality, one of which Britomart cannot partake, Britomart herself is hesitant to distance herself from incest or any other form of perverse sexuality. The maid Glauce talks about such incestuous women as Myrrha and Biblis, claiming that Britomart is entirely separate from them due to her chastity. She says that these women, "how euer shamefull and vnkind, / Yet did possesse their horrible intent: / Short end of sorrowes they thereby did find; / So was their fortune good, though wicked were their mind" (III.ii.43.6-9). The women fulfilled their incestuous desires, and although Glauce condemns them for their wickedness, Britomart cannot help but feel envious of them for having accomplished what she has not yet: the fulfillment of desire. Britomart is still on her quest to marry and procreate with Artegall, but Myrrha and Biblis freely act upon their wicked desires. Britomart wishes that "she could realize her desire as they were able to realize theirs," and so "Britomart allies herself with Ovid's incestuous women" (Lenhof 220). Though Spenser places Britomart high above these women due to her virtuous chastity, Britomart does not give herself airs about her purity. Soon after saying this, though, Britomart must once again dispel temptation, and Glauce's efforts to stifle Britomart's passion also hint at incest. She brings up Britomart's father, saying Britomart should control her urges because should her father "of his

dearest daughters hard misfortune heare” (III.iii.5.9), he might “turne to foule repriefe, / And sore reproch” (III.ii.5.7-8). She does not directly say that the relationship between Britomart and her father is incestuous, yet given Britomart’s tendency toward masculine behaviors and her lack of a mother, any suggestion of love greater than that of a father for his daughter would be reminiscent of incest in this scenario.

Spenser intends for Britomart to be a model of chastity, but even for women who hope to emulate chastity as a primary virtue, Britomart is a problematic role model due to her masculine tendencies. She can never be totally feminine because this would make her an easy target for the male knights and enemies she comes across, which would endanger her chastity and thus her source of power. She needs to behave like a man, and her femininity “is nearly always hidden under guard, lest some man or woman take advantage of her weakness” (Carvajal 74). It is no coincidence, then, that her predestined husband is Artegall, a man who also serves as a gender opposite. Britomart is immersed in the world of men, wearing men’s clothing and traveling on a man’s quest to save a loved one in distress, while Artegall is held captive by a woman and even wears women’s clothing as part of his submission. Even when he battles Radigund in Book V, he stops when he sees he has drawn her blood: “At the sight thereof his cruell minded hart / Empierced was with pittifull regard, / That his sharpe sword he threw from him apart, / Cursing his hand that had that visage mard” (V.v.13.1-4). Compassion, which is typically considered to be a feminine virtue, is therefore the weakness which results in Artegall’s downfall. Britomart and Artegall are therefore a well-matched couple since they mirror each other in the sense that they both serve as gender opposites, although Britomart is praised for her masculine strength and Artegall is scorned by Britomart, and thereby Spenser, for his perceived femininity.

Britomart cannot represent Renaissance women in any direct sense, due to her exceptionalism and her uncommon role in *The Faerie Queene*, but Spenser still uses her as a vessel to preach female morality to the court as a way to maintain these standards for women. Therefore, Britomart needs to have the same weaknesses as all women if she is to demonstrate the validity of the chaste virtue in humanity. She has the skills of a warrior and the chastity of a Madonna figure, but she also has human weaknesses of anger and jealousy. She is only wounded when she gives into these weaknesses, which is why her discovery of Radigund is such a turning point in the poem. Radigund “essentially provides a mirror image of what Britomart could become if she does not temper the use of her own martial skills and her tendencies toward extreme anger and jealousy” (Cohee 9), which makes it all the more important for Britomart to slay Radigund upon their meeting. Radigund is the biggest threat to Britomart’s wholeness, since she is a corrupted version of herself, and this would have been an unconscious reminder of Mary Tudor to a Renaissance audience. The fear of a bad female ruler would have been very real in Elizabethan England, so Spenser has to have Britomart destroy Radigund to show the victory of a good and virtuous female over an evil one.

When discussing the distinctions between good versus evil women in *The Faerie Queene* it is important to bear in mind the temptation of critics to see in female characters what we want to see in them, and what we want Spenser to be saying through them. Critics frequently respond to Britomart and the other female characters “in terms of their own ideas of what a woman should or should not be” (Cohee 12). Readers often expect Spenser to subscribe to the patriarchal principles of Renaissance society, and in doing so they find what they are looking for in female characters. In this way critics “blur the distinctions between life and literature and use *The Faerie Queene*’s female characters to vent their own biases about women’s behavior” (Cohee 12).

Gender has always been a central concern to critics, and an epic poem with a female warrior for a protagonist naturally draws the attention of feminist critics. We cannot know for sure how Spenser intended *The Faerie Queene* to be read, but it has long been a battleground for critics to argue over whether or not Spenser's knight of chastity is another patriarchal construct to preserve double standards of sexual behavior for women.

The centrality of Britomart's chastity also marks the Elizabethan transition from Catholicism to Protestantism: Britomart is lauded for her chastity, not her virginity. She does not lose anything upon her union with Artegall, since theirs is a pure and chaste love. However, seeing Artegall reduced to the status of a woman under Radigund's rule reviles Britomart. She has, for the most part, rejected her own femininity, and it disgusts her to see Artegall dressed in women's clothing, and she cries "What May-game hath misfortune made of you? / Where is that dreadfull manly looke?" (V.vii.40.2-3). In fact, Spenser seems to show a mistrust of women in this passage, since Britomart has searched for Artegall throughout the entire poem only to greet him with cruelty when she finally finds him. However, marriage has always been the end goal of Britomart's quest, and even she seems to realize that she is a fit wife for Artegall since they are both gender opposites. In this way, Spenser fashions Britomart into an "ideal marriage partner" against a backdrop of less worthy female characters (Cohee 11). This is a double-edged sword since Spenser appears to grant Britomart autonomy when really he is only creating in her a more powerful and independent version of Renaissance women for the purpose of seeking marriage, thereby reinforcing patriarchal prescriptions for female behavior. Nevertheless, Spenser resists the urge to either idealize Britomart as a Madonna figure or defile her as a whore, and for this he deserves at least a modicum of credit.

