

The importance of gender sexuality in book iii of the faerie queene



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Varying representations of both genders are abundant in romantic literature of the Renaissance period in general, a fine example of which can be found in Edmund Spenser's allegorical epic poem, *The Faerie Queene*. The poem depicts the tale of seven knights, who each represent the desirable noble virtues of holiness, temperance, chastity, friendship, justice and courtesy. Book three of *The Faerie Queene* is concerned with the virtue of chastity, "that fairest vertue, farre above the rest" (Smith 342), which is embodied by the knight Britomart, a woman who has disguised herself as a male knight in armour. Britomart's chastity is almost portrayed as the infinite source of her physical and emotional strength in the poem, enabling her to resist and ultimately defeat all which may threaten to corrupt it. The chaste, pure love Britomart has for Arthegall can not be tainted by lust, despite the advances of Malecasta, the impassioned and sensual lady of Castle Joyeous, where she lives guarded by six servant knights who defend the lady and her honour.

The theme of chastity serves as a tool through which Spenser provides a critique on sexual ideology in his own time and how this ideology differs between the two genders. Lauren Silberman has theorised that "the Spenserian critique of conventional sexual ideology becomes part of a cultural discourse that, several centuries later, produced feminism" (2) and upon considering this, it is impossible to ignore the fact of extreme progressiveness towards gender and sexuality employed by Spenser in his political viewpoint and consequently, in his writing. This essay aims to explore the importance of gender in Book III of the *Faerie Queene*, and particularly in the early cantos, as it determines the process and outcome of the pursuit of romantic desire for multiple characters and the ways that it

provides a channel through which we can derive an explanation for events occurring in the way that they do.

Probably the most profound example of the importance of gender and sexuality in Book III is realized through the representation of love as a hunt, with men as the hunters and women as the hunted. In this way, gender becomes the most significant distinguishing indicator of characters and their representation, influencing all the events that occur in each of their stories. In the first canto, Arthur and Sir Guyon are riding on horseback in search of the Faerie Queene so that they may offer their services to her. Britomart, disguised as a male knight, happens across their path and, after a brief altercation, they make peace and continue on together. Suddenly, a maiden runs past them, pursued closely by a forester who intends to rape her, “breathing out beastly lust her to defile.” (Smith 348) The two knights follow hastily, while Britomart continues on with her quest, undistracted.

Thus far, Spenser has provided the reader with two clear images of the female gender. Firstly, the hunted creature, an object pursued by men for their own gratification, and then Britomart, “a more productive alternative” (Silberman 14) to typical gender ideology, wherein a woman can pursue her own quest for romantic fulfillment, and take on the role of hunter. In this case, of course, it is important to note that while she has rejected societal expectation based on her gender, Britomart can only assume this position of autonomy and pursue the object of her desire without fear of danger or judgement by rejecting her own gender, casting off femininity and disguising herself as a man. So while Spenser has provided an alternative image of the

female gender, even still he is aware that this alternative can not be without limitation.

This scene of love as a pursuit is also highly reminiscent of traditional Petrarchan interpretations of the same subject matter. Even more noteworthy than the conventional representation of women as the helpless, hunted object, is the image here of men as slaves to their sexual desire. The male characters in Book III are often presented as being helpless in terms of controlling their yearnings, but especially in this early scene during the first canto, Arthur and Guyon seem to blindly abandon their initial quest in favour of pursuing a totally unknown maiden, “ a bit like horses who break in to a gallop simply because they observe other horses galloping.” (Silberman 29) Their motives are highly ambiguous; they appear to be “ full of great ennuie and fell jealousy” (Smith 348) and make the impulsive and irrational decision to pursue the maiden rather than her persecutor, despite their intentions to rescue Florimell from him.

The implication here is that these male characters are at the mercy of physical forces beyond their control or understanding. If questioning the motives behind the male romantic pursuit, we must also question those of Britomart and her quest to find the object of her affections, a knight who she has seen in a mirror given to her father by Merlin. The critical difference between the two lies in the legitimacy of the feelings fuelling each one, a difference that is solely dependent on gender. For Arthur and Guyon, lust fuels “ beauties chace” (Smith 348), a phrase which epitomizes Spenser’s opinion of it: fleeting, false and unsubstantial. Britomart, however, is inspired by chaste love, a love “ sanctioned by the goal of marriage” (Mikics 88). She <https://assignbuster.com/the-importance-of-gender-sexuality-in-book-iii-of-the-faerie-queene/>

transforms herself in to a knight, after the image of her love Arthegall, and thus, “ the lover is transformed into the beloved”. (Silberman 29) In an unprecedented reversal of gender roles, Britomart becomes the character driven by reason and rational thinking inspired by chastity, while the male knights are ruled by emotion, lust and impulsive action inspired by sex.

In the previous scene, in which Guyon and Britomart (whose true gender and identity Guyon is unaware of) partake in a duel, Britomart knocks Guyon off his horse using a magical sword which she has taken from her father’s possession. This whole scenario perhaps inadvertently raises some poignant questions about the ability to choose one’s own gender and the benefits which may come from doing so. This is the reader’s initial encounter with Britomart, and we are deceptively led to believe that this is an example of female empowerment, where Britomart can display her prowess and prove herself as worthy despite her gender. However, this is not the level playing field it appears to be, and we come to realize that while Spenser boasts progressive ideas about gender ideology, he is confined still by a traditional fear of feminine defeat over masculinity. Britomart can only win in fight against a man when using a magical spear, and she uses it to unabashedly goes far and beyond what is necessary to protect herself from masculine aggression throughout Book III. Spenser also confines his female heroine by disallowing her the freedom to flaunt both masculine and feminine characteristics, so that she spends most of the book taking every precaution to conceal her true sex. However, Britomart knows that she can achieve much more and come much closer to her destiny if she can continue pretending to be a man. As Jane Blanchard has observed, “ as a knight-in-

arms, [Britomart] can conquer male combatants and flirt with licentious females before hanging up her helmet and her spear to settle down as a wife and mother.” (39)

In summary, the importance of gender and sex in Book III of *The Faerie Queene*, and more specifically in the early parts of it, lies in the remarkable difference between the pursuit of love for the male and female characters. The representations of gender differ greatly, so that not only does Spenser offer a critique of gender and sexual ideology of his time in general, but also provides an alternative in the form of his heroine, Britomart, even if it proves problematic at times. In Book III, gender is the dominant defining characteristic that most significantly determines how the story of each character unfolds, and ultimately the outcome of their success in pursuing the objects of their desire.

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