

**Spenser's Britomart : The Knight of  
Chastity and the Virgin Queen  
บริโทมาร์ทอัศวินผู้รักษาพรหมจรรย์และ  
ราชินีผู้ทรงพรหมจรรย์ในวรรณกรรม  
ของสเปนเซอร์**

*Jeffrey S Kramer*  
เจฟฟรีย์ เคอเมอร์

**Abstract**

*The Faerie Queene* of Edmund Spenser has virtually been assigned the status of the 'official poem' of the Elizabethan era, the one work most closely reflecting the ideals and assumptions of the court and of its revered and dreaded head, The Virgin Queen. In Book III of the poem, however, we find a far more interesting and complex relationship between the poet and his sovereign. Naturally, in "The Legend of Britomart, or of Chastity," there is flattery of Queen Elizabeth, and apparent assent to her exaltation of virginity as the ideal state for womankind; but the narrative constantly asserts a contrary ideal, in which even the heroine who represents chastity must bow to the demands of the God of Love.

## บทคัดย่อ

*The Faerie Queene* โดย Edmund Spenser เป็นวรรณคดีซึ่งเป็นที่ยอมรับกันว่าเกือบจะมีสถานภาพเทียบเท่ากับโคลงประจำรัชสมัยของสมเด็จพระนางเจ้าอลิซเบท (ที่ 1) *The Faerie Queene* เป็นวรรณคดีเรื่องหนึ่งซึ่งสะท้อนให้เห็นอุดมคติและความเชื่อของบุคคลในราชสำนัก และอุดมคติและความเชื่อที่บุคคลเหล่านี้มีต่อประมุขที่ได้รับเคารพและยำเกรงอย่าง “ราชินีผู้ทรงพรหมจรรย์” แต่ในโคลงเล่มที่สามของวรรณคดีเรื่องนี้ ผู้อ่านจะค้นพบความสัมพันธ์ที่น่าสนใจและสลับซับซ้อนอย่างมากระหว่างกวีและพระราชินี ตามปรกติแล้วตำนานของ Britomart หรือตำนานแห่งพรหมจรรย์นี้ดูอย่างผิวเผินจะเป็นการสรรเสริญพรหมจรรย์ว่าเป็นคุณสมบัติในอุดมคติของผู้หญิง แต่การเล่าเรื่องได้แสดงถึงอุดมคติซึ่งขัดแย้งกับอุดมคติของพรหมจรรย์ตั้งแต่ต้นจนจบ แม้แต่ตัวละครเอกของเรื่องซึ่งเป็นตัวแทนของพรหมจรรย์ก็ยังคงพ่ายแพ้แก่เทพเจ้าแห่งความรัก

In the year 1590, when the opening three books of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* were first published (they had been circulating privately in manuscript form for at least a year before that), Spenser saw fit to include a dedicatory letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, a kind of explanatory preface which would shed some needed light on the “dark conceits” of the allegorical poem. One such allegory might have been perfectly transparent to the poem's first readers even without Spenser's explicit help : the title character, Gloriana the Faerie Queene herself -- never seen in the poem, only described in awed reverence, but in whose name all the great deeds of the poem's questing knights are performed -- was a figurative representation of this world's most glorious sovereign, Queen Elizabeth I.

At this time the Queen was fifty seven years old, and had been on the throne for thirty six years. With all possibility of childbearing

past, the marriage problem which had occupied so much of court politics for the first decade and more of her reign had been mooted and Elizabeth had long settled into her cultic role as the Virgin Queen, a goddess from whom mighty dukes and earls would most gladly and humbly beg the slightest glance of favor but whose purity, like that of her sister goddess Diana (one of the most common avatars of Elizabeth in songs and speeches of tribute) rebuffed any hopes of receiving any further favor beyond that glance. Tournaments were still held each year on the Queen's Accession Day in which Elizabeth's 'servants' (including some of the most powerful men in the realm) jostled one another for the honor of wearing one of her scarves. And only two years earlier, in 1588, the Royal Virgin had put on the armor of war, defying the power of the Spanish Armada and presiding over the most significant military victory England had enjoyed in almost two hundred years. Not only the goddess of chastity now, Elizabeth was also the warrior princess, raised up by God's hand like Deborah from the Old Testament to rescue His people from their (and His) enemies.

