

# The man in the mirror: the influence of reflections on allegory and chastity



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The role of the magic mirror in Britomart's encounter with Arthegall extends beyond the fact that it drives her quest to find him. It is also the center point of Spenser's theme of reflection and representation and its influence on his use of allegory and chastity. By identifying mirrors as a symbol for allegory, and then underscoring the misleading qualities of reflections, Spenser hints that allegory, though directly reflective of one main theme, can be simultaneously interpreted multiple ways. This suggests that the allegory of Chastity has several meanings other than that of an entirely non-sexualized, virginal woman. Unlike in Book I, Spenser's writing in Book III is not meant as a tool for blatant moralizing. Here, he is much more interested in the abilities of his verse to create a "lively... pourtraict" of Queen Elizabeth, a "mirrour [for] her selfe to see", a reflection made of words (231-2). Spenser's mirrors reveal his quest to find the true identities of his characters and muses by examining their reflections, using tools like Merlin's magic mirror, which "like to the world it self, and seemed a world of glas" (254). It serves the same purpose of allegory, creating an entirely new domain that reflects and comments on the themes and events of the real world without requiring it to be a painstakingly exact copy. Similarly, Spenser concedes that his mirror of verse, despite representing "living art", cannot be completely "life-resembling" (231). Therefore, he indirectly describes Elizabeth, his actual subject, through several varied 'mirror images' of her, all of which are allegorized as Chastity. A mirror reflection can comment on allegory through their similar natures as one dimensional, formless images and fictional characters. In describing the very human Elizabeth using the imaginary Britomart, Spenser both mirrors and allegorizes her. The mirror is, in fact, a symbol of and an allegory on allegory itself. However, many of the mirrors in <https://assignbuster.com/the-man-in-the-mirror-the-influence-of-reflections-on-allegory-and-chastity/>

Canto III present reflections that are rather misleading. Elizabeth is represented by Chastity, but Chastity is in turn represented by a number of women in Canto III, from Belpheobe to Amoret to Britomart to Florimel, each of whom also represents an entirely different set of characteristics. If each of these is meant to be a mirror image of Elizabeth, then it would seem that Spenser's mirrors are so bewitched that each look produces a completely different reflection. Perhaps due to the presence of mischievous magic, the enchanted mirror that Britomart looks into is surrounded by contradictions. Its origins are suspect; it is alternately referred to as "Venus looking glas" and as "the glassie globe that Merlin made/ And gave unto king Ryence" and compared to mirrors made by "Great Ptolomae... by Magicke power" (234, 254). The mirror's reflections are equally ambiguous. Arthegall is merely the "shade and semblant of a knight" (258), a mere impression, the smoke and the mirror. He appears when Britomart looks at the glass, as if his reflection preempts her own transformation into a manly knight. As a mirror image, he is as a "fine forgerie" (245), a 'deceitful' copy of Britomart when she misleads everyone with her manly disguise, like Elizabeth did with her manly power and aggressiveness. In addition to a magical mirror's unreliability, creating a mirror through verse is also prone to deception. Britomart, with only Arthegall's face imprinted into her mind, tries to build up a more complete image of him through others' testimony. She confirms Spenser's earlier worry that words are not truthful enough to paint honest, faithful representations when she compels Arthur to defile Arthegall's name and then induces Redcrosse to praise him. She ends up with a mental picture of her love that stems from what she wants to see, and not necessarily what actually is true. One also can never completely trust the motives or goal of a <https://assignbuster.com/the-man-in-the-mirror-the-influence-of-reflections-on-allegory-and-chastity/>

Spenser mirror/allegory. In Britomart's case, the mirror revealed her true love, only to cause her pain from the ensuing love wound. Love is usually chastity's enemy, as it encourages and causes "ill" and "evill" to purity (266); Britomart describes her love resentfully in terms of "bitter stowre [and] horror" (250). Under the guise of an agent of love, like the protean wicked witches of fairy tales consulting their mirror on the wall, the "mirrhour fayre" maliciously sets Britomart on an unrelenting, agonizing search after a mere shadow (254). As two allegories clashing, Britomart representing Chastity and the mirror representing Allegory battle to determine how rigidly the mirror can control Britomart, and vice versa. Ultimately, there is a compromise. Chastity can be more loosely interpreted, and allegory does not need to imitate its subjects so exactly. As a result, the ambiguity of Britomart's reflection through the magic mirror and the mirror of Spenser's words suggests that there is room for interpreting women's virtue, which she embodies. So that love is not so painful, Spenser proposes that the translation of the Chastity allegory might also be able to accommodate feminine eroticism and manly dominance. Flouting her strict standards of honor, Spenser highlights Britomart's womanly sensuality by subtly surrounding her with unchaste imagery. When discussing Arthegall, Britomart seems to betray an emotion much more passionate than virginal affection; she can barely describe him without having an orgasmic reaction in her curiously "alablaster brest" in "which all that while she felt to pant and quake/ as it an Earth-quake were" (259). With the loosened allegorical constraints, it is acceptable, even desirable, for chaste women to know and enjoy sensual delights, and pursue them (as Britomart does) for pure-hearted reasons. While it is sinful to solely lust after men's physical