Britomart proves to be the exception to many rules of patriarchy, since her magic is used for good and not for evil, which also makes her a more real threat to the men in the poem. Human women who consort with magic are often considered to be witches, who get their magic by making deals with the devil. This makes them reliant upon “external—male—catalysts for their treachery” and separates their “‘femaleness’ from the source of [the] threat” to male sovereignty (“Nightmares of Desire” 319). Britomart is abnormal in this regard, since her power comes from her magical spear instead of from the devil. Her disguise is a suit of male armor, and so if she poses a threat to men they cannot merely “pierce demonic disguises” (“Nightmares of Desire” 319). Britomart’s virtue makes her abilities and her magic more powerful than that of other women, but it also makes her more human. After all, most women—perhaps especially Renaissance women—are more likely to pray to God for strength and virtue than they are to make deals with the devil in order to wear demonic disguises to ensnare men. Despite Britomart’s otherwise exceptional life, her reward for exemplifying morality is a very conventional one: marriage. She uses a magical spear, overcomes gendered binaries, and personifies the highly regarded virtue of chastity, but the best conclusion she can hope for at the end of her quest is marriage to a man who initially repels her by wearing women’s clothes and adopting feminine traits. According to Spenser, then, unless a woman is in line for a throne it is unlikely that her life will end in anything more remarkable than marriage.

Nevertheless, Britomart employs Spenser’s efforts to combine the old and new in his epic poem about early modern virtues: she carries the story of a romance, but from the perspective of a man. She fulfills a very traditional role in a very non-traditional way: she is on a quest to rescue her loved one from the captivity of an evil one, except that she is a woman attempting to rescue a man from an evil woman, the “love quest of her male counterparts” (Findley 22). Spenser leans

pretty heavily on the tradition of an epic romance in this poem, but in a way that challenges the genre as a whole. Particularly in Book IV, which depends “upon the genre to make [its] own narration intelligible, [uses] it to question the literary tradition that makes possible [its] narration” (Findley 22). In Book IV, Britomart has not forgotten her quest to find Aretgall, but this does not stop her from rescuing Amoret when she discovers the damsel in distress. Busirane kept Amoret in captivity for seven months “Because his sinfull lust she would not serue, / Vntill such time as noble Britomart / Released her” (IV.i.4.2-4). In this way Spenser questions the traditions of medieval romance, since a woman rescues another woman. This occurs in the book devoted to the virtue of friendship, and so any homoeroticism in Book IV between Britomart and Amoret is most likely unintentional; yet whether or not one reads their relationship as homoerotic, the conventions of medieval romance are still being challenged.

Understanding the historical context in which Spenser wrote such a character as Britomart is essential because of her role in the allegory of *The Faerie Queene*; it is nearly impossible to forget that the poem is ultimately about Queene Elizabeth. Britomart’s union with Artegall begins the line of succession from which the Tudor Queen Elizabeth comes, and so in a way Britomart’s entire quest is about fighting for the future reign of Elizabeth. Britomart’s chastity also mirrors Elizabeth’s own, and in this way “Elizabeth is both the beginning and the end of the Tudor dynasty” (Griffin 7). Britomart’s quest to create a hero results in Elizabeth, for as Merlin prophesies: “Then shall a royall virgin raine, which shall / Stretch her white rod over Belgicke shore” (III.iii.49.6-7). This fervent nationalism of Spenser’s does more than just flatter a monarch; it demonstrates the poem’s self-awareness. The layers of the poem are cyclical, continually going back and forth between Elizabethan England and the land of Faery. Britomart’s chastity is a clear homage to the Virgin Queen, yet in Spenser’s world there would

be no Virgin Queen without the chastity of Britomart. This makes chastity both the beginning and the end of the Tudor line, both a virtue and a downfall.

Some have argued that Britomart's connection to Elizabeth does not guarantee her the respect of Spenser or Renaissance audiences, since she is clearly inferior to Elizabeth and other exceptional women. Spenser dares not speak too openly in favor of women's authority, since Elizabeth would have been the only positive example of women's authority to exist in the recent, collective memory of Spenser's audience. Britomart's chastity is eternal, but her virginity is temporary since she eventually marries Artegall; Elizabeth's virginity, in contrast, lasts a lifetime. Britomart's chastity is merely a vessel that carries her to Artegall, and her real value lies in the fruit of her womb: the beginning of a line that would result in Elizabeth. When *The Faerie Queene* was published in 1590, it would have been too late "to urge the queen to marry, but it was not too late to insult her by suggesting that she should have married and borne an heir, which is what the figure of Britomart has the potential to do" (Villeponteaux 54). While the poem is typically considered a straightforward homage to Queen Elizabeth, it is entirely possible that Spenser portrays Britomart as an alternative Gloriana figure who did not make the same choices as Elizabeth and is therefore actually a preferable female authority figure. Merlin prophesied that Britomart's most important deed in life would be bearing a child "who will be the first in a long line of British monarchs culminating in Elizabeth I herself" (Villeponteaux 54). Britomart begins in a position of complete authority, as when she easily unseats Sir Guyon in the beginning of Book III, but it is only because she wields a magical spear that she is able to do so. Such an obvious phallic symbol shows that her strength comes from her ability to wield her own sexuality like a weapon—literally—but it also comes, ultimately, from a man. After all, Britomart could not become Elizabeth's ancestor by herself.

Spenser also needs to distance Britomart from the idea of a typical female warrior since too strong a connection would be reminiscent of the Catholic tradition, like Joan of Arc; with the days of Mary Tudor not far behind, this could not be allowed. More parallels needed to be made between Britomart and Elizabeth in order to overshadow any possible parallels between Britomart and Mary Tudor, which is why Spenser so thoroughly emphasizes her chastity and virtue. Such a focus would draw the attention of the audience to the merits shared by Britomart and Elizabeth, and it would also show that their female authority is less threatening than it would be if they were powerful warriors who could pose a physical threat without the use of men (the phallic symbol of a magic spear in Britomart's case, and in Elizabeth's a military force of men). There is a lot of tension and contradiction in Spenser's portrayal of Britomart as a female warrior, mainly because he needs to write in favor of a female monarch without losing sight of the fact that "an extremely powerful female knight threatens our sense of patriarchy" (Villeponteaux 58). The easiest way to reconcile all of these tensions and contradictions is to accept that the issue of feminine authority in Elizabethan England is not one that can be explained simply. On one hand, to suggest that Elizabeth is anything but a flawless leader and beacon of virtue is treason; on the other hand, Renaissance society requires a strict hierarchy in order to function, and women had traditionally been ranked beneath men.