When we read, therefore, that the Third Book of *The Faerie Queene* -- the third and last book in the 1590 edition -- "conta[ins] the Legend of Britomartis, or of Chastitie," we are prepared to see a further act of tribute to England's Gloriana. By virtue of her name alone, Britomart already shares a significant attribute with the Queen : she is an embodiment of the British nation. As Spenser explains in his preface, each Book of the *Faerie Queene* presents the adventures of a knight who exemplifies one great virtue, ending in the knight's accomplishment of his quest and the rout of the corresponding vice. No wonder, then, that the virtue of chastity would be placed so

prominently in the poem; and once it was placed there, inevitably the narrator must link that virtue explicitly with Elizabeth :

*It falles me here to write of Chastity,  
That fairest vertue, farre aboue the rest;  
For which what needs me fetch from Faery  
Forreine ensamples, it to haue exprest?  
Sith it is shrined in my Soueraines brest,  
And form'd so liuely in each perfect part  
That to all Ladies, which haue it profest,  
Need but behold the pourtraict of her hart,  
If pourtrayd it might be by any liuing art...*

Since the book's virtue is the special property of a woman, it is only appropriate that the knight-errant defending this "fairest virtue" is a woman, the first woman knight-errant in *The Faerie Queene*. Like the Queen, as portrayed in a hundred verses and pageants, Britomart's purity is both an attractive force and a barrier to that attraction :

*For she was full of amiable grace,  
And manly terrour mixed therewithall,  
That as the one stird vp affections bace,  
So th'other did mens rash desires apall,  
And hold them backe, that would in error fall;*

Nor should any reader (even one who was somehow unfamiliar with the great victories of Queen Elizabeth) be astonished that a woman may be capable of the great martial deeds needed to bring the virtue home in triumph, for

*...by record of antique times I find,  
 That women wont in warres to beare most sway,  
 And to all great exploits them selues inclind :  
 Of which they still the girlond bore away,  
 Till enuious Men fearing their rules decay,  
 Gan coyne streight lawes to curb their liberty;  
 Yet sith they warlike armes haue layd away :  
 They haue exceld in artes and pollicy,  
 That now we foolish men that prayse gin eke t'enuy.*

In the minds of his readers, the poet insists, Britomart and Queen Elizabeth must be partnered as shareholders in the virtues too often denied to women :

*Of warlike puissaunce in ages spent,  
 Be thou faire Britomart, whose prayse I write,  
 But of all wisdom be thou precedent,  
 O soueraigne Queene, whose prayse I would endite,*

Britomart, moreover, partakes not only of Queen Elizabeth's virtues, but of her blood : Elizabeth and the rest of British royalty are her descendants.

*Well worthy stock, from which the branches sprong,  
 That in late yeares so faire a blossome bare,  
 As thee, ô Queene, the matter of my song,  
 Whose lignage from this Lady I deriue along.*

All these parallels are thrust upon the reader even before the action of the book begins. When Britomart does set out on her quest, her signal victory, at the climax of Book III, comes at the expense of the wicked magician Busirane, who has abducted the fair maid Amoret and imprisoned her within his enchanted castle where he tries every night to break down her resistance to his lust. Busirane's spells are powerless against the knight of chastity, however, and Amoret is rescued.

It all seems very easy to read, then : the third book is an allegory of the triumphs of the Virgin Queen, in which Spenser rather shamelessly flatters his sovereign by name, by allusion, by allegorical figure, and by paying fulsome tribute to the glory of the virgin state as an ideal to which all womanhood should aspire. But in fact it is not nearly so neat and easy as that, and to see more clearly why it is not we need to look at some of the political and religious currents which helped form Spenser's thought and art.

There is a wonderful scene at the end of the film *Elizabeth* in which the still-young and still-insecure queen beholds a mass of sculptings of the Virgin Mary, and finds her moment of inspiration : "I will become a Virgin." The filmmakers' intended irony, of course, stems from the fact that the statuary which inspired Elizabeth to take on this role was itself destined for destruction as a relic of Papist Mariolatry by the new, Protestant regime represented by Elizabeth. The iconoclast, in other words, was becoming the icon she herself had broken. The irony was not entirely lost on Elizabeth's contemporaries. Her most unshakeable supporters were the radical Protestants who dreaded above all other prospects a return to Catholicism. But these radicals were typically uncomfortable with the medievalist elements

of Elizabeth's court pageantry, the tournaments and tiltings and love-toyings, and they had little patience with the Queen's public declarations that a life of virginity would be to her the sweetest of destinies. On doctrinal grounds, the 'Protestant left' was convinced that marriage and procreation was the genuine ideal of human existence, and not (as Catholic tradition had it) a mere second-best alternative for those too weak to achieve God's true ideal, virginity. On political grounds, they longed to see Elizabeth solidify the international Protestant cause by making a marriage with a suitable Protestant prince. The most hopeful or fanatical even believed in a pure-English marriage which would ultimately lead to a purified England taking up the role of the new Israel, and inaugurating a new Golden Age. One poet who traveled in the circles of that Protestant left, and whose early work in particular expresses some of its most apocalyptic hopes, was Edmund Spenser.

