

The Hierarchy of Love:
Order Through Chastity in
The Faerie Queene

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Abstract

The virtue of chastity is the subject of Book III of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, and allegorical figures represent various kinds of love, which, together, form an experience of chastity in the mind of the reader. I approach Book III as a Christian Platonic reader with the belief that in *The Faerie Queene*, Platonic idealism seems to become, through Christianity, a human experience. Much of my understanding of a Christian Platonic perspective has come from St. Augustine, who embraced the Platonic tradition as a way to understand the physical and spiritual world while remaining true to the Christian faith. Augustine teaches that we must understand the dynamics of our spiritual selves to navigate the world of the senses, perceived by the physical self. I also refer directly to the works of Plato, which are poetic and esoteric in meaning, and so contain many parallels to the poetry of Spenser that open *The Faerie Queene* to a Platonic reading. And so, with what I understand as a Christian Platonic perspective, I discuss the virtue of chastity as the means to ascend a platonic scale of love. The variety of desires and expressions of love in *The Faerie Queene* may then be seen as a hierarchy, in which the lowest, or base desires are physical and experienced through the senses, and the highest form of love is spiritual and experienced on the intellectual plane.

Christianity, then, may be the bridge between the platonic conception of the spiritual and material worlds, and can also be the bridge of consciousness between chastity in virginity and chastity in marriage. The figures in Book III show various levels of consciousness, and in my thesis, I suggest that chastity can be seen as a virtue formed by the consciousness of physical desire and the subsequent decision to subordinate base loves of the flesh to spiritual love of the soul. What I take the reader through, ideally, is a way to piece together the many fragments of the poem into an integrated "experience" of chastity, and also a way to see how a Christian Platonic perspective can relate the world around us, the world we experience through the senses, to the world we know only through our minds—and even then not fully.

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Short Titles

FQ: Spenser, Edmund. The Faerie Queene. Spenser: Poetical Works. Edited by E. De Selincourt et al. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970.

Conf: Augustine of Hippo. Confessions. Translated by R.S. Pine-Coffin. London: Penguin Books, 1961.

City: Augustine of Hippo. Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans. Translated by Henry Bettenson. London: Penguin Books, 1961.

EM: Augustine of Hippo. "The Excellence of Marriage." The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century I/9: Marriage and Virginitv. Edited by John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. Translated by Ray Kearney. New York: New City Press, 1999. 33-61.

For now we see in a mirror, dimly,

But then we will see face to face.

Now I know only in part;

Then I will know fully,

Even as I have been fully known.

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three;

And the greatest of these is love.

I Corinthians 13:12-13

Introduction

Spenser dedicated what became his greatest work to “fashion[ing] a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline”¹ with the belief that social reform must first take place within the individual. Yet this reform was to be the “generall end” of the *The Faerie Queene*, a state of mind in the reader achieved through allegorical experience of virtue. “Knowing how doubtfully all allegories may be construed,”² Spenser constructed his poem with the intention of unearthing long-buried truth from layers of deceitful connotations accreted through repeated misuse of the language. By allegorizing moral virtue as a manifold projection of the individual mind, Spenser allows the reader to see beyond rigid definition, which could only represent external virtue. Virtue thus becomes an experience rather than an unforgiving, impersonal rule.

Chastity is the supreme virtue of six in *The Faerie Queene*,³ and as the titular virtue for Book III, chastity seems to be the climactic theme of the first three books and the foundation of the last three. The important role of Book III to the structure of the rest of the poem⁴ can show how chastity, imagined in *The Faerie Queene* as virtuous love, is the source of energy for all life, and provides the means for the upward ascension of the human soul. Yet Spenser seems to show us that this ascending experience of virtuous love can only be understood by seeing many fragments of what it is and what it is not. As I hope to express in this thesis, the harmonization of discordant fragments of the poem

¹ Spenser, “Letter to Raleigh,” 1589, line 8.

² Ibid, line 3.

³ Spenser originally planned to include the twelve moral virtues of Aristotle. Whether the poem is unfinished with the six existing virtues is a matter of interpretation, and many critics argue that the *Mutabilitie* cantos, which are usually printed following Book VI, are evidence that Spenser did not intend to fulfill his original plan of twelve virtues.

⁴ Many critics have noted that the narrative and poetic figures in Book III are not confined to demonstrating the virtue of chastity. For example, the RedCrosse Knight of Book I, although he appears in other books, does not contribute much beyond his virtue of Holinesse. Britomart, the hero of Book III, represents chastity, but also plays a significant role in the Books of Friendship and Justice (IV & V).

takes place in the mind of the reader, and so it is necessary to position oneself at the right distance to see the whole. I have found that a Christian Platonic interpretation of Book III offers a way to relate the various representations of chastity, especially marital and virginal chastity.

With this in mind, my objective is to relate the integrated experience of chastity, as occurring through the reader, to a Christian Platonic concept of love. To come to such an understanding, I will not try to determine Spenser's own commitment to Christian Platonism, but how a Christian Platonic reader might read Book III of *The Faerie Queene*. In my thesis, I am not concerned whether Spenser was a Christian, Platonist, Protestant, romantic poet, or epic poet, since he represents an aspect of all of these, and *The Faerie Queene* is a fusion of different philosophical, religious, and poetic traditions. My focus will not be to read the Book of Chastity and directly trace the influence of any single tradition or even the influence of the familiar combination of traditions under the name of Christian Platonism.⁵ Spenser will always elude us; the ambiguities in *The Faerie Queene* will confound us.

Instead of a more objective critical perspective, I will define myself as a Christian Platonic reader, identifying with a tradition of reading instead of identifying Spenser with a tradition of writing. What I have to say about the Book of Chastity has been influenced by my interpretation of texts that have had timeless authority in the evolving tradition of Christian Platonism.⁶ Although there are far too many Biblical parallels in the poem to

⁵ It should be noted, however, that Spenser was motivated by his own dedication to the faith in reforming Christian virtues through allegory.