Britomart plays an atypical role in *The Faerie Queene* since she is both a clear allegorical reference to Queen Elizabeth and a fictional ancestor who began the line of monarchs ending with Elizabeth. She has a great deal of feminine virtue and masculine strength combined to make her a powerful warrior and a challenging protagonist. She contains a lot of contradictions to which Spenser leaves no clear-cut answer. Is he writing in favor of women's rule or patriarchy? Can the two coexist? I think the best way to interpret such a character is to acknowledge that

Spenser is walking the tightrope of courtliness and must therefore at least appear to conform to certain popularly held beliefs. Also, most critics incorrectly assume that Spenser is in complete control of his own work, when in reality he has his own set of prejudices and beliefs regarding women that would likely seep into the text without his intent. Whether Britomart is a paragon of feminine virtue, or a fierce female warrior, she is still a difficult combination of the masculine and feminine and therefore defies the binary gender system. Many critics believe that Britomart loses some of her feminist potential by adopting the behaviors and habits of a man, but another possibility is that she exemplifies the best qualities of both genders: something she has in common with her royal descendent, Queen Elizabeth.

IV. The Passive Amoret and the Issue of Women's Unmarried Chastity

Whereas Britomart represents the virtue of chastity, particularly in regard to unmarried love, Amoret represents the virtue of married love and remaining true to one's spouse despite separation. These two virtues collide when the characters do, after Amoret is abducted the night of her wedding and Britomart rescues her. When this happens, Britomart achieves that which Amoret's husband Scudamour failed to do: penetrate the flames blocking the entrance to the enchanted House of Busirane. Britomart enters to save Amoret while Scudamour is forced to retire, "all scorcht and pitifully brent" (III.xi.26.9). At this point in the narration, the 1590 edition of *The Faerie Queene* contradicts the 1596 edition. As the poem was published in 1590 it ended with Book III, and the next three books were only added in 1596, and so the conclusion of Amoret's rescue was also the conclusion of the edition published in 1590. The image of the hermaphrodite is central to the conclusion of Book III as it was published in 1590, and it "calls attention to a problem of allegorical personification, both in its traditional employment and in Spenser's use of it here" (Cheney 192). After being rescued, Amoret feels overwhelming gratitude to Britomart and symbolically replaces Scudamour with Britomart. The two women feel drawn to each other, and the natural gender roles get twisted around as they establish a relationship with Britomart as Amoret's hero and Amoret as Britomart's damsel in distress.

However, for them to have lesbian feelings for each other, even temporarily, complicates things for Spenser, and therein arrives the hermaphrodite image. Bearing in mind that both Amoret and Britomart represent some form of chastity, whether marital or premarital, any sort of attraction between them would be complicated. With this image Spenser harkens back to Ovid's Hermaphroditus, particularly with "the implied narcissism of Scudamour's 'wilfull anguish'" because here "Spenser seems again to be echoing Ovid's awareness that both dissolution and

synthesis are portrayed” (Cheney 193). Traditionally, Spenser’s use of the hermaphrodite image here is thought to illustrate the mystical significance of Christian marriage, and in unifying these two chaste characters he creates a kind of symbolic marriage that mirrors the actual marriage that occurred between Amoret and Scudamour earlier in the day. Spenser uses a rather androgynous image of Venus later in Book IV, and this hermaphrodite image in Book III is similarly androgynous, which seems to suggest that although Christian marriage is essential for the morality of society, it isn’t necessarily an important balance of gender issues. The hermaphrodite image therefore symbolizes marriage and what happens with the necessary unity of opposites. The world depends on such unity because otherwise the opposites would split each other apart.

The unexpected attraction of opposites also adds interesting depth to a book of *The Faerie Queene* that is, after all, a discussion of chastity. It is possible that Spenser uses the image of the hermaphrodite “to call attention to apparent contradictions in celebrating sexual union within the context of a Book devoted to chastity” (Cheney 195). Certainly the symbolic union of Britomart and Amoret shows that marital and premarital chastity are natural partners, and that one is dependent on the other; however, the more obvious indications of the image suggest the lust and chastity are very closely linked as well. Britomart has just saved Amoret “under circumstances which suggest that she is uniquely qualified to perform a task which defeats Amoret’s own lover” and therefore it is her chastity that protects her from the figurative (and, in the enchanted house of Busirane, literal) flames of lust (Cheney 195). Throughout *The Faerie Queene*, Britomart is frequently marked as exceptionally qualified to complete particular tasks due to her chastity, so this is hardly unusual. However, for her to be qualified to rescue Amoret when Scudamour cannot is unexpected. The magnetism of these two opposites should not, logically, overpower the sacred bonds of matrimony that have just been established. Her hero is

not her husband, but a lady warrior who is on a quest to find her husband through unconventional routes: specifically, routes that do not take her through traditional courtship. This raises a lot of complicated questions for the modern reader of *The Faerie Queene*. Why must Amoret, as the representative of chaste, married, courtly love be a passive victim? If the book is designed to elevate courtly culture and place its queen on a pedestal, why must the representative participant of courtly culture suffer and be rescued by a woman who is not a part of courtly love in the same way that Amoret is?

