

Women used as
stereotypes of
gender.



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“The Faerie Queene” is an epic poem written by Edmund Spenser in the 16th century – English Renaissance, but set in the Middle Ages because of its being a chivalric romance. Aside from religious allegories, juxtapositions, and contradictions, Spenser mentions the place of gender by giving his reader the stereotypes, meaning set of postulated ideas about the specific type of somebody or something, which includes race, ethnicity, religion, culture as well as the gender of that century’s women. Protagonist and antagonist, Una and Duessa, are the representations of two opposite gender stereotypes in a literary sense in the “Faerie Queene”. The writer focuses on the virgin and the whore by combining facts and his ideas about Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots, who he aims actually, by giving examples from the bible.

To begin with, 16th century was the era of discoveries, inventions, explorations and great literary works. To exemplify, Leonardo da Vinci constructed a flat-water wheel, Peter Henlein invented pocket watch, Zacharias Janssen – compound microscope, Galileo Galilei invented water thermometer, Isabella Cortese wrote a book about alchemical secrets, and Thomas More wrote his ‘Utopia’... Besides, Elizabeth I was one of the most successful women who was treated as “a female monarch in a male world”; however, it was thought that women were affected by their emotions and passions so they ought to have been housekeepers and dutiful whereas men had a rational way of thinking, which gives them the right of ruling a country. (Norton 541) As it is understood from the instances, there are rarely women who contributed to the history of humanity in this century. This issue is stated confessedly in the book “Who am I This Time?: Female Portraits in British and American Literature” as “Patriarchal society views women

essentially as supporting characters in the drama of life. Men change the world, and women help them.” (Pearson and Pope) The reason why almost all are males is that women generally were not allowed to work in such fields as medicine, law or education because they were considered to be weaker than men. There were some socio-cultural stereotypes that women were expected to obey; therefore, their only duty was, customarily, to take care of their family, especially their husbands. These duties consisted of preparing food for them, cleaning the house and having enough knowledge of medicine in case of the sicknesses of the family members. While men had serious jobs, women in 1500’s were supposed to be housewives, washerwomen, milliners, dyers, bakers, nannies, servants... On the other hand, the ones who worked not only got paid less but also were abused from time to time due to their gender.

Furthermore, there are some literary stereotypes attributed to women along with socio-cultural ones. These are used by writers, playwrights and poets in order to touch the audience’s own life conveniently, to help them understand and perceive smoothly, and occasionally, to criticize these clichés. Edmund Spenser wrote this allegoric poem to show the significant virtues and vices by benefiting from these literary stereotypes. Unrefinedly, women were supposed to be either virgin, mother/wife, old maid, or the goddess/whore in the literary texts. In the *Faerie Queene*, Spenser centred upon two specific stereotypes which were virgin in the face of Una and whore in the face of Duessa so as to represent the actual figures of Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots.

What is more, one of the main characters of the *Faerie Queene* is Una stereotyping ' virgin' in the poem. She is narrated as the ideal Christian woman, who is actually a woman whom Spenser wants in his own life. First of all, virginity symbolizes pureness and innocence and Una is described as " so pure and innocent, as that same lambe, / She was in life and virtuous lore," (Book I, Canto I, Stanza 5, Lines 1&2). Also, her whiteness in her physical appearance is the sign of that purity, which is given in the previous stanza; " A lovely Ladie rode him faire beside, Upon a lowly Asse more white now then snow, Yet she much whiter, but the same did hide Under a vele, that wimpled was full low, And over all a blacke stole she did throw, As one that inly mournd; so was she sad, And heavie set upon her palfrey slow, Seemed in heart some hidden care she had, And by her in a line a milke white lambe she lad." (Book I, Canto I, Stanza 4) Her innocence is conveyed through the metaphor, which emphasizes the underlying meaning as well as the appearance of her throughout the stanza. ' Snow' embodies purity and rebirth in the literature and it is generally used with ' white' denoting purity, light and innocence. In the second line of this stanza, the speaker says, ' more white now then snow' and the next stanza repeats, " she much whiter". Snow and white already mean pureness and Una is even more innocent then these images. Besides that, in the last line, " a milke white lambe" refers to her chasteness; however, here, there is an allusion for Christianity owing to ' lambe' that is one of the titles of Jesus Christ that is mentioned in the bible, John 1: 29 & John 1: 36, which compares her to Jesus just like in the previous stanza, " as that same lambe". Instead of white, ' fair' is another word used for her both physically and spiritually. King calls for her daughter like this, too; " Then forth he called that his daughter faire, / The fairest Un' his onely

daughter deare, / His onely daughter; and his onely heyre;" (Book I, Canto XII, Stanza 21)

