

Lucifera, a foil or a
parody of queen
elizabeth?



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There is little debate that Spenser admired Queen Elizabeth I. When reading through Book One of *The Faerie Queene*, Gloriana is fashioned in a manner that allows her to act as an allusion to the famed maiden queen. In his letter to Sir Walter Raleigh explaining the intricacies of his writing process and his reasonings behind the work, Spenser states that the Queene of Faery land is a fictional representation of Queen Elizabeth, who he intends to depict as both a most royal ruler as well as a beautiful lady. This interpretation hinges upon reading *The Faerie Queene* as an epic and as a celebration of Elizabeth, her Protestant reign, and England as a nation. However, Gloriana seems to exist only within the margins and background of the work as she actually never presents herself to the reader. This absence is not meant to diminish the power of Gloriana, however, it does allow for Elizabeth to appear elsewhere in the foreground of the work, and not solely in a flattering light. I argue that Spenser uses *Lucifera* and the House of Pride as a satirical criticism of court life that mirrors the Tudor court of Elizabeth.

Through this snapshot of court life, Spenser is able to point out the obvious moral failings of the environment at hand. However, problems arise in regard to Spenser's admiration of Elizabeth when she is analyzed beside her corrupt counterpart, *Lucifera*. It is instinctual to distance the two; however, Spenser's deliberate similarities force a certain proximity between the two, allowing readers to see the darker side of English court. It might initially be difficult to compare the elaborately nefarious *Lucifera* to the beloved Good Queen Bess. However, upon a closer examination certain parallels become increasingly evident. Spenser introduces the reader to *Lucifera* in a way that asserts the queen's authority and reduces us to that of her subjects. *Lucifera*

sits upon “ a rich throne” wearing “ royall robes in gorgeous array” (Spenser 1. 4. 8 2-4). Immediately, it feels as if the reader is stationed below Lucifera, forced to look upward at the queen from a position of submission. The description continues to mirror Elizabeth as Spenser describes the monarch as “ A mayden Queene, that shone as Titan’s ray” (5). Historically, Queen Elizabeth is acclaimed for retaining her maidenhood throughout her life; she was often referred to as The Virgin Queen by her people, an homage to her alleged chastity. Spenser finishes his opening description of Lucifera by placing a great emphasis upon her burning and bright beauty.

While this description paints the queen as overtly beautiful, there is also something painful, excessive, and unnatural about her outward appearance. Spenser continues to provide readers with details about his vain queen, who “ so proud[ly]” sat upon her high throne “ in a Princely state” (10. 1). The use of the word “ Princely” perhaps has more meaning to modern readers when attempting to make a connection to Elizabeth, as rumors surrounded her reign suggested that the daughter of King Henry VIII was actually a man. These rumors found traction as explanations for the queen’s excessive makeup, her unwavering refusal to ever take a husband, and her admirable authority as a ruler. Spenser continues to describe Lucifera, who “ in her hand” holds “ a mirrhour bright” allowing her to constantly admire her reflection (6). Spenser enforces the idea that this ruler is openly concerned with self-appearances, pride, and personal vanity. Following a physical depiction of Lucifera, Spenser provides readers with an ancestral background of the notorious queen stating she was the daughter “ Of griesly Pluto” and “ sad Proserpina the Queene of hell” (11. 1-2). During this depiction, one can

assign actual figures of history to the respective mythological characters that they resemble. Horrid Pluto could easily be an allusion to Elizabeth's infamous father, King Henry VIII and the sad queen of hell could be an allusion to Elizabeth's mother, Anne Boleyn, infamous in her own right. The underworld, a relatively grim place, mirrors the later stages of King Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn's marriage, which ultimately ended with the latter beheaded by the order of the former. Spenser's *Lucifera* aspires to surpass her parents and even Jove himself. *Lucifera* aims to "wield the world," ambitiously "to the highest she did still aspyre / Or if ought higher were then that, did it desire" (11. 6-9).