For a book devoted to chastity, Spenser devotes a lot of time in Book III to describing the various pitfalls and ailments associated with love, and especially with courtly love. He includes *Infirmity and Death in the Masque of Cupid*, and Spenser keenly associates suffering with love. This means that the hermaphrodite image at the end of Book III might be representative of Amoret's exploration of her own chastity, as she comes to terms with her own masculinity since courtly love has forced her into purely feminine roles her entire life. In the allegory of this book, Amoret is clearly the conventional courtly lady, but this also implies that "if Amoret has to suffer because she has accepted Busirane's definition of love," she might suffer in the Cave of Lust "because she enjoys illicit sensual desire like Lust" (Lin 355). This entanglement in courtly culture causes lots of grief for Amoret, and there certainly is plenty of blame to go around for Amoret's suffering in Book III. Critics have blamed Scudamour for treating Amoret "as a trophy rather than an object of love" (*Wanton Eyes and Chaste Desires* 102), Venus for her "laughing complicity in the kidnapping of her adopted daughter and faithful virgin father" (*Wanton Eyes and Chaste Desires* 98), and society as a whole for denying sexuality in a "system of signs that repudiates bodily integrity" (Silberman 162). Spenser blames none of these potential sources, however. At no time does Spenser "repudiate sexual pleasure or desire within the boundary of

marriage” (Lin 356), particularly in Amoret’s case because the object of her sexual desire is her lawfully wedded husband. It is only when she is a captive of Busirane that her desires become twisted, and her desires intermingle with Britomart’s. At this point, though, it is necessary to examine Busirane’s symbolic purpose in the poem, because if he distorts Amoret’s chastity in his enchanted house then his function as a symbol in Book III becomes critical.

It is easy to label Busirane a villain in Book III, since he causes such suffering to Amoret, but he also acts as something of an enforcer of the conventions of courtly love. Since he represents the conventions of courtly love, Busirane “strips Amoret of her identity as married chastity,” thereby also stripping her of her ability to fight back and making her a passive victim (Lin 356). Amoret is the poem’s representative of true femininity, but she always bends when met with challengers like Busirane. This seems to suggest that Spenser is telling us that “the Protestant ideal of married chastity is no match for the conventions of courtly love” and that she must necessarily suffer when held prisoner by the demands of courtly love (Lin 356). She faces a tremendous amount of pressure as the poem’s standard for married chastity, and she cannot hope to bear it all while under the restraints of courtly culture. Britomart, on the other hand, maintains the pressure of representing active chastity because she has freed herself from courtly culture as a female knight on an independent quest. As the role of marriage was changing during Spenser’s time as a court poet, he seems to be arguing that marriage cannot be so deeply entrenched in conventions of courtly love if the morality of chastity hopes to survive. This is not only a comment on the morality of Elizabeth’s court, but on Elizabeth herself. Spenser seems to blame court for Elizabeth’s virgin status, saying that she could not hope to find the ideal bliss of Protestant married chastity because of the oppressive nature of court-constructed conventions. Although the character of Britomart indicates that Spenser wishes Elizabeth had married and

borne an heir, the character of Amoret provides excuses for Elizabeth's single status, saying that true happiness in marriage can only be found if that married chastity remains a private affair, free from the pressures of court as Elizabeth never could be.

Protestants in Elizabethan England were learning new ways to look at marriage and suffering in an attempt to further separate their religion from Catholicism, and in Book III of *The Faerie Queene* Amoret explores similar topics with her adopted mother Venus. She learns the importance of sex in the Garden of Adonis, where Venus "wheneuer she that will, / Possesseth [Adonis], and of his sweetness takes her fill" (III.iv.46.8-9). The garden is a relatively amoral place, neither corrupted by evil nor burdened with obligations of virtue, and so Amoret's lessons here are about as objective as they can be in the world of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. Elizabethan England was trying to distance itself from any remnants of Catholicism leftover from the days of Bloody Mary, and changing attitudes toward the private sphere was a part of that. English Protestants in the sixteenth century "saw marriage and sex within the boundary of marriage as lawful and necessary but not as a sacrament" (Lin 358). Amoret, raised outside the confines of courtly culture, is left essentially to find her own way in courtship once she leaves the Garden of Adonis and is trapped within the confines of court. It is possible that in the Garden of Adonis "Amoret may not have learned...that a sexual relation has to be limited within the boundary of marriage" (Lin 358). But she has at least learned that if she wants to give in to her sexual urges, she must live with that person "in stedfast loue" like Venus (III.iv.50.6). At the very least, her sexual education in the Garden of Adonis has provided her with an adequate understanding about sex such that she has no reason to be frightened by sexual pleasure.

Her fear, then, must come from a different source. She has not experienced or learned about any of the sufferings that frequently accompany love and sex, though she is probably at

least vaguely aware of them. As the adopted daughter of Venus, she would realize that beyond the circle of perfect Womanhood there are Doubt, Delay, the Gate of good desert, Daunger, and Loue and Hate held together by Concord (IV.x.11-43). Though sheltered and protected earlier in life, “she probably faces Daunger, Doubt, and Delay when Scudamour takes her out of the Temple” (Lin 360). This indicates that from the very beginning of her relationship with Scudamour, she has been susceptible to dangers of which she was barely aware before, dangers for which she is completely unprepared. When Scudamour claims Amoret as his lady love in this scene, he does it more to prove that he is the legitimate lover worthy of claiming the shield with the inscription “Whose euer be the shield, faire Amoret be his” (IV.x.8.9) than to actually take Amoret as his lover and wife. It is vanity, not love, that starts their relationship. From the very beginning Daunger has been a part of their courtship due to the risks Scudamour took to claim Amoret. To an Elizabethan audience, “Daunger represents the jealousy of a husband or the public disgrace resulting from the revelation of a love affair” (Lin 360) and so in order to take Amoret as his own Scudamour must confront fears of infidelity, though to open the doors to jealousy before a relationship has even begun seems extraordinarily precarious, though the only real danger the couple has encountered so far is Amoret’s own fear.

Based on evidence found in Amoret’s interactions with Scudamour, Amoret’s main fears in her relationship with Scudamour come from sex. She “often prayd, and often [Scudamour] besought, / Sometime with tender teares to let her goe, / Sometime with witching smyles” (IV.x.56.3) and that seems to indicate a woman who cannot make up her mind about a man. Here she seems to suffer “from the fear of building a sexual relationship with Scudamour” (Lin 361). This is not yet the level of suffering she experiences in the House of Busirane, but it lays the groundwork for her later suffering there. At this point in the poem, Amoret seems to have a

rather Catholic attitude toward sex—or at least the way Elizabethans viewed the Catholic attitude toward sex—thinking of marriage and sex as pollution (Lin 361). It is more likely at this point, however, that Amoret’s uncertainty about Scudamour comes from the fact that she has not been allowed to make decisions regarding their relationship. He claimed her as a trophy without her input. He chose her, or at least he chose the shield and honor that came with winning her, but she did not choose him. Parallels between Amoret and Elizabeth are inevitable here, mainly because of the portrayals of courtly love. Winning Amoret came with a certain degree of honor and glory, not to mention a fancy shield, but the prizes that would come with winning Elizabeth would be considerably greater. Perhaps Elizabeth ought to fear matrimony simply because marrying would cause her to lose sovereignty over herself, not to mention her country, and so her marriage could never contain the true purity of married chastity.