⁶ Among several others, these texts include Augustine's *Confessions*, *City of God*, and *Moral Treatises*, the dialogues of Plato, Ficino's *De Amore* (a commentary on the *Symposium*), and the Geneva translation of the Bible. I use this translation because it was the most common household Bible when Spenser wrote *The Faerie Queene*, and although he would have been familiar with other translations as well, it is not unlikely that he would have frequently referred to the Geneva Bible. Rather than use a modern translation for the

consider them all, I look to many verses in the works of Paul because there I find the most helpful ways to understand what virtuous love in *The Faerie Queene* can mean to a Christian Platonic reader. Augustine provides illuminating commentaries on the Epistles of Paul and other Biblical texts, and his life and works offer a key source from which we may derive our Christian Platonic perspective.⁷ In addition to these religious and philosophical texts, I will also look to Spenserian critics who have dealt with Platonic and Christian themes in *The Faerie Queene*. Undoubtedly C.S. Lewis has been a major influence in my reading of the poem, and of allegory in general, because of his emphasis on the philosophical and moral themes in *The Faerie Queene* and his insistence on reading Spenser's creations not as autonomous beings, but as elements of a whole.⁸ Although his criticism has served as starting-point for a philosophical and moral interpretation,⁹ I have not found any reading of Book III that offers a Christian Platonic interpretation of the virtue of chastity. Perhaps it is because chastity does not seem to relate much to Platonism, and that when Platonism is introduced to the study of Book III, critical emphasis goes to the theme of beauty and leaves the theme of chastity largely unexplored.

How, then, does a Christian perspective relate to Platonism? And what could an integration of these paths of thought possibly contribute to our understanding of chastity? I will try my best to answer these questions (though I will not pretend to give a summary of either Christianity or Platonism), and show how the theme of chastity in Book III

purposes of this thesis, I find it easier to relate the Geneva text to the poem because the language is more consistent between the two.

⁷ I will explain why in the next section.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Spenser's Images of Life*, ed. Alastair Fowler (Cambridge, 1967) 113.

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Allegory of Love* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 321. Hereafter cited in the text as "AL."

becomes, through a Christian Platonic perspective, a hierarchy of love.

Christianity, Platonism, and the Order of Love

Through Christianity, the Platonic concept of love as a “want” became a “circle,” overflowing from heaven in the form of God’s love for humanity. The individual soul may complete the circle by ascending the “ladder” of platonic love to the spiritual realm.¹⁰ Marsilio Ficino, a Renaissance Neoplatonist,¹¹ popularized the concept of “platonic love,” which he held to be the love between souls, existing on a spiritual, intellectual level. The highest form of love, both for Plato and Ficino, was the love for the soul, and this kind of love would not be expressed through physical means. In his commentary (*De Amore*) on Plato’s *Symposium*, Ficino writes:

That light and beauty of the soul we comprehend with the intellect alone.
(Ficino, 2.9)

Yet Ficino seems to Christianize Platonic ideas of love by asserting that creation, which includes the entire sensible world, is essentially good (which is a seven-fold assertion by God in Genesis), but that one must not be content to remain in the sensible world.

Human desire must strive for the spiritual, intelligible world; thus it must strive to ascend the platonic scale of love.

He who properly uses love certainly praises the form of the body, but through that contemplates the higher beauty of the soul, the mind, and God, and admires and loves that more strongly. (Ficino 2.7)

¹⁰ Robert Ellrodt, *Neoplatonism in the Poetry of Spenser* (Geneva 1960), 155, 205.

¹¹ Ellrodt describes Renaissance Neoplatonism as a “seething mass of confused thinking,” referring to the way in which “all known systems of philosophy were tortured into harmony by the minds of men more alive to likenesses than sensitive to discrepancies” (Ellrodt 9). In this thesis, however, I will focus on texts written by or directly influenced by Plato.

It is this integration of Christianity and Platonism¹² that I think lends a way to understand Spenser's poem as a spiritual journey that relies upon the beauty of creation to begin ascending the scale of love. I do not try to ascribe any Platonic text to Spenser's poetry,¹³ but instead try to use an understanding of Platonic texts as a way to understand the spiritual significance of the virtue of chastity in *The Faerie Queene*. The virtue of chastity, therefore, does not require the death of all physical desire, but rather the mastery of it. As Ellrodt points out:

The originality of Spenser's philosophy of love lies in the association of Platonic idealism with an acceptance of bodily union limited by ethical standards. (Ellrodt 146)

This is to say that in *The Faerie Queene*, we seem to have Platonic idealism made into a human experience through Christianity. Because in Christianity marriage is a sacrament, bodily union becomes part of the experience of spiritual love.¹⁴ Nevertheless, to the Christian mind, all worldly loves are limited by and subject to the corrupted state of humanity. Because we can never escape the perspective of our minds, we must use reason to make our way through the world of the senses. The imperfection of the human mind, because of our Fallen condition, keeps us from seeing truth as a whole.

¹² In *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, Jon A. Quitslund's entry for "Platonism" defines the term as meaning "both the doctrines found in Plato's writings, and a tradition extending from pagan antiquity through the Christian centuries beyond the Renaissance." As for the significance of Platonic texts for Spenser's poetry, Quitslund writes: "While Plato's dialogues do not offer a single coherent system, they have stimulated many philosophers and poets to build worlds of their own around ideas attributed to Plato. Our subject (Platonism) was known to Spenser as a profusion of opinions, not an "ism."

¹³ For the dangers of mere source ascription to the poetry of Spenser, see Ellrodt p. 9.

¹⁴ On a larger scale, the Word made flesh (I John 1:1), the foundation of the Christian religion, formed a bridge between heaven and earth (in Platonic terms, similar to the intelligible and the sensible). The human experience, as Christianity teaches, is both spiritual and physical, and the physical must be subordinate to the spiritual to escape death.

Using both Christian and Platonist ideas, Augustine teaches that the soul must use the intellect to navigate through the world of the senses to eventually free itself from it. Addressing God in his *Confessions*, Augustine writes:

By reading the books of the Platonists I had been prompted to look for truth as something incorporeal, and I caught sight of your invisible nature, as it is known through your creatures. (*Conf* VII.20)

Paradoxically, *The Faerie Queene* brings us into a world of sensible things wholly through the intellect or our reading experience. The figures of the poem are subject to the perceptions of the body, but the reader is able to experience the narrative on a higher plane. Like the Platonists, Augustine believes in the mutability of the soul, and therefore in the potential for a human to undergo moral refinement. He also makes the Platonic distinction between the body and the soul, and regards the intellect as having authority over the non-rational body.