Spenser has created a character that is power-hungry and prideful, but also mirrors Queen Elizabeth in her desire to propel England into an age of triumph and prosperity. This creates an interesting paradox between the allusion to Elizabeth via *Gloriana* and that of *Lucifera*. Elizabeth as *Gloriana* is much more muted and occurs behind the scenes. However, *Lucifera*, from her introduction, dominates the scene, forcing us to notice and contemplate her similarities to Queen Elizabeth. Further complicating matters, Spenser reveals to the reader that *Lucifera* is not even an anointed queen. Instead, she has "made her selfe a Quenne," however, "Yet rightfull kingdome she had none at all" (12. 2-3). Reinforcing the idea of a stolen reign, Spenser presents a lack of royal pedigree for *Lucifera*, stating she possessed no "heritage of native soveraintie," which caused her to "usurpe [the throne] with wrong and tyrannie" (12. 4-5). When reading through this description of *Lucifera*'s apparent path to the throne, another common criticism of Elizabeth during her reign emerges, her legitimacy; as a bastard, there were

many who felt the rightful heir to the English throne following the death of Elizabeth's half-sister, Mary Tudor, was Mary Queen of Scots. The portrait of Lucifera clearly is meant to paint her as a usurper.

The question becomes, what allegorical purpose does Lucifera serve, and how should we read her in conversation with Queen Elizabeth if the latter is meant to be exalted and honored in this poem? An easy, but not satisfying answer is that Lucifera serves to represent pride and vanity in human form and should be read as a foil to Queen Elizabeth. However, I feel that the similarities between Lucifera and Elizabeth are too striking and too intentional to dismiss. Instead, I believe that Lucifera affords Spenser, as critic DiPasquale points out, a "snapshot of court" that allows him to satirize the trappings of the lavish lifestyle (268). Douglas Brooks-Davies points out that Lucifera's "superficial brilliance and vainglory make her a parody of Gloriana (though it would not have taken a very astute courtly reader to notice a satiric equivivalence between some of Lucifera's aspects and trappings and those of Elizabeth)" (441). While Lucifera is overtly prideful and vain, her entire existence seems to be motivated by maintaining her regal façade, evidenced by her "strutting and primping," which serve as "obvious examples of courtly vanity" (DiPasquale 269). Importantly, this interpretation becomes less critical of Elizabeth herself, and allows Spenser's chagrin to fall more directly and scornfully upon court life, rather than upon the monarch. The link is the similarities between the House of Pride and Elizabethan court. This representation of Elizabeth's court, "a portrait of overblown pride and courtly vanity" serves to "expose the darker side of the actual Elizabethan court that is flatteringly evoked but never quite represented in the always

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off-stage Court of Gloriana" (277). While many concepts are allegorized completely and concretely in *The Faerie Queene*, such as holiness, disparity, and truth, Queen Elizabeth is only alluded to, and resembles a plethora of characters. While many of these allusions are flattering, Una and Gloriana for example, Spenser's decision to also align the Virgin Queen with the vain queen, *Lucifera* warrants a certain examination. Rather than reading *Lucifera* as a foil meant to highlight the many virtues of Elizabeth, she serves a deeper purpose as a parody of the beloved Queen of England. Naturally, the parody of the original is more flamboyant and exaggerated, the importance lies in the fact that the warped reflection mirrors the initial. This parody gives Spenser's work more depth by introducing a satirical lens through which England can be viewed. Spenser, by critiquing a misconstrued construction of Tudor court, is able to comment on the English society and their dangerous relationship to that lifestyle. Perhaps the House of Pride is meant to portray an overexaggerated version of English court; or, perhaps, it serves as a foreboding warning of what is eventually to come from the current version of English court and its emphasis upon luxury and indulgence. Attempting to unpack the proximity of these two monarchs actually results in more questions than answers; however, it undoubtedly broadens the scope of conversation and allows the reader to trace the trajectories themselves.

Works Cited

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