Amoret—much like Elizabeth, depending on one’s perspective—spends some time hiding from love and sex at the beginning of Book IV in a scene that is really the culmination of her fear. During this episode, “mistakenly convinced that Britomart has failed to rescue Amoret from the enchanter, Scudamour in the 1596 edition wanders off in search of other assistance” (Stephens 524). This is hardly behavior for a knight in shining armor attempting to valiantly save his lady, but since the real danger to Amoret is her own fear she can be the only true source of her rescue. Amoret hides in a cave with Aemylia and becomes aware that other men besides Lust hover at the cave’s entrance, since Aemylia is “of God and man forgot” (IV.vii.14.9). In her discussion with Amoret, we learn not only more about Amoret’s own fears regarding men, but about what happens to women who hide in fear rather than facing the men and dangers in their lives. The cave, like many other symbolic caves in romantic poetry, “figure the interior of woman’s body, protected and protecting as long as man remains outside” (Stephens 524). Here

within the feminine protection of the cave, Amoret learns a good deal from Aemylia about lust and femininity, two topics about which Spenser obviously attempts to educate his audience from a masculine, but nevertheless insightful, perspective.

Since the other dangers of love have already been overcome when Scudamour claimed Amoret as his love, all that remains is Amoret's fear of men and sex, but Aemylia warns her not to remain a passive victim. Amoret tries to forget her own troubles by means of helping Aemylia, but "rather than ignoring yourself in order to worry about my, Aemylia advises, you need to make yourself aware that your hapless plight is just like mine" (Stephens 524). Sheltered in a cocoon of womanhood in the cave, Amoret attempts to find herself through Aemylia. This is the key difference Stephens makes between Scudamour and Amoret in this episode: "whereas Scudamour loses Amoret, Amoret loses herself; we cannot, however, dispense with Amoret simply by making her represent Scudamour's lack" (Stephens 525). Amoret is a passive victim in *The Faerie Queene* to such an extent that when Scudamour has the opportunity to take back his wife later in Book IV, instead he decides to regale his friends with the story of how he originally won her from Venus. In this sense, the union between Britomart and Amoret is more pure of heart than that between Scudamour and Amoret. There is greater respect and equality between Britomart and Amoret than there is between Scudamour and Amoret, and this occurs on Busirane's doorstep; "subtly or not, the hermaphrodite begins to resemble Busirane's own idea of a proper relationship between the sexes" (Stephens 525). This image is unlikely, then, to be Spenser's idea of a proper relationship between the sexes, but Scudamour's utter disregard for Amoret in this episode truly demonstrates the lack of respect inherent in any relationship in which the man has claimed a woman as a prize, which almost certainly would be the case in any relationship with Elizabeth, and so this scene serves as a warning to Elizabeth against marriage.

In removing the hermaphrodite image in the 1596 ending of Book III, however, Spenser also removes the most important part of the text that speaks from an even remotely female perspective. The image helps to explain Britomart's and Amoret's naïvete, particularly regarding the scene in which Britomart convinces Busirane to close the wound in Amoret's chest, and "Britomart halfe enuying their blesse, / Was much empasioned in her gentle sprite" (III.xii.46a). Her own chastity causes her ignorance in this scene, since she does not realize that closing a chest wound is not the same as sexual consummation, nor that "wedding nights are not always blissful for wounded virgin brides" (Stephens 527). Still, while masculine desire tends to threaten women in *The Faerie Queene*, the hermaphrodite poses no danger to any of them, and in fact it helps to present a nice closure to Book III: the women find safety and comfort in each other. The conflict of Book III "does not taint the hermaphrodite itself, [and so] the hermaphrodite's disappearance cannot represent anything but loss" (Stephens 527). In removing the hermaphrodite image from the canceled ending of Book III in the 1596 publication of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser almost entirely dismisses the female perspective and returns to a more traditional, male-centric narration. Perhaps it was too risky for Spenser to write about two women sharing an attraction of equality, but in any regard the poem loses a good amount of feminine insight with the 1596 ending to Book III.

Spenser never shies away from problematic scenes in *The Faerie Queene*, though, and critics still debate about the nature of Scudamour's relationship with Amoret. This is due in part to the complicated publishing history of *The Faerie Queene*, wherein "Spenser asks us to fit together two separate narratives," the 1590 three-book poem "where the wicked enchanter Busirane has Amoret in his possession and where Scudamour, as Cupid's man, is powerless to liberate her" and the 1596 continuation "where the story gets the beginning that it previously

lacked” (Walkden 93). One of the more popular theories held by modern critics is that Scudamour is a rapist, which is why he could not save Amoret from Busirane, another male aggressor who holds Amoret captive. When attempting to reconcile the two narratives, this concept makes sense: “Scudamour cannot save Amoret from Busirane...because he could not save her from herself” (Walkden 93). This theory can also be supported by certain things Scudamour says about Amoret. Certainly he does not speak lovingly to or about her; more often than not he speaks of her as a conquest, a possession he has won, his spoils of war. In fact, he provides the rationale of a rapist: “For no intreatie would forgoe so glorious spoyle” (IV.x.55.9). The term “spoyle,” which here refers to Amoret, also connects her to the other female victims of the poem. This explanation of Scudamour as a rapist fits the poem both in the 1590 three-book version but also in the 1596 expansion, because it answers many questions about Amoret’s relationship with Scudamour; more importantly, it explains why Britomart as a chaste warrior could accomplish what Scudamour could not.