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attributes, chaste minds can still process wholesome love and its natural consequences of procreation. Britomart's Nurse describes her as being strongly affected by the image in Merlin's mirror, and being "deepe engrafted [and] infested" by the consequent love (266). Like Chrysogonee, Britomart's chastity is penetrated by something immaterial, without physical body, that is reminiscent of Malbecco, who became an allegory when his "substance was consumed to nought" (374). Similarly, the non-corporeal 'shade' of Arthegall and the matter-less sunshine also represent allegory. Like mirror reflections, which can be infinite depending on how many times someone looks into a glass, they reproduce using the images of the women who happen to be present. When Chrysogonee and Britomart, the representatives of Chastity, are unwittingly impregnated by substance-less allegory, Spenser allows chastity to experience and embrace sexual love while remaining blameless and clean-hearted. Mirrors are powerful vehicles for the womanly vanity and self-love that allows for sensual pleasure. The value of reflections and mirrors is based on images and visible things, like color. In Canto III, Spenser often mirrors Britomart's pure whiteness with contrasting redness to suggest an attitude of Chastity that is far from innocently unadulterated. Spenser uses the word "colourable" to mean 'deceptive' (267). The virginal warrior's purity, defined by her extreme paleness and blonde hair, is often corrupted and stained by blood or blush, by other men or through her own fiery love. In Malecasta's castle, she is attacked by Gardante, who represents 'looking' and sight, the sense that is most pleased by mirrors. He metaphorically rapes her with his eyes and his phallic sword, until her left her "lilly smock with staines of vermeil steepe" (248). Her Nurse tries to cure her lovesickness with a potion of milk and <https://assignbuster.com/the-man-in-the-mirror-the-influence-of-reflections-on-allegory-and-chastity/>

blood, both feminine fluids. When she thinks of her love, “ her pure yvory/ into a cleare Carnation suddeine dyde” (267). Chastity is not immune to sexual overtones. Indeed, Spenser links Britomart indirectly with Adonis, the lover of Venus, goddess of physical pleasure. Both mirror each other, with their pure hearts bloody with love wounds that “ staines [their] snowy skin” (242). Both are represented by lustily red, “ dainty flowres” (242), as if their chastity was meant to bloom and be deflowered, not kept in budded-up innocence. Chastity should not be blindly, militantly non-sexualized; in order for chaste hearts to stop bleeding from apparently hopeless love, love and adoration must be portrayed as something normal and pleasing. At the same time, however, Spenser implies that Britomart’s chastity is so well maintained because she completely avoids all eroticism, discredits her femininity and ignores the burden of purity by becoming entirely like a man. In this scenario, her arsenal of male weapons completely defends her chastity. In times of crisis, her “ snow-white smocke” is defended by “ her avenging blade” (248). Here, to be “ despoiled”, she can simply ‘ disrobe’ (247), dropping the shield of her manly armor and nakedly advertising herself as a woman. Ironically, it is only when she is immersed in the strongly phallic, penetrative imagery of her sword, her “ griding”, ‘ piercing’ weapon that her feminine virginity becomes invulnerable (248). It is as if she is more comfortable in the armor and attitude of a man because, peculiarly, her chastity is only truly safe when her invincible male image aggressively ‘ penetrates’ her weaker female copy until her natural identity is as a man, and her mirror image is womanly only her spirit. Spenser raises yet another method for Chastity to be achieved. Mirrors allow women to see copies of themselves, to be “ vewd in vaine” (254). It also encourages them to admire <https://assignbuster.com/the-man-in-the-mirror-the-influence-of-reflections-on-allegory-and-chastity/>

beauty, to focus on the visual. Ultimately, a mirror allows a form of self-appreciation and spiritual self-generation, which, for women, would invalidate the purpose of most men, then allowing them to easily retain their chastity. However, since mirrors obviously are not sufficient for physical reproduction, men stay in the frame. Even so, Spenser suggests a state of affairs in which mirrors, sight, and concentration on the visual cause traditional roles of gender and sexuality to be inverted, as if reflected in a circus funhouse mirror. Here, women do the looking; the Peeping Toms of Canto III are mostly female. Venus peeps on Adonis while he bathes (which overturns the conventional position of men like David watching women like Bathsheba in their vulnerability). At dinner, Malecasta peeps on Britomart, who peeps on Arthegall in the mirror. In these relationships, women dominate the positions of power, and coddle their lovers while also keeping an eye on them. The mirror again reflects another version of loving, sensual Chastity as empowering, and Allegory as generously open for interpretation.