It seems odd to think of Spenser in these terms, because *The Faerie Queene* (by far his most famous work) seems saturated in such a medieval, and therefore seemingly 'Catholic,' atmosphere. It is full of the very elements which (I have just been arguing) were seen with great suspicion by the militant Protestants when Queen Elizabeth employed them as political pageantry. But to use these elements for poetic purposes is not necessarily to use them naively. The conventions of knight-errantry -- in which villains and monsters are overcome by pure-hearted knights seeking, as their only reward, a nod of approval from their virgin ladies -- had been the target of vigorous scoffing from sophisticated readers for many years by the time Spenser revived them for his epic. We only have to remember that this was the age of *Don Quixote* as well in order to recognize this. This is not to say that Spenser, like Cervantes, has set out to annihilate the nonsensical

cult of questing knights and their Dulcineas; but neither should we mistake him for a Don Quixote who believes in that cult with perfect fervor. *The Faerie Queene* operates over a wide emotional range, as Spenser at times employs the machinery of the quest romance to bring out moments of high exaltation, at other times undermining the entire scheme with shafts of irony. We should remember, after all, that the poet Spenser pointed to explicitly as his model was Geoffrey Chaucer. (This poetic tie had at least one additional consequence for the history of poetry : Spenser's request to be buried next to Chaucer in Westminster Abbey was the beginning of the institution of Poet's Corner. Chaucer himself earned his place there for his work in the royal service, not for his poetry.)

Despite the Chaucer connection, even some of Spenser's most admiring readers have at times passed over or refused to see the degree of irony at work in the "sage and serious" poet (Milton's description). Keeping that connection in mind, however, let us look again at the induction to Book III, with its extraordinary tribute to chastity as "that fairest virtue, far above the rest." Chastity, the greatest of all virtues? "Far above" that, say, of loving one's neighbor as oneself? We must be in the realm of Chaucerian irony here, where comic effects are achieved through the use of a person who utters the most breathtaking absurdities in a tone of the most placid assurance. It is safe, I think, to say that no philosopher, no theologian, no saint or apostle, not even the most fervent devotee of the Blessed Virgin Mary, known to Spenser, ever made such a claim for the supreme status of chastity, indeed that none would take it seriously for a moment. It stands in flat opposition not only to all the tendencies of the Protestant movement, but to all Christian teaching. Saint Paul himself, of course,

failed to find a place for “chastity” among the three cardinal virtues of faith, hope and charity, of which “greatest of all” was charity, not chastity. From a secular perspective, as well, the notion of chastity as the arch-virtue would be seen as self-evidently absurd. Certainly Aristotle (whose treatment of ethics is singled out for praise in Spenser’s prefatory Letter to Raleigh, where Spenser notes his plans to compose further books in which additional heroes will exemplify further Aristotelian virtues) would have scorned the idea. Aristotle’s arch-virtue is “magnanimity”, that combination of courage and generosity of spirit which belongs pre-eminently to Prince Arthur, the hero among heroes of *The Faerie Queene*. It is also the virtue conspicuously allotted to Britomart herself in the eleventh chapter of Book Three, where Scudamour marvels at the “huge heroic magnanimity” which leads Britomart to risk death in order to rescue Amoret. Britomart, I wish to suggest, is the “knight of chastity” only in her “official” capacity, as part of a studied but ultimately perfunctory bow in the direction of the cult of the Virgin Queen : Britomart’s true knightliness, her true heroism, is the more active virtue of magnanimity.