Scudamour’s role as rapist changes slightly as the narrative progresses so that he can fill another, equally admirable, role: that of the jilted husband. When he cannot rescue Amoret from Busirane since he is a male aggressor like Busirane, Britomart as the representative of chastity can get through and save her. When this occurs, Amoret sees her true savior and forgets about her rapist husband for a while and recognizes that chastity could save her whereas male aggression could only harm her. Within this allegory, “Scudamour is destined to become a minor exemplum—married rather than single, domesticated, even cuckolded (at least in his own imagination), rather than heroic” (Walkden 95). Though it is perfectly evident to the modern critic that rape and aggression do not create a happy marriage, this is an especially important point to make in a book devoted to chastity. Though Britomart is the paragon of unmarried

chastity, Amoret represents married chastity, and so when these two forms of purity merge it creates a force that has the ability to save both women from the male aggression of the outside world. It speaks to a kind of female empowerment, women protecting other women, and men have no part in this kind of force. This is where the hermaphrodite image comes in. Technically speaking, Scudamour is not spurned by Amoret in this scene; she might prefer Britomart for the protection and feminine safety she provides, but she is not the one who has marked Scudamour unworthy. Busirane marked him as unworthy, in a way, by marking him as an equal. Busirane's flames recognized Scudamour as a fellow male aggressor and that prevented him from getting inside to save Amoret. Scudamour is threatened by Britomart and by Britomart's chastity, and then comes to represent the conjunction of his two primary roles: "the man who, fearing cuckoldry, turns rapist, thereby sealing his fate as a cuckold" (Walkden 95). Scudamour represents the form of male aggression that is poisonous to marriages, and that is why he and Amoret cannot be happy together, and also why Britomart could save Amoret when Scudamour could not.

Scudamour's mixed roles not only reveal the nature of Spenser's allegorical structure but is also very revealing about the themes of the poem. Allegory and symbolism intermingle in Book III, and that "interconnects with a thematic conflict between marriage and male honor" (Walkden 95). In *The Faerie Queene*, these two things can coexist only if that male honor is bound to some sort of chivalric code. Scudamour's honor is irreconcilable with Amoret's married chastity not because he is a man with male honor, but because he seeks to claim and consume rather than to cherish and protect. Were he to treat Amoret with the honor she deserved, there might have been a true marriage between them; however, his version of male honor involves taking as much as he can without bothering to defend the honor of his lady. The reader

becomes aware of this problem when Britomart first comes across Scudamour. She comes across a man in distress who has “set down his weapons but he has case his shield aside—‘rudely’ in early modern English carries connotations of excessive force or violence, indicating the strength of Scudamour’s disgust” (Walkden 96). The shield is a symbol of chivalry and honor, and so by throwing it aside he opens the door for Britomart to take his place. She has much more honor and chivalry than does Scudamour, and so her union with Amoret is far purer and more powerful than Scudamour’s union with Amoret. In this way, chastity overcomes male honor for the protection and glory of marriage in Book III of *The Faerie Queene*.

It cannot be forgotten that Amoret is a twin, and therefore her role in the allegory is only half of a whole. In Spenser’s historical allegory Amoret “corresponds to Elizabeth Throckmorton, Raleigh’s wife” and Belphoebe’s double, “a screen that sanctions the expression of Timias’s devotion, although only briefly and with terrible consequences for him” (Craig 21). Amoret and Belphoebe are mirrored characters who present two sides of one coin: chastity. Yet Amoret represents a more passive, married chastity and so Lust attacks her when she leaves her protector Britomart asleep and “of nought affeard, / Walkt through the wood, for pleasure, or for need” (IV.vii.4.1-2). Nothing about this is overtly wrong, and few things could be more benign than a lady going for a walk. This wandering through the woods only becomes perilous when done in a corrupt world like ours and that of *The Faerie Queene*. Even for virtuous women like Amoret and Britomart, “behavior that would seem irreproachable to any but the fussiest and most unrealistic observer is dangerous” (Craig 23). There are few truly safe behaviors for women in this world, not through their own fault but through the nature of the men around them. Women need constant protection, as a result, and Busirane actually provides this for Amoret, albeit unintentionally. The flames he used to prevent people from taking Amoret might not have

worked against Britomart, but they did work against Scudamour, and so he accidentally kept Amoret safe from an outside form of male aggression: besides himself, of course.

Another interesting element of Scudamour's relationship with Amoret is that it lacks a concrete ending; their story just drifts away as more important narratives seize center stage. Their marriage is left unconsummated, or at least it is never officially consummated, and so there is no satisfying conclusion to their story. They differ from other married couples because Florimell and Marinell "await an endlessly postponed reunion" (Craig 16) that fails to provide an image of married bliss for the reader, perhaps because Florimell is too weak to represent married chastity as Amoret does. In contrast to this couple, then, Scudamour and Amoret face an even worse fate: they meet "in a narrative oblivion that makes them invisible to one another" (Craig 16). This is a double-edged sword in the context of *The Faerie Queene*, because not only does Spenser endeavor to teach people about morality, he also attempts to glorify these morals. Perhaps he seeks to meet this goal by hiding the bulk of the relationship from the sight of the reader. The problem with Spenser showing what happens after a marriage ceremony is that he generally shows men as aggressors and women as their passive victims, but by the same token women contain a mysterious kind of energy about which Spenser clearly knows very little, because he hides it the best he can in his poem. To him, "women [are] the possessors of an ominous power" (Craig 16). He cannot hope to explain it, so the only way he can deal with this mystery is to repress it in his female characters as much as possible. Women present a plethora of roles in this poem, yet they are never truly free and their struggles are rarely reconciled as thoroughly as they could be.

Violence seems to be inherent in the way Spenser views chastity, and certainly in the way that he presents it in *The Faerie Queene*, mostly because of the conflict between Spenser's

definition of chastity and his audience and patron Elizabeth's version of chastity. Spenser insists on chastity "defined as male possession of the female body," which is directly counter to "the counterheterosexual chastity" of Elizabeth (Frye 49). Spenser's discussion of chastity is twisted and channeled until it morphed into the rape at the end of Book III. The significance of this rape "lies in the clash between Elizabeth's definition of chastity and the more mainstream construction of women" (Frye 50). Spenser must not only reconcile commonplace opinions about women with the fact of a female monarch, he must also reconcile these opinions with the public assumptions about Elizabeth's chastity. Through this rape, the legal and moral ramifications of such chastity are enforced. The rape even demonstrates "how language can be used to enforce a definition of chastity" (Frye 50). Elizabeth's iconography of virginal chastity is the starting point of most female characters in the book, but none can live up to Elizabeth's standards: or, rather, the standards Spenser wishes us to believe Elizabeth withholds. Even so, this image of Elizabeth contradicts Spenser's assertion of "women as vulnerable, threatened, and thus logically protected and possessed by men" (Frye 50). When these two ideas rub up against each other, as they inevitably would for a male English poet under Elizabeth's rule, something drastic must occur for them to be reconciled; for Spenser, that took the form of a rape.