As I have learned from the writings of Paul and Augustine, Original Sin stripped humanity of willful control of the body, and so we must struggle to overcome the base desire of the flesh¹⁵ through reason and virtuous love, in hope of ascending from the depths of chaos and coming to an ordered state of being, in which the rational mind rules the unconscious and irrational desires of the flesh.

Let not sinne reign therefore in your mortal bodie, that ye shoulde obey it in the lusts thereof. (Rom 6:12)

¹⁵ Following the examples of Paul and Augustine, I use the term “flesh” to refer to both the physical body and the material world perceived through the senses.

Augustine's *Confessions* is a first-hand account of this struggle, and shows that consciousness of sinful desire does not guarantee their subordination.¹⁶ Augustine reflects on the "strange phenomenon" of the division between our will and our desires, and how the mind cannot obey its own command.

Why does this strange phenomenon occur? What causes it? O Lord in your mercy give me light to see, for it may be that the answer to my question lies in the secret punishment of man and the penitence which casts a deep shadow on the sons of Adam. (*Conf* VIII.9)

We cannot begin to understand the united, unchanging force of Providence and the common rule of love that governs all things until we have achieved unity in our own minds. As Paul relates:

But I se[e] another law in my members, rebelling against the law of my minde, and leading me captive unto the law of sinne, which is in my members. (Rom 7:23)

Chastity is the conscious effort to conquer the sinful desire of the body to rule the unruly, to order the disordered. The figures of unchaste love in Book III show different levels of consciousness, and the various ways the mind can react to the force of love working through the senses. The figures I interpret as unchaste represent the effects of degenerate love, that is, love not ordered by chastity. Without chastity to subordinate the unconscious desires of the flesh, the poetic figures seem to display a chaotic, destructive energy rather than an ordered, constructive (or spiritually ascending) energy.

The importance of chastity for the Christian Platonic reader may be the way love acts as a universal force, moving all creation and maintaining order in the individual, society, and the entire cosmos. Love, as in the Platonic model, has many forms in *The*

¹⁶ Recalling his past struggles with physical desire, Augustine writes: "For my part I was a prisoner of habit, suffering cruel torments through trying to satisfy a lust that could never be sated." Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961) VI.2.

Faerie Queene, and we can distinguish between “chaste” loves, which lead to virtuous deeds, and “false” loves, which lead to destruction. By comparing the lustful desires and false loves to spiritual desire and virtuous love in *The Faerie Queene*, I hope to show how the various shades and semblances of love form an understanding of platonic love, and how this understanding of love relates to Christianity. I will also argue that the means to ascend the platonic scale of love is through chastity, and it is this virtue that achieves and sustains order within an individual (by subordinating the body to the mind) and in society (by subordinating the self to others and God). Through a Christian Platonist lens, I allow that false love can become right love through subordination of mundane desire, and so maintain that Spenser shows us that even the highest form of love may begin in base desire.

Allegory and the Authorization of Virtue

Allegory is a powerful literary tool not for its presentations of new material, but for its *representations* of familiar ones. For allegory to be effective, the reader must have preconceived notions of the allegorical figures, and must be willing to reshape and even abandon these notions after initial association with the familiar ideas in the text. This is the didactic function of allegory: the employment of verbal images to “paint” the morals of the text onto the mind of the reader. Yet this rhetorical use of language can also imprison ideas to a closed image, blocking the reader from seeing more than one aspect. Language, therefore, can be dangerous in its effectiveness of representation (the extent to which the image adheres to the reader’s mind). Spenser acknowledges the limitations of language and denies poetry the skill to perfectly represent life in the proem to Book III:

But living art may not least expresse,
 Nor life-resembling pencil it can paynt,
 All were it *Zeuxis* or *Praxiteles*:
 His daedale hand would faile, and greatly faynt,
 And her perfections with his error taynt:
 Ne Poets wit, that passeth Painter farre
 In picturing the parts of beauty daynt,
 So hard a workemanship adventure darre,
 For feare through want of words her excellence to marre. (*FQ* III proem 2)

Spenser claims the artist always fails in attempting to portray perfect beauty, in this instance the beauty of chastity, and by doing so also shows the impossibility for art to give anything other than insufficient fragments of the divine (though he does allow that the poet, using language, comes much closer to perfection than the painter). Spenser's art evades idolatry because of the contradictions, tangles, and missing pieces. As the reader must experience all kinds of love in *The Faerie Queene*, the poem seems to support the Platonic idea of love as an ascending journey to goodness, or virtue.

That Spenser seems to recognize the distinction between the divine and the material world invites a Platonic reading of *The Faerie Queene*, and we can use this perspective to experience the living world behind the pages of poetry. Owen Barfield, in *Poetic Diction*, notes that

...It was not in the nature of English poetry before the seventeenth century to "add" meaning to words in this way (referring to the "soul" of a word), by evoking their hidden reality. Thus Spenser, who made all English into a language of his own, half-creating in his poesy another Spenserian world, which never quite touches the real one, gave little of *permanence* to language. (Barfield 117-18)

In *The Faerie Queene*, words are not so much material objects representing material things, but more like an association of ideas representing many aspects of an issue. This use of language relates to Platonic philosophy, which distinguishes between the sensible/material world and the intelligible/spiritual world. For Plato, the spiritual is

reality, and the material world, which can never escape the limitations of the senses, is an illusion.

Art is an attempt to communicate between the sensible and the intelligible worlds (as I understand it through a Christian Platonic perspective), and the imitation of life in art is matter for inexhaustible philosophical discussion.¹⁷ However, when art attempts to imitate or describe the divine, the issue becomes much more sensitive. As shown by recurrent instances of schism over the use of iconography in the church, religious authorities have often seen art as blasphemy and idolatry. In Spenser's time, Protestants fought against the Catholicism's traditional reliance on material and pictorial representations of religious beliefs. More radical Protestants even condemned the use of words to devise representations of the divine, claiming that Scripture was the only acceptable material form to embody the Word of God. Spenser was concerned that his allegory would be construed as an idolatrous work,¹⁸ and frequently frees his poem from any presumptions by disclaiming his own ability as a poet to imitate the divine:

Right well I wote most mighty souveraine,
That all this famous antique history,
Of some th'aboundance of an ydle braine
Will judged be, and painted forgery,
Sith none, that breatheth living aire does know
Where is that happy land of faery
Which I so much do waunt, yet no where show,
But vouch antiquities,¹⁹ where no body can show. (*FQ* II proem I)

¹⁷ In defense of the romantic and/or phantastic in literature (as Spenser's poem certainly is to me), I think the closer art comes to imitating life, the more suspicious we should be. By disposing of the details that make a work of art "realistic," we have a more transparent view of true reality, or what is going on behind the curtain.