The further one gets into Book III, the more rapidly the principle of chastity -- at least of chastity in the “Elizabethan” sense, chastity as virginity -- recedes from the center of things. Within a few stanzas after the hyperbolic tribute to “the fairest virtue,” the narrator casually informs us of the cause which has driven his heroine to set out in arms :

*Euen the famous Britomart it was,  
Whom straunge aduventure did from Britaine fet,  
To seeke her loue (loue farre sought alas,)  
Whose image she had seene in Venus looking glas. [my emphasis]*

The knight of chastity is in quest of love and marriage. Most fortunately and blessedly so, for it is her destiny to become, in a sense, the mother of a nation. So she is assured by the wise and mighty Merlin himself, who reveals that

*Renowmed kings, and sacred Emperours,  
Thy fruitfull Ofspring, shall from thee descend;  
Braue Captaines, and most mighty warriours,  
That shall their conquests through all lands extend,  
And their decayed kingdomes shall amend :  
The feeble Britons, broken with long warre,  
They shall vpreare, and mightily defend  
Against their forrein foe, that comes from farre,  
Till vniuersall peace compound all ciuill iarre.*

Such were the hopes of a Golden Age fancied by the more fervent and idealistic Englishmen of Spenser's time, especially during Elizabeth's early years on the throne. It must have struck many of them that if only, like Britomart herself, Elizabeth had sought a worthy English husband....

It turns out that all the world is on the same quest for love which spurs Britomart : happy if they recognize it and find the object of their love, most unhappy if they fail to see it or -- worse -- attempt, futilely, to resist Love's power, for

*Well did Antiquitie a God thee deeme,  
That ouer mortall minds hast so great might,  
To order them, as best to thee doth seeme,*

*And all their actions to direct aright;  
 The fatall purpose of diuine foresight,  
 Thou doest effect in destined descents,  
 Through deepe impression of thy secret might,  
 And stirredst vp th'Heroes high intents,  
 Which the late world admyres for wondrous moniments*

Love is a God, not only in might, but more crucially in being a benevolent guide who directs us “aright” towards worthy and heroic deeds and towards the purposes marked out for us by fate.

Conspicuously, Book III offers cautionary examples of the ill fate of those who would take the path of Jonah and flee from the mission assigned to them by the God. The noble Marinell, destined by Love to marry Florimell, has been hidden away from women by his mother who misreads a prophecy that he would come to grief “by woman’s hand.” As tends to happen in such cases, the attempt to avoid the prophecy is the cause of its fulfillment : because he chooses the path of war instead of love, Marinell is struck down and severely wounded when he challenges a passing knight. Marinell’s mother laments :

*Fond Proteus, father of false prophecis,  
 And they more fond, that credit to thee giue,  
 Not this the worke of womans hand ywis,  
 That so deepe wound through these deare members driue.  
 I feared loue : but they that loue do liue,  
 But they that die, doe neither loue nor hate.*

She is both right and wrong : right, as the tale will go on to show in more detail, in associating love with life itself, fear and denial of

it with death (though fortunately Marinell recovers in time to learn his lesson); wrong in doubting the literal truth of the prophecy, for Marinell's wound is indeed the work of "woman's hand" -- the passing knight who responded to Marinell's rash challenge was Britomart herself. That is to say, the first great feat of arms performed by the Knight of Chastity is that of meting out punishment for the crime of attempting to flee from the demands of Eros. Spenser, it seems, is not a poet who may be trusted to take chastity with perfect seriousness. We might have anticipated this from the fact that he is the author of one of the great love celebrations in the English language (the *Epithalamion*), and from the further fact that this book of *The Faerie Queene*, the "Legend of Chastity," also contains one of the great fertility songs in the English Language, the description of the Garden of Adonis where all forms of life eternally procreate from the realm ruled by Venus and her reborn lover. This passage is linked to the rest of the third book, not only thematically, but by the presence in the Garden of Adonis of Amoret, adopted child of the goddess of love, whose destiny it is to be rescued by Britomart. That is to say, the last great feat of arms performed by The Knight of Chastity is the preservation of the daughter of Venus.

Another role played by Amoret in Book III is to stand as a contrast to yet another of the avatars of Queen Elizabeth found in *The Faerie Queene* : Amoret's sister, Belphoebe. Spenser explicitly declares that Belphoebe is one of the "mirrors" of Queen Elizabeth, representing her "rare chastity." While Amoret was brought up since birth by Venus, Belphoebe was raised by the goddess of chastity, the huntress Diana. Like the Virgin Queen, naturally, Belphoebe inspires both love and dread in all males who approach. Prince Arthur's

squire, Timias (often seen as an allegorical portrait of Walter Raleigh) finds himself under Belphoebe's spell after she saves his life, and soon recognizes what a deadly fate it is to love such a goddess :

*Vnthankfull wretch (said he) is this the meed,  
With which her soueraigne mercy thou doest quight?  
Thy life she saued by her gracious deed,  
But thou doest weene with villeinous despight,  
To blot her honour, and her heauenly light.  
Dye rather, dye, then so disloyally  
Deeme of her high desert, or seeme so light :  
Faire death it is to shonne more shame, to dy :  
Dye rather, dy, then euer loue disloyally.*