The rape scene is also very complicated due to all the layers of symbolism present, given that both Amoret and Britomart represent Elizabeth in very different ways. The rape scene is therefore extremely metaphoric, one in which Britomart "endures an assault of misogynistic images drawn from the history of the idea of love" (Frye 51). The scene before her essentially plays out all of the abusive attitudes towards women in a single horrifying scene. Busirane forces Britomart to watch as Amoret, her heart torn from her chest, stabbed with a dart, and placed in a silver basin that she holds in front of her. This is rife with morbid symbolism already, but it

becomes increasingly so when one remembers that “the poem tells us that the figure being raped represents Elizabeth, while another female figure who also represents Elizabeth is forced to watch” (Frye 51). Critics have struggled with this scene for centuries, arguing over the meaning of the scene and the source of the conflict present during that episode. For many years, most readers “saw Amoret as responsible in some sense for what happened to her, felt relieved that she was rescued, and accepted Britomart as her rescuer” (Frye 51). As attitudes toward women and rape have changed, at least somewhat, critical perspectives on this topic have changed as well. A more modern perspective on the matter is to recognize that Spenser “attempts to supplant the representations of Elizabeth’s female authority with more mainstream definitions of chastity” (Frye 52). Whether or not Spenser intends this to be an enforcer of marriage through the threat of rape is still up for debate, however.

To answer this question, we must examine the scene through the two primary issues present: a historical issue and a transhistorical issue. The historical issue is to look at the attitudes toward sex and rape during the sixteenth century, “when the idea of the companionate marriage—the ideal marriage espoused by humanists in which the man and the woman possessed equal souls but occupied unequal social and moral positions—was entering the mainstream of English thought, where it remains today” (Frye 52). As the shift from Catholicism to Protestantism took hold with mainstream England, ideas about marriage were changing, and consequently so did ideas about sex and rape. In this scene Spenser shows that marriage and rape are certainly connected, presumably—but not necessarily—because a husband could protect a woman from safe whereas on her own a woman is susceptible to all kinds of dangers. The transhistorical issue is “the extent to which representation becomes violent when language functions as a delimiter and enforcer of gender roles” (Frye 52). At a time when it would be wise

for men to sing the praises of a woman's strength—or at least of one woman's strength—Spenser instead chooses to write a book about chastity in which women are continually dominated and possessed by the men around them. Male aggression triumphs over female submission every time, and this rape scene exemplifies that perhaps more than any other: Busirane wields his power over Amoret and forces Britomart to watch, thereby dominating both of them simultaneously.

Many female characters in Book III of *The Faerie Queene* represent Elizabeth in some way, and through them Spenser attempts to reconcile a female monarch with his own ideas about chastity. The overall effect of this symbolism is that he enforces traditional gender roles, particularly in regard to what he perceives as the primarily female virtue of chastity. We never see the most obvious Elizabeth figure, the Faerie Queene herself, in the poem but other female characters serve a similar purpose. These include “Belphoebe, the unapproachable but gazed-upon Amazon; Amoret, Belphoebe's twin sister; and Britomart, the militant enforcer of chastity” (Frye 59). All of these women present some form of chastity, though all of them have a repressed sexuality in some way or another. Of these women, “Amoret and Britomart also resemble Elizabeth in that they enact the kind of court spectacle in which the queen so frequently participated” (Frye 59). This is especially true in the rape scene, which is first and foremost a spectacle of symbolism and layered meaning. Like the spectacles at court, this one is both for and about Elizabeth as the Virgin Queen. Not only did Spenser “[claim] the queen and her court as his subject and audience but also openly participated in that most courtly activity, the use and redefinition of the queen's iconography of chastity” (Frye 59). The poem clearly addresses Elizabeth and the courtiers surrounding her as its primary audience, so in using representatives of

Elizabeth to enforce the traditional, male-dominated view of female chastity Spenser crafts an epic that is not altogether flattering to Elizabeth.

Particularly in the hermaphrodite image, Spenser strongly indicates that a chaste woman is only whole when her unmarried chastity is joined to her married chastity, meaning that Elizabeth is not as fully chaste as she ought to be. The true virtue of a woman lies not in her virginity, according to Book III, but in the purity of body and spirit that allows her to wed. In this sense, Elizabeth fails both Britomart and Amoret: Britomart as the ancestor she declines to honor by producing an heir to the throne, and Amoret since she declines to marry and provide an example of married chastity. The episode in the temple of Venus also suggests that Elizabeth uses her virginity as a shield just as much as she uses it as a weapon: she maintains the power over the country and, perhaps more importantly, over the court as long as she remains unmarried and so long as she acts as if she is still considering suitors. Amoret's fears about marriage, therefore, in many ways mirror the fears Spenser projects onto Elizabeth. An unmarried woman holds certain control over men that she loses as soon as she becomes the conquered property of a husband. Chastity and power, therefore, go hand in hand for women. Book III of *The Faerie Queene* might claim to be about female chastity, but at its roots it struggles with the reality of female authority as well.

V. Conclusion

The style and characters of *The Faerie Queene* have a tendency to blend classic, romantic tropes with early modern thinking to write a quintessentially English epic poem about Elizabeth and her court. While the poem depicts many parts of courtly life, because of Spenser's preoccupation with female authority and morality much of the poem seems concentrated on women: how they behave, how they should behave, and the ways in which having a female monarch has shifted the balance of power between men and women in England. A large part of this discussion occurs in Book III of the poem because that is the book devoted to chastity, which Spenser sees as a very feminine virtue, perhaps mainly because it is a virtue that is such a major part of Elizabeth's character. She used her virginity as a weapon so that she could maintain control over her country and court, and so Spenser's female characters typically either use their chastity as a weapon or they are completely passive in their chastity, allowing Spenser to further distinguish between the two main types of women.