¹⁸ For the precarious position of art in the debate over iconography and idolatry, and the reactions of Spenser and his contemporaries, see Linda Gregerson, *Reformation of the Subject: Spenser, Milton, and the Protestant Epic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁹ "Antiquities" may refer both to the muses' role in inspiring Spenser's poem and to the use of Greek mythology, which are often used by Christian artists because the lives of the pagan gods and goddesses represent primal concepts of love and human nature.

In this passage, Spenser directly addresses the Queen-- for his poem to win approval in Elizabeth's court, Spenser needed to praise the Queen's virtue and sovereign ability²⁰-- but also seems to address religious consciences in his displacement of the poem to the "land of faery," where it may not be conflated with the "reality" of England²¹ or even with our own presumptions, which may be influenced by impure definitions of virtue.

A truly virtuous human, by traditional Christian definition, is one who leads a life of uncompromising abstinence from the pleasures of the body, be it from food, luxuries, or sexual gratification.²² Spenser does not abandon this template of virtue altogether, but adjusts it in a manner that seems very much aligned with Christian Platonic philosophy; *The Faerie Queene* leaves room for human loves and earthly passions in a complex integration of moral virtues. Augustine took a similar position against the strict doctrine of the Manicheans, who eschewed all earthly loves in favor of a wholly spiritual life. The Manicheans believed that the human soul was trapped in a sinful body, and so all earthly experiences were potentially dangerous to the soul, including marriage to another human, which implied consummation of sexual desire. As we also see in Plato's *Symposium*,

²⁰ Elizabeth was Queen of England when Spenser wrote *The Faerie Queene*, and though she did not accept the role of highest religious authority, her approval was the most precious, and was often the determining factor of success for poets, playwrights, and courtiers. I will venture to insert here that Elizabeth was more concerned with political affairs than religious ones, and dealt with religion as it was most advantageous to maintain stability in her court and kingdom, as much as this was possible.

²¹ This is not to say that there are no allusions to specific political, social, and religious affairs in *The Faerie Queene*; indeed, there are many more than contemporary readers may be able to appreciate, but such a discussion must be left to another study. I will attempt only to explain the philosophical and religious aspects of love and chastity, mostly limited to Book III. Such is the richness of Spenser-- to come to any illuminated understanding of *The Faerie Queene*, I have personally come to see one must approach the many angles of the poem with patience, and, in my case, much outside reading to even recognize them.

²² By emphasizing virtues as models for the Christian daily life, Spenser was faithful to his Protestant background, although we cannot exclude Catholic influence from his poetry. Goethe has commented on the difference between Protestantism and Catholicism: "Protestantism concentrates on the moral development of the individual; virtue is the first and last of its concerns, hence it is also a factoring our social lives. God recedes into the background; heaven remains empty; and immortality is reduced to an object of speculation." As for Catholicism, "ethical self development is out of the picture" (von Goethe, Wolfgang. Diary of Goethe, September 7, 1807).

love in *The Faerie Queene* takes on various forms, which makes one definition or concept seem insufficient.

It is important here for the reader to distinguish Spenser's allegorical figures from psychologically complete characters, which they are not. Interpreting them as such greatly limits comprehension of Spenser's conception of the human potential for moral virtue. The attributes of the figures, good and bad, and their interactions with each other can be read as the interplay between the various aspects of the human soul.²³ *The Faerie Queene* does not offer a complete example of virtue in any one figure; it is through the contradictions, shortcomings, and proximity to success of the figures that we approach an integrated understanding of the moral virtues, which may only come together in the mind of the reader, not in the narrative. Britomart, the knight of Chastity, is the most fully developed figure of chastity (perhaps more developed than any other figure of virtue in the poem), yet she is still incomplete and represents the aspect of humanity that seeks unity outside of the self, arising from imperfection and desire for divine wisdom-- but more of this later. For now, I think it is best to give a few definitions of chastity from sources other than Spenser before we abandon ourselves to the web of faery land.

Uses of the word "chastity" vary considerably among authors, context, and period, though in most cases, it refers specifically to women. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives several definitions of chastity, among them:

1. purity from unlawful sexual intercourse; continence
2. abstinence from all sexual intercourse; virginity, celibacy

These definitions suggest the *physical* state of chastity, which is probably the most

²³ The necessity of this distinction for my own readers prompts me to use the term "figure" in place of "character," and I hope that my use of personal pronouns will not confuse the matter.

widely understood use of the term.²⁴ Chastity was often written about as a physical claim to be protected from “cruel invaders,” as in Margaret Cavendish’s *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* (1656). In this sense, the challenges to chastity are outside the self, while the challenges for one to whom chastity is an inner responsibility, or spiritual vow, may come from within the self, from the weakness of the mind. Aphra Behn, in *The History of the Nun, or The Fair Vow-Breaker* (1689), writes that there are “degrees of Vows”; the *sacred vow* of chastity is made to God, and the *marital vow* of chastity is made to the lover. In both cases, chastity is a conscious devotion directed outside the self and is more than just a physical claim. The dangers to chastity extend to men²⁵ in John Reynolds’ *Triumphs of the God’s Revenge* (1622), which warns of the dangers of a lover’s devotion when it is consuming and insufficient:

Monsieur Bellvile...no sooner saw Laurieta, but he gloried in the sight of her singular, and triumphed in the contemplation of her exquisite and incomparable beauty: making that, his best content; and this, his sweetest felicity, that, his sovereign good; and this, his heaven upon earth: so as losing himselfe in the Labyrinth of her beauty, and as it were drowning his thoughts in the sea of his concupiscence and sensuality, he spends not only his whole time, but a great part of his wealth, in wantonizing and entertaining her: a vicious and foule fault, not only particular to Bellvile, but incident and fatall to too many Gallants, as well of most parts of Christendome in generall... (Reynolds 108)

Bellvile’s love is founded in physical dimensions (beauty) and not turned heavenward—thus it is not chaste and is equivalent to idolatry. Love not directed by chastity will lead to confusion; like being lost in a labyrinth, the thrill soon turns to despair.²⁶ This example

²⁴ Although less commonly used, chastity also evolved to imply “exclusion of excess or extravagance; moderation or restraint.”

