

Religious and  
historical allegory to  
churches.



Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* follows its protagonist Redcrosse on a traditional hero's journey, all of which is a religious and historical allegory for the conflicts of the church taking place during Spenser's time. Redcrosse encounters the mysterious Duessa on his journey, a figure who he initially trusts, but who ultimately wants to subvert him. Duessa fills not only the role of villain over the course of the story, she also acts as an allegory for the Catholic church and the biblical temptress, adding to Spenser's message of the truth of the Protestant Church and the corruption of Catholicism.

Duessa's constant trickery and deception represent the corruption associated with the Catholic Church. When Redcrosse meets Fradubio, the tree-man explains that Duessa deceived him so that he "took Duessa for my Dame" (805) and engaged in a relationship with her for some time, before he accidentally found her bathing and saw her in her true form, observing that "Her neather partes misshapen, monstrous // were hidd in water, that I could not see // but they did seeme more foule and hideous // then womans shape man would beleeve to bee" (805). Duessa deceives Fradubio into thinking that she's the beautiful woman he fell in love with, when in fact she's a deformed witch, and once he figures out who she is, she turns him into a tree. Duessa creates an image of beauty and innocence but is in reality corrupt and bent on destruction, an attitude that transfers into her interactions with Redcrosse. He is close to discovering who she really is after Fradubio tells his story, but as soon as he turns on her, Duessa pretends to faint, manipulating her appearance so she takes on a "pale and deadly hew" (806). Redcrosse is immediately worried for her and forgets any doubts he had; she manages to manipulate him into caring for her again by depicting

herself as innocent, meek, and helpless. In taking on this facade that allows her to trick the other characters to further her own plans, Duessa also establishes herself as an allegory for the corruption that Spenser and other Protestants of his day believed was embedded in the Catholic Church. Duessa lures men onto her side by portraying herself as a beautiful, innocent maiden in need of a protector, much like Spenser believed the Catholic Church lured potential worshippers by painting themselves as the one true church, when in reality the institution had considerable amounts of corruption, from religious officials enjoying luxurious goods to high-level clergy members taking bribes. Duessa's role in *The Faerie Queene* is to further Spenser's allegory of the truth of the Protestant Church, a role furthered by the fact that she comes from Rome. She moves into the story as a symbol of the corrupting nature of the Catholic Church; a representative from Rome, she makes quick work of deceiving Redcrosse and others into believing that she holds nothing but beauty and innocence, when in reality she is corrupt and wants only to bring about destruction.

In addition to being a force of corruption and destruction, Duessa's mission to distract Redcrosse from his true mission furthers Spenser's allegory that Catholicism distracts from the one truth of the Protestant Church. Redcrosse begins *The Faerie Queene* on a quest to help Una find her family and save her kingdom from a dragon, but once he meets Duessa and hears her of her "sad plight, friendlesse, unfortunate" (801), he is immediately distracted from his original quest and tells Duessa that "may ye rest // having both a new friend you to aid" (802). While he previously was deeply devoted to Una, all thoughts of her fly out the window as soon as Duessa presents her case.

While traveling with her, Redcrosse encounters numerous horrors, from the House of Pride to the giant Orgoglio, and engages in numerous battles in the name of someone who is both cruel and who doesn't care for him at all, rather than using his strength to fight for good. Duessa distracts Redcrosse so that he is unable to see his actual enemies. When Orgoglio attacks, Redcrosse is attacked " ere he could get his armour on him dight // or get his shield" (857). Duessa makes him let his guard down to the point where he is totally unprepared for potential attacks, and as a result is nearly killed by a monster who is fairly significant. When the giant is finally killed by Arthur, his body " was vanisht quite, and of that monstrous mas // was nothing left, but like an empty bladder was" (873). Orgoglio is described as being a large and formidable enemy, but in reality is simply filled with air and completely insignificant once vanquished. Redcrosse may easily have defeated him, as he's defeated larger monsters, but because Duessa has weakened him and distracted his mind away from his original mission, he's unable to defeat even small and insignificant enemies. Duessa is established as the ultimate foil for Una: Una's name literally means " one", further establishing her connection to the one truth of Protestantism, but Duessa's name means " two", alluding to ideas of duality and deception associated with the Catholic Church. In distracting Redcrosse from his mission of helping Una and weakening him in his fight against his enemies, Duessa establishes herself as a counter to Protestantism, and the truth Spenser and his English contemporaries believed it brought. She is not just an obstacle Redcrosse must content with; she represents the distraction from the truth that Spenser and his fellow protestants believed that Catholicism provided for the people of England after the Reformation.