The first type of women is the passive damsel in distress who maintains medieval standards for female inferiority. Women like Amoret in *The Faerie Queene* demonstrate a more passive, married chastity that is more congruent with the behavior of women in medieval romances. Amoret has been conquered by Scudamour, claimed by him like a prize at a jousting tournament, and thus she does not truly belong to herself anymore; by extension, nor does her chastity. Chastity that is owned by a husband cannot be wielded like a weapon by the woman in question. That makes the first type of women the safer type, but also the type that is less fit to rule since a ruler must be in control of an entire country, including their own person and chastity. Still, in the 1590 ending to Book III Amoret has a union with Britomart that suggests the power

of combining married and unmarried chastity. If the two kinds of chastity are more powerful when joined together, then the second type of women is also increasingly important.

This type of women is the aggressive woman of power, and she is far more dangerous to a Renaissance poet since her very existence threatens the delicate balance upon which early modern society rests. Each book of *The Faerie Queene* dissects a different virtue of Renaissance society, and at its surface it appears that Spenser is preaching morality to the masses, yet the reader cannot lose sight of the fact that the audience of the poem is primarily Elizabeth and her court. Book III does not simply encourage women to remain chaste, it shows the different forms of power that come from chastity and prescribes many of these to Elizabeth. Some of these forms of power are more masculine, as Britomart's magical spear that could potentially serve to illustrate Elizabeth's masterful wielding of a navy that is decidedly masculine but nevertheless speaks to her competence as a female ruler. However, later in *The Faerie Queene* Britomart undermines her own power and helps to strengthen the traditional hierarchy of power in Renaissance England.

Toward the conclusion of Book V, Britomart challenges Radigund and fights for the freedom of her betrothed, Artegall, yet in liberating Artegall she unintentionally creates a rather awkward moment. She has reversed the standard gender roles, and traditionally Artegall should have been the one to rescue Britomart in her distress. Rather than reveling in her powerful position after freeing Radigund, however, she "completely alters the structure of the Amazon society, reinstating male authority" (Bowman 509). Despite the fact that her own martial prowess freed Artegall and produced the opportunity to restructure the hierarchy of power, she immediately gives this power back to Artegall and makes all the knights "swear fealty" to him (V.vii.43.6). Even when provided with the opportunity to make a stand for the equality of

women and the ability of women to rule, Britomart chooses not to. Her own power is used “to reinstate a hierarchy that calls female possession of ‘liberty’ usurpation,” and nothing in the text “succeeds in negating the paradox of Britomart’s action” (Bowman 510). Why, then, would Britomart plainly reject female rule? The question becomes central to the feminist issues of the text, given that she freely chooses to elevate Artegall’s power to the detriment of her own.

Until that point in the poem, Britomart has been self-assured in her abilities; rejection of power seems to contradict her prior attitude toward herself. Not only has she always been confident in her abilities, but she also has the right to rule in her own country given that she is her father’s “onely daughter and his hayre” (III.ii.22.4). Britomart remains aware of her femininity throughout the poem, but she never gives any indication that she sees anything wrong with her defeats of male knights or in her expectation of future rule. However, the entire purpose of Britomart’s quest is to find Artegall and produce a line of monarchs with him, and so overthrowing Radigund’s power gives Britomart the choice between the structure Radigund had created and the structure Artegall has the potential to provide both for Britomart and for her country. Within the context of her relationship with Artegall, then, it makes sense that Britomart would want to side with Artegall rather than with Radigund.

More importantly, within the context of Elizabeth’s reign it makes sense that a male poet would give Britomart his own voice in condemning the rule of women. Had Elizabeth married, she would have given her power to a man as Britomart gave hers to Artegall; as such, it can be presumed that Spenser wishes Elizabeth had done so, and writes Book V as an endorsement of the path he wishes Elizabeth had taken. The text explicitly denounces female rule, making an exception only for the divinely appointed: “they were born to base humilitie, / Unlesse the heauens them lift to lawfull soveraintie” (V.v.25.8-9). The poem does not, however, explicitly

state that Elizabeth is one such divinely appointed monarch, leaving that up to the imagination of the reader. The very act of Britomart killing Radigund mirrors Elizabeth's defeat of Mary, since "to a woman in power, other women are a very real threat" (Bowman 520). The aftermath of defeating a female rival is also the same: the opportunity to subvert the traditional power hierarchy in favor of women. However, like Britomart, "Elizabeth also sanctioned rather than challenged the oppression of other women" (Bowman 520). For the sake of reinforcing her own power, Elizabeth maintained the notion that her reign was a God-given exception and that women on the whole were not fit for authority, since to suggest that all women were as superior as her would weaken her own claim to the throne. Vanity certainly might also have played a role in this sanction of the traditional male-centric power structure, since to do so meant disseminating the notion that Elizabeth was an outstanding woman.

The debate over a female monarch is a complicated one, and not one that Spenser could put to rest even with an epic poem devoted to dissecting the characteristics of Elizabeth and her rule. Ultimately Spenser seems to come to the conclusion that women are unfit to rule apart from one specific exception. He wants us to believe the exception to be divine right, but that is not quite accurate; the real exception to which he points is that of a woman who secures her throne by marrying and producing an heir. Since Elizabeth did not do this, divine right is not enough to make her worthy of the English crown. At the very least, she has failed in her service to England because she has ended a golden age that provided relative prosperity to the people. In failing to marry, she put her own selfish needs—keeping her own throne secure—above those of the country. This political issue nearly transcends the feminist issues of the text, but mostly the two get intertwined so that a discussion of one must necessarily lead to a discussion of the other. Elizabeth's reign marked a time of overwhelming changes, and it had the opportunity to be a

time of overwhelming change for the power hierarchy and gender roles; yet, like Britomart, Elizabeth rejected this opportunity. *The Faerie Queene* encapsulates the society of Elizabeth's court and shows the attitudes of a male poet toward the authority of a female monarch, and ultimately demonstrates that although this was a time full of great potential for women's gender roles their oppression remained intact.

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