²⁵ The need to preserve chastity was most often expounded to young women, though the chivalric tradition did preach the value of a male knight’s chastity.

²⁶ In Plato’s *Phaedo*, Socrates warns against relying on the body to guide the soul: “...when the soul uses the instrumentality of the body for any inquiry...it is drawn away by the body into the realm of the variable, and loses its way and becomes confused and dizzy, as though it were fuddled” *The Collected Works of*

closely relates to chastity in *The Faerie Queene*, but it is important not to hold fast to a single definition if we are to read the poem as a Christian Platonic experience and not merely for a static description of virtue. Through this experience of Spenser's poetry, I hope to understand what chastity means to the Christian soul, using Paul and Augustine as guides to the spiritual world of the individual.²⁷

Chastity, like the other five moral virtues in the existing poem, is a conscious virtue, existing wholly in the mind and independent of material distinctions such as class, gender, race, and age. Although chastity is most often associated with female virtue,²⁸ men were equally responsibly for keeping their minds pure. St. Paul warns Timothy against the dangers of unchastity:

For men shall be lovers of their owne selves, covetous, boasters,
proude...lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God... (II Tim 3:2-4)

From this passage, we can recognize chastity's importance in the mind regardless of sex or gender, and we can also distinguish the love of God from the lesser, unchaste loves of the self and of pleasure. St. Paul continues his warning by implying that unchaste men are also a danger to the chastity of women.²⁹

For of this sorte (unchaste men) are they which crepe into houses, and lead captive simple women laden with sinnes, and led them with divers lustes, which women are ever learning, and are never able to come to the knowledge of divine trueth. (II Tim 3:6-7)

Plato, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), 79c.

²⁷ Although I see Spenser as also writing *The Faerie Queene* for societal order and the future of the English monarchy, I will place emphasis on the implications of chastity for order in the individual soul.

²⁸ The chastity of women, specifically of young maidens, was a major theme in all forms of English literature prior to and throughout the Renaissance.

²⁹ This theme I will address later in reference to the troubles of Florimell and other victims of male lust in Book III.

The suggestion that chastity is enabled by a “knowledge of divine truth” cannot be taken lightly, and is central to my understanding of chastity in this study.³⁰ Although St. Paul seems to be implying that sin works differently in men, who are driven by aggressive lust to take advantage of women, also called the “weaker vessel,” my interpretation of chastity in *The Faerie Queene* finds the virtue to depend much more on a steadfast mind in search of truth and purity. That women may be hindered from this wisdom by indulging in the pleasures of the body can certainly be seen in many of the poem’s less virtuous “female” figures, but I find that Spenser designs his “men” with similar weaknesses. That is important for the reader to situate the “male” and “female” fragments of chastity can be confusing, and I prefer to think of the figures in the poem as participants in a manifold projection of an individual mind. The reader, regardless of gender, may find all of these fragments present in his or her own mind.

Chastity requires a willful subjection of the body to the mind, and in a larger sense, the willful subjection of the self to God. This conscious aspect of chastity distinguishes the virtue from virginity, which may be determined by occasion and other physical factors outside of the will. St. Paul makes this subtle, though crucial, distinction in his second letter to the Corinthians, in which he describes a “chaste virgin.”³¹ The very reference to a virgin as “chaste” may seem redundant, but it points towards the difference between a “virgin by circumstance” and a “virgin by will.” Spenser makes a distinction between those who “chastity for itself did embrace” and others who abstained from sex

...for other causes firm and sound,

³⁰ My interpretation of Britomart’s quest will lead me to argue that what she ultimately seeks is divine knowledge and unity through such enlightenment, not simply union with a lover in the figure of Artegall.

³¹ II Corinthians 11:2

Either for want of handsome time or place,
Or else for feare of shame and fowle disgrace. (*FQ* III.vii.60)

The virtue of chastity in *The Faerie Queene* is deeper than a social convention; it must be part of the inner life and so cannot be forced upon an unwilling soul.

Chastity does not necessarily mean abstinence from sex; it also means fidelity in marriage. Amoret, whom I will come back to later, represents marital chastity in *The Faerie Queene*, and the sanctity of chaste marriage (non-adulterous) appears in Scripture and throughout Augustine's writing. Nor does chastity mean denial of love, but rather love turned towards God, and towards humankind for God's sake:

Seeing your souls are purified in obeing the trueth through the spirit, to
love brotherly without faining, love one another with a pure heart
fervently. (I Peter 1:22)

Human love for all of humanity, or charity (*charitas*), is not separate from parental love, filial love, or even friendship, but represents a spiritual development in that love is more inclusive and less discriminate (more spiritual and less object-specific). Augustine writes that love begins and ends in God, and so the many forms of human love are unified when they reach a certain level of purity:

...the Scriptures of our religion (Christianity), whose authority we rank
above all other writings, do not distinguish between love and fondness or
charity. (*City* XIV.vii)

Augustine places a high value on love when it is "concerned with good things and directed towards God himself."³²

In Scripture, chastity seems to imply love directed away from the lusts of the body, and thus away from selfish desire. This is not to say that love cannot begin in the body, as perceived by the senses, but it must be lifted from its baseness through chastity

³² Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1961) XIV.vii. Hereafter cited in the text as "*City*."

and directed outside the self. The idea of different stages of love (which I will refer to as parts of a hierarchy) is in harmony with the Platonic understanding of love, as is the idea of the “mutable” soul, which can be purified through right love (love that aims heavenward).