The refrain “Die rather, die” is then repeated three more times by Timias as he sings his way through the hopeless conclusion of his hopeless love, the love of a mere fleshly man for a dedicated virgin goddess so far above him. That is a good deal of death to place at the feet of the Queen's figurative embodiment, and there is more to come. The narrator concludes his apparently rapturous tribute to Belphoebe/Elizabeth with these lines :

*To youre faire selues a faire ensample frame,  
Of this faire virgin, this Belphoebe faire,  
To whom in perfect loue, and spotlesse fame,  
Of chastitie, none liuing may compaire :  
Ne poysnous Enuy iustly can empaire  
The prayse of her fresh flowring Maidenhead;*

*For thy, she standeth on the highest staire  
Of th'honorable stage of womanhead,  
That Ladies all may follow her ensample **dead**. [my emphasis]*

We may easily take the fourth line as innocent, straightforward praise; perhaps it would be straining the line too far to insist it contains the implication that Belphoebe's chastity places her among the ranks of the non-living. The final line, however, surely induces a double take : it requires a certain strain to read it in its eulogistic sense ("even after Belphoebe is dead, let all women still follow her example) and **avoid** the obvious implication that Belphoebe's example is a deadly one. The implication is even more difficult to avoid when we read, in the corresponding tribute to Belphoebe's sister Amoret, at the corresponding juncture of the succeeding canto, that Amoret has been brought up

*To be th'ensample of true loue alone,  
And Lodestarre of all chaste affectione,  
To all faire Ladies, that doe **liue** on ground. [my emphasis]*

Sisters, both serving as examples of love to all women : one an example from death, another for the living. Amoret's "chaste affection" is not (like Belphoebe's) virginal : chastity, in her case, means faithfulness to one man, the man she marries and "To whom her louing hart she linked fast/In faithfull loue, t'abide for euer more." Belphoebe's ferocious chastity makes her unsuited for the role either of rescuer or rescued; Britomart's own experience of passion makes her the proper savior of the similarly impassioned Amoret.

Britomart learns of Amoret's captivity from Amoret's fiancée, Scudamour, who cannot rescue his lover himself because Busirane's castle is guarded by a ring of magic fire which Scudamour may not pass without being burned. The allegory here is virtually transparent : the association of fire with sexual passion is virtually automatic, and Spenser has reinforced that association within the narrative by referring repeatedly to love as the "sacred fire" or "goodly fire." Busirane's fire though does not affect Britomart, allowing her to enter the castle and eventually defeat Busirane. Because Britomart is immune to the "fire" of passion? Plainly not. She longs for Artegall to the point of illness, showing all the effects of love fever. She is allegorically wounded by "Gardante" (the gaze of desire) in the opening canto, and even by the knife of Busirane in the course of rescuing Amoret. She can pass through the fire while Scudamour cannot for the simplest of reasons : the fire represents the desire which both Busirane and Scudamour feel for Amoret (for Busirane is almost certainly to be seen as Scudamour's dark double), a desire which Britomart does not feel. She burns for a man, not for another woman. Thus even the defeat of the wicked seducer, the episode which would seem on first reading to show the triumph of virginity over lechery, turns primarily not on the knight of chastity's resistance to passion, but on the particular nature of her passions.

Britomart's one-woman invasion of Busirane's castle ends when she interrupts the strange seduction ritual Busirane is practicing on Amoret, a ritual involving a pageant of allegorical representations of sexuality. In an unusually blatant (for Spenser) breaking of the allegorical code, the narrator declares that this pageant is as various "as there be phantasies/In wauering wemens wit... Or pains in loue."

What is clear enough to the reader is still puzzling to Britomart, who finally ignores all these distractions and disarms the sorcerer. She is passionate, in other words, but still innocent. Here then at the end of the legend of chastity, any parallel to the Virgin Queen must be disavowed : nobody ever accused Queen Elizabeth I of innocence.

Patriarchal cultures, even those temporarily ruled by female sovereigns, have a limited toleration for warrior heroines. It would probably have surpassed the limits of that tolerance, it would probably have frightened Elizabethan readers too badly, if Britomart had been endowed with the enormous learning and shrewd (at times devious) intelligence of their sovereign. As Spenser's friend Sir Philip Sidney recognized, some things may be accepted as part of history which are nevertheless intolerable in poetry.

*All quotations are from The Faerie Queene by Edmund Spenser, edited by A.C. Hamilton (London : Longman, 1977).*