Moreover, the virgin is the one who stays as a girl and who is untouched, ignorant of earthly concerns, which makes her angelic; she never has to acknowledge sexual intercourse. Afterhand, this figure may turn into mother/wife, or seductress if she falls down her purity and commits fornication like it is mentioned in the Revelation; " And there followed another Angel, saying, Babylon that great city is fallen, it is fallen, for she made all nations to drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication." (14: 8) Una prefers the first one, to become wife, and she conserves her chastity until she gets married to Redcross Knight who mentions her as virgin, too: " Thine, O then," said the gentle Redcrosse Knight, " Next to that Ladies love, shalbe the place, O fairest virgin, full of heavenly light, Whose wondrous faith, exceeding earthly race, Was firmest fixt in mine entremest case. And you, my Lord, the Patrone of my life, Of that great Queene may well gaine worthy grace: For onely worthy you through prowes priefe Yf living man mote worthy be, to be her life" (Book I, Canto IX, Stanza 17) In addition to the phrase " fairest virgin", the speaker underlines Una's innocence one more time by saying " heavenly light". Light is wielded as a religious allusion, as well, since Una pulls him to the right way like Jesus as it is mentioned in the Bible; " When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, ' I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'" (John 8: 12) She helps Redcross to find the proper way, the light, in his journey. Likewise, he says, " you, my Lord, the Patrone of my life", he sees her as the protector of himself, he cannot be a

hero without her and he needs her support. Indeed, these can be considered as a socio-cultural stereotype of women together with its literary sense, because women are expected to take care of their mates and help them. Then, in the fourth line, Redcross points out “earthly race”, which refers to the worldly pleasures, her not being besotted with it, and her virginity. Identically, men admire and worship, from time to time, to the virgin stereotype as a result of her beauty and try to seduce her; nevertheless, she cannot be deluded whatever they do since she is the most maiden; “Who, after Archimagoes fowle defeat, Led her away into a forest wilde; And turning wrathfull fyre to lustfull heat, With beastly sin thought her to have defilde, And made the vassal of his pleasures vilde. Yet first he cast by treatie, and by traynes, Her to persuade, that stubborne fort to yilde.” (Book VI, Canto III, Stanza 3)

Conversely, another main character in the Faerie Queene is Duessa who is the stereotype as the whore. She is absolute opposite of the virgin, Una. Even Spenser expresses her as “false Duessa” twenty-two times in the book. Literally, this stereotype is considered as goddess and she is enraptured in men’s weakness by tempting and seducing them through her beauty and sexuality. On the other hand, it is revealed by Arthur that Duessa is not that charming in reality to contrary of what is known when she is captured by him; “So as she bad, that witch they disaraid, And robd of royall robes, and purple pall, And ornaments that richly were displaid; Ne spared they to strip her naked all. Then when they had despoild her tire and call, Such as she was, their eyes might her behold, That her misshaped parts did them appall, A loathly, wrinckled hag, ill favoured, old, Whose secret filth

good manners biddeth not be told.” (Book I, Canto VIII, Stanza 46) This ugliness of her is the result of her moral and inner deformity. A verse from the bible counterbalances this circumstance, as well; “ And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and gilded with gold, and precious stones, and pearls, and had a cup of gold in her hand full of abominations, and filthiness of her fornication.” (Revelation 17: 4) What is essential is not her physical appearance but who she is. Therefore, what Aristotle says comes true; “ The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities.” In this quotation, quality may be substituted for her morals. Thus, what Redcross Knight has to do is to choose either Una or Duessa, either good or bad, either virgin or whore...

Additionally, Duessa takes the advantage of female power of seduction for the purpose of teasing men into the defenceless position; “ Then bowing downe her aged backe, she kist / ... / Did closely lurke; yet so true-seeming grace” (Book I, Canto V, Stanza 27, Lines 1&4) Even though she, even herself, affirms her seductresses; “ Duessa I, the daughter of Deceit and Shame”(Book I, Canto V, Stanza 26, Line 9), she still describes herself as “ virgin widow” (Book I, Canto II, Stanza 24, Line 8) who cannot never be reached. She continues to offer herself to people such as Orgoglia; “... hold thy mortall hand for Ladies sake, / ... / And me thy worthy meed unto thy Leman [mistress] take.” (Book I, Canto VII, Stanza 14, Lines 6&9). From another point of view, the way Duessa acts is to keep men away from their knightly responsibilities in contrast to Una who helps Redcross Knight. She destructs men and brings them to the failure instead of supporting them. Here, it is seen that she is the paradox of socio-cultural stereotypes, as well.

Duessa does not think about wifely or motherly issues while she only cares about sexual pleasure and so she changes her carnal mates very frequently.

In the chivalric romance epic “The Faerie Queene” composed by Edmund Spenser in 1590, the author uses the stereotypes of women in the late sixteenth century. Una and Duessa are personified ingeniously. Spenser achieves his goal, which is to celebrate Elizabeth I, Protestant church and British community. He approaches Queen Elizabeth in terms of virginity, Protestantism, head of the church of England which is the true one and restored by her, her reaching Saint George who is symbolized by Redcross Knight in the poem and her dressing style meanwhile he approaches Mary, Queen of Scots in terms of whoredom, her instigation and infidelity, widowhood, Roman Catholicism which is false church and her execution. The writer substantiates his ideas via verses from the bible time to time in order to be clearer in his expressions.

Works Cited