In *The Faerie Queene*, love is the dynamic force that moves the entire cosmos, be it in the heavens, earth, or Faerie Land. Divine Love is eternal, but any form of love beneath this, such as love of money or erotic love, is incomplete and forever striving for immortality. Christian beliefs hold that because of the Fall, human love cannot achieve the eternity of divine love without rising through the stages of base and misdirected love, and proper love requires subordination of the self to the beloved. Hence, mundane love may be constructive or destructive, ascending or descending, directed towards Life or directed towards Death. It is through this Christian Platonic vision of love that I will attempt to trace the various figures of chastity, as we experience them in Book III.

Degenerate Loves

The title page introduces the third book of *The Faerie Queene* as “The Legend of Britomartis, or of Chastitie,” and so we expect that Britomart, the knight of chastity, will contribute most to our understanding of the virtue. Yet we do not know why without seeing how she acts independently and in relationship to the other figures in Book III. And so I begin the ascent of the scale of love at the base, at the level of physical and irrational desires. I hope to show how these degenerate loves, as I call them, are insufficient to the individual being, and that when the hierarchy of love becomes inverted and base love subordinates all intellectual and rational love, the result is chaos and decay.

Jealousy, as imagined through the figure of Malbecco in Book III of *The Faerie Queene*, is the extreme form of degenerate love, the “vilest” of the mind’s passions:

O Hatefull hellish Snake, what fury first
 Brought thee from balefull house of Proserpine,
 Where in her bosome she thee long had nurst,
 And fostered up with bitter milke of tine,
 Fowle Gealosity, that turnest love divine
 To joylesse dread, and mak’st the loving hart
 With hatefull thoughts to languish and to pine,
 And feed itselfe with selfe-consuming smart?
 Of all the passions in the mind thou vilest art. (*FQ* III.xi.1)

If we are to understand love in *The Faerie Queene* as a hierarchy ordered by chastity, it is important to note that jealousy is, indeed, a form of love, but lacks the proper energy to escape destruction. Although jealousy begins in love and has the potential to rise above its baseness, it desires unlimited control of the beloved and directly opposes the subordination of the self that is required by proper love.

Malbecco, a “cancerd crabbed Carle,”³³ is consumed by false love for his possessions:

...all his mind is set on mucky pelfe,
 To hoord up heapes of evill gotten masse,
 For which he others wrongs and wreakes himselfe. (*FQ* III.ix.4.1-3)

When the party of questers (Britomart, Paridell, and Satyrane) finally obtains passage through his unwelcoming gate, they are offended by his lack of courtesy and unwillingness to entertain their company. Malbecco “ne cares, what men say of him ill or well” (*FQ* III.ix.3.7) because he is too devoted to protecting his wealth and keeping his wife, Hellenore, out of sight and away from competitors to his “property.” Seeing his condition through the law of love in the New Testament, we can easily predict

³³ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, in *Spenser: Poetical Works*, ed. E. De Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), III.ix.3.5. Hereafter cited in the text as “*FQ*.”

Malbecco's destruction if he does not redirect his love away from idolatry, as taught by John:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world-- the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches-- comes not from the Father but from the world. (1 John 2:15-6)

Using John as a guide, a Christian Platonist may see that Malbecco errs by loving temporal riches, and places his faith in things of the world.

Malbecco's love for Hellenore is a burden because it is a jealous love, and the guilt of his inability to provide sexual satisfaction (he is apparently old and withered) cause him to

...alway suspect her truth, and keepe continuall spy
upon her with his other blinked eye. (*FQ* III.ix.5.3-5)

Malbecco values his wife as an object to be possessed, and so violates the rules of right love by assuming power over the beloved. His marriage is a failure for obvious reasons, namely the lack of chaste love in both partners (Hellenore needs only the opportunity to commit adultery-- her body is chaste through force but her mind is not). Malbecco's impotence inhibits the means to lawfully satisfy sexual passion and his greed bars the way to ascend from sensual love to the love for another's soul, which seeks its own likeness outside the self and must be unselfish in intention. In "The Excellence of Marriage," St. Augustine attributes marriage with three "goods": offspring (proles), fidelity (fides), and the sacramental bond (sacramentum).³⁴ Malbecco and Hellenore, "(u)nfitly yokt together in one teeme" (*FQ*, III.ix.6.2), have none of these to value, and

³⁴ Augustine of Hippo, "The Excellence of Marriage," in *The Works of Saint Augustine* I/9: Marriage and Virginity, ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A., trans. Ray Kearney. (New York: New City Press, 1999). 1.1. 2.2. Hereafter cited in the text as "EM."

their marriage is joyless and loveless (the absence of love and chastity negates the *sacramentum*).

Hellenore eventually runs away with the lusty Paridell, and sets fire to Malbecco's castle "for sport, or for despight" (*FQ* III.x.12.6). The fire that consumes his treasure is analogous to the fire of false love that consumes his heart, and Malbecco is caught between saving one idol from the flames and the other from escaping with her lover:

He was therewith distressed diversely,
Ne wist he how to turne, nor to what place;
Was never wretched man in such a woefull cace. (*FQ* III.x.14.7-9)

Once the fire is quenched, Malbecco is left in despair, bereft of any love at all:

Into huge waves of griefe and gealousy
Full deepe emplonged he was, and drowned nye,
Twixt inward doole and felonous despight. (*FQ* III.x.17.4-6)

This flood seems to wash away all possibilities of his heart to love, and so Malbecco's body, without the sustaining force of love, begins to decay. Once again, Spenser gives material form to the words of St. John: "Whoever does not love abides in death."³⁵

Indeed, Malbecco falls into this state after failing to reach death by throwing himself from a cliff in agony-- his decaying body is by now so light that death eludes him, and so Malbecco can

...never dye, but dying lives,
And doth himselfe with sorrow new sustaine,
That death and life attonce unto him gives. (*FQ* III.x.60.1-3)

By now he has transformed into an abstract entity, *Gealosy*, and not only scorns all love of others, but hates himself as well. His soul is damned forever, punished by perpetual death. In a twisted way, Malbecco has obtained immortality that the human state strives

³⁵ 1 John 3:14

for through love, yet shows how false love left untended by chastity becomes increasingly degenerate and ends in despair.

I see Malbecco's destruction as the effect of irrational devotion to the unequivocal beloved-- his money and "trophy" wife do not love him in return, and so Malbecco is consumed by his own desire because he does not benefit from the "nourishment" of love that must come from the beloved. Malbecco is blinded by his greediness and jealousy; his mind is trapped by his base desires and so he cannot reform himself through chastity. The mind must be aware of a world beyond the walls of its prison before it thinks of escaping; Malbecco does not seem to be able to love anything other than idols.