Duessa's seduction alludes to biblical seduction and temptation, establishing her as a religious allegory for the temptress. When Redcrosse first meets her she's dressed in red, " Purfled with gold and pearle of rich assay" (798) and wearing " a Persian mitre on her hed" (798). Duessa is dressed in finery and presents physical beauty, both of which serve in drawing Redcrosse over to her cause: he's drawn in by the image of a beautiful woman. Her primary method of distracting Redcrosse over the course of the poem is to seduce him: Spenser explains that the two of them are " Poured out in loosnesse" (857) together, implying that they've been having sex. Every time Redcrosse grows closer to figuring out who she truly is, she uses her beauty to seduce him into having sex with her. Her seduction eludes to the image of the temptress in the Bible: when she first meets Redcrosse her appearance is also similar to that of the whore of Babylon, who drew in people with her beauty and finery but who was blasphemous. Her temptation of Redcrosse also alludes to Eve, who many readers of the Bible interpret as having tempted Adam to eat the forbidden fruit and caused the two of them to fall from Paradise. Duessa is not just a historical allegory for the Catholic Church: she is also a religious allegory for the figure of the temptress, and in addition to serving as Redcrosse's enemy, she also serves as a continuation of the Bible's message that women who tempt men, through their sexuality or through other means, are not to be trusted and will ultimately come to a bad end.

While Duessa serves as a symbol for Catholicism and biblical temptresses, she also fills the role of feared foreigner in a society terrified of differences. Duessa enters the play as an immediately recognizable foreigner: she's

dressed in bright colors and finery, a direct counter to the figure of Una, who's described as "much whiter" (783) than her white donkey, and who hides "under a vele" (783), as would have been common for high-class English women of the time. Duessa's bright clothes that don't cover her entire body are distinctly out of place when contrasted to Una's wardrobe, and her clothes immediately reveal her to be foreign and "other". Not only is Duessa foreign, however, she is from the Holy Roman Empire: her father was "an Empererour // he that the wide West under his rule has" (801), and therefore has a connection to the Catholicism that would have frightened readers of the time. Not only is Duessa a symbol of a religion deemed corrupt and untrue, she is also a foreigner who comes from a far away land with distinctly different beliefs and different styles of dress. In a time of such severe religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants, anyone who didn't match the accepted British norms and standards - Protestantism, refinement - was immediately viewed as someone to be feared or ostracized. Duessa fills the role of fearsome foreigner, who Spenser's contemporaries would immediately have recognized as an enemy because of her similarities to other enemies of the time. She acts as a villain who undermines Redcrosse, and a symbol of Catholicism and temptation in a society that would have recognized and condemned both, but she also represents the foreign and unknown people who her society would have feared because of their separation from the accepted norm.

The Faerie Queene is an epic poem chronicling battles and adventure, but it also serves as a historical allegory for the Protestant-Catholic conflict in England and a religious allegory for the Bible. Within all three of these

contexts, Duessa serves as a foil for Redcrosse: as a villain, as a symbol for Catholicism and as a symbol for the biblical temptress. She also represents the fear of foreigners and anyone who strayed from the norms of Spenser's day, by acting as a person who readers of the time would have already perceived as a villain, but in every possible form, she represents a challenge to be faced and an obstacle to be overcome.