As we have seen in Malbecco's helpless despair and his inability to believe in a life without the possession of his idols, other figures of unchaste love share a similar lack of reason or conscious control with respect to the beloved(s). Let us suppose, then, that the enemies of chastity in *The Faerie Queene* include the desires of the unconscious. Unlike a psychoanalytic approach, a Christian Platonic approach may argue that unconscious desire in Book III does not hold the key to the individual soul; it is more like a chain that keeps the soul from escaping the transient world. And so with a Christian Platonic perspective, I view the unconscious as a challenge to the spiritual nature of the individual. If the conscious mind suggests reason, intellect, and will, then the unconscious mind suggests desire of the flesh and the irrational impulses that, because of our fallen nature, plague the human soul and keep us from our true spiritual nature in God. I bring this thought into my reading of *The Faerie Queene*, and argue that chastity gives the individual the power to escape the irrational desire by refining love and lifting it out of the world of the senses.

If we understand chastity as a Christian virtue possible only through consciousness, made effective through the willful control of the body, we see the need to recognize sin for what it is, and the decision to renounce it must follow. Without knowledge of the body's sin, guilt for sin does not exist, and order cannot be restored because the mind is not conscious of disorder.

But sinne toke an occasion by the commandment, and wrought in me all manner of concupiscence: for without the Law sinne is dead...but when the commandment came (when the mind became aware of sin), sinne revived. (Rom 7: 8-9)

In *The Faerie Queene*, the struggle between the will and the flesh seems to ensue only when the mind is aware of sin, and we can read the unchaste figures as "lawless" when the wants of the body pay no heed to reason or the mind's need for conscious control.

Malecasta is a figure of lawless indulgence, and an unrestrained projection of the unconscious desires of the flesh. Castle Joyeous, her lively abode, is a place of "superfluous riotize," and those inside act upon their lusty appetites without any sign of guilt. Malecasta also goes by the name of "Lady of Delight," indicating that her greatest concerns are in diversions and sensual pleasures. Indeed, the Lady of Delight and her subjects surround themselves with "roiall riches and exceeding cost," and value is synonymous with enjoyment. No pleasure is left unfulfilled, and everything abounds in immoderate extravagance. Castle Joyeous seems to be saturated in lustful passion; no corner is left wanting of luxury. Appropriately, the passionate myth of Venus and Adonis drapes the wall on a magnificent tapestry:

First it did shew the bitter balefull stowre,
Which her assayed with many a fervent fit,
When first her tender heart was with his beutie smit. (*FQ* III.i.34.7-9)

The tapestry narrates the sleights and sweet allurements Venus uses to tempt Adonis, and how she treats her lover after her victory. This myth is a dominant theme in Book III, and Spenser makes frequent allusions to the conquest of love that it represents, as well as the bittersweet fate of Adonis. Although Venus "oft adviz'd him to refraine from chase of greater beastes," Adonis cannot escape his fate and is "engored of a great wilde Bore." When Venus sees his helpless state,

Him to a dainty flowre she did transmew,
Which in that cloth was wrought, as if it lively grew. (*FQ* III.i.38.8-9)

Here, and later in the Garden of Adonis, Spenser makes a distinction between eternal life and the appearance of eternal life, which we may call perpetuity, as depicted on the tapestry "as if it lively grew." This distinction suggests to me that earthly love, though extended through the perpetuity of fruition (procreation), cannot last beyond the material world.

The "real" Venus that appears in the Garden of Adonis seems to represent love in a different way from her image in Castle Joyeous. As Lewis notes:

The good Venus is a picture of fruition: the bad Venus is a picture not of 'lust in action' but of lust suspended..." (*AL* 332)

Yet I am not sure I can find Venus, representing perpetual love, to be entirely "good." I think that the love Venus represents is only an aspect of the chaste love we are seeking in Book III. The love of Venus and Adonis appears to be idle and uninspired by any truth that lies beyond earthly love. Although the Garden of Adonis is a place of natural beauty and sweetness, it is plagued by

...wicked Tyme, who wit his scyth addrest,
Does mow the flowring herbes and goodly things,
And all their glory to the ground downe flings... (*FQ* III.vi.39.3-5)

Does not this vulnerability, one that not even Venus can deter (her “heart was pierst with pittty at the sight”) show the insufficiency of earthy love?

For all that lives, is subject to that law:
All things decay in time, and to their end doe draw. (*FQ* III.vi.40.8-9)

Furthermore, the very notion that “Chaos” provides the earthly material of living forms suggests that chastity must create order in earthly love if there is to be any hope of true permanence. We read that earthly substance is eternal, but it is forever changing, and “often altred to and froe” (*FQ* III.vi.37). The myth of Venus and Adonis is another way to see the fatal error of Castle Joyeous: love that begins and ends in the senses, violating the Platonic order of love by choosing to remain at an intermediate level.

The love of Venus and Adonis falls short of the platonic model, in which one form of love is to be abandoned to reach the next level, leaving the baser forms in search of the spiritual, pure form. Lewis points out a misconception of Platonic love, specifically in the Renaissance, saying that some “imagine a love which reaches the divine without abandoning the human and becomes spiritual while remaining carnal: they do not find this in Plato” (*AL* 5). Lewis might well be thinking of the *Phaedo*’s assertion that “true philosophers make dying their profession” (67e), and concern themselves with freeing the soul from the chains of the material body. This is rather like an antithesis to the concept of the preservation of life through mutability and frutition in Garden of Adonis, but I do not think Spenser wants us to exclude physical love from the experience of chastity. Instead, physical love and procreation can be part of a chaste marriage.

By placing Florimell among the figures of unchastity, I do not mean that she herself is unchaste, but that her physical beauty awakens desire in others. The “fairest Dame alive,” Florimell can be read as an earthly manifestation of ideal beauty. Her most

significant role in the Book of Chastity is the beloved, or the object of desire (although Florimell is devoted to Marinell, this devotion serves mainly to assert her unavailability to potential suitors). Because Florimell is mainly the love object, she is a passive figure, and always seems to be fleeing from some lusty aggressor. Florimell arouses lust through the senses, specifically the sight of her beauty, but this alone does not condemn the desire as degenerate or false. As souls trapped in physical bodies, we naturally begin to love through the senses. The perception of beauty inspires desire, but the mind may behave in various ways under the influence of love. Spenser emphasizes the danger of desire falling into the wrong hands, or rather the wrong mind:

Wonder it is to see, in diverse mindes,
How diversely love doth his pageaunts play,
And shewes his powre in variable kindes:
The baser wit, whose ydle thoughts always
Wont to cleave unto sensuall desire,
And in lewd slouth to wast his carelesse day:
But in brave sprite it kindles goodly fire,
To all high desert and honor doth aspire. (*FQ* III.v.1)

Paul shows us a spiritual way to understand the possibility of “diverse mindes” among beings of the same origin, as the creation of God:

Hathe not the potter power of the clay to make of the same lompe one vessel to honour, and another unto dishonour? (Rom 9.21)

Spenser imagines this idea of “diverse mindes” in the various reactions to Florimell’s beauty. A “foule ill favoured foster,” a withered fisherman, a witch’s brutish son, and Proteus, the sea-god, are among the “baser” minds that pursue Florimell. These figures represent degenerate love because their desire does not reach beyond carnal lust or the possession of beauty as a physical object. In contrast to the “baser wit,” Arthur reacts to Florimell’s beauty in a way that may at first seem like lust: he joins the foster’s pursuit of

Florimell “full of envy and gealosy” and “indignant yre.” Yet Arthur’s pursuit of Florimell may signify the Platonic devotion to Beauty itself, the quest for the universal beauty that lies beyond sensible forms in the intelligible world. In this sense, Arthur’s love, though it begins in the senses and is charged by lust, is ultimately directed towards spiritual beauty and truth. Lewis suggests that Arthur pursues Florimell as an earthly representation of the spiritual *eros*, leading him to the search for divine glory in the Platonic ascension of his love (*AL* 132-5). The difference between Arthur’s desire and the desire of, say, the witch’s son is the difference (subtle yet crucial) between chastity and unchastity. Let me explain further-- The witch’s son, a “laesy lord...stretched forth in ydlenesse always” (*FQ* III.vii.12), is taken “unawares” by Florimell’s brightness, which was too much for his “feeble eye.” She awes him into a fit of lust and a “wicked flame” of unchaste thoughts, and the slow-witted son tries his best to woo her through the practice of courtly love. The artificiality of his courtship (and of his “love”) is reinforced through his contentment with the “false Florimell,” a cunning imitation of beauty wrought by the witch to placate her son. “In vaine delight” of beauty (as a physical object, in this case, artifice) possessed, the witch’s son sinks back into idleness. Virtuous love, or chaste love, inspires brave deeds, and so in the “highest and worthiest” minds, love

Lifteth it up, that els would lowly fall:
It lettes not fall, it lettes it not to rest... (*FQ* III.v.2.5-7)

In Arthur, love aspires to greatness-- not ambitious recognition, but magnanimity.³⁶ Love arouses courage and action in Arthur:

It lettes not scarce this Prince to breath at all... (*FQ* III.v.2.8)

³⁶ If Spenser had written the other six books of virtues, we might have seen Arthur’s development into Magnanimity itself as the pinnacle of moral virtue.

With this distinction in mind, let us ascend to the figures of chastity, in hopes of understanding why, despite human error, they may be called chaste.

Figures of Chastity

With her son in a frenzy over the fugitive Florimell, the witch calls on a "hideous beast, of horrible aspect...likest to an Hyena was, that feeds on wemens flesh, as others fede on gras" (*FQ* III.vii.22). The hyena seems to be like desire in its most lewd, carnal form, inhabiting an animal body to represent the bestiality of lust. Plato's theory of the soul in the *Republic* gives us a way to distinguish between a soul ordered by chastity and one enslaved by a "mob of motley appetites." The soul is composed of a hierarchy of three parts; the first two parts are reason and just anger (noble irascibility), and the third is the "appetitive" part, so called because of the "intensity of its appetites concerned with food and drink and love and their accompaniments..."³⁷ For Plato, virtue is a "harmony of parts in a hierarchy,"³⁸ and I interpret the struggle of Satyrane against the hyena as the soul struggling for sobriety amidst the irrational desires of the flesh. Plato describes this "sobriety" of the soul as a "kind of beautiful order and a continence of certain pleasures and appetites..." (*Republic* IV.430e) We can understand the virtue of chastity as sobriety in love, and so in a chaste soul, the various rational and irrational desires are ordered in a hierarchy. Sobriety is, then, "the concord of naturally superior and inferior as to which ought to rule in both the state and the individual" (*Republic* IV.432a).

³⁷ Plato, *Republic*, in *The Collected Works of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, trans. Paul Shorey (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), IX.580d.

³⁸ Jon A. Quitslund, "Platonism," in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A.C. Hamilton (University of Toronto Press 1990).

Florimell, by falling into another lust trap, escapes the immediate danger of the hyena. The hyena, bereft of its prey, is left to battle with Satyrane, armed in “rugged steele unfilde,” who is roused to combat upon seeing Florimell’s abandoned girdle (the chastity belt she loses in her flight). Satyrane is a representation of “natural” man-- rugged and coarse, yet kind-hearted and honest. It appears to me that the battle between Satyrane and the hyena can show the battle between man’s natural consciousness, or will, and the carnal desires of the flesh. Satyrane, in this sense, fights for chastity. One may say that it requires no adept mind to realize that the hyena is a threat-- the physical appearance of the beast is enough, and too grotesque to ignore. But to recall the interpretation of the poem as an interior world of the mind, or an interior view of the individual experience, shows that the beast does not always appear in the form of a hyena. Spenser shows us that lust is *like* a hideous beast, but we must know ourselves well enough to recognize the beast within.³⁹

The awakening of the mind to the insolent nature of the body is a crucial step towards a Christian Platonic ascension towards God, and I see the struggle of the will against the body as chastity in action. Timias reveals, in the spirit of Augustine and Paul, how painful this step can be. Wounded in battle, the faithful squire of Arthur lay “wallowd all in his owne gore” until “great grace or fortune thether brought comfort to him” through Belpheobe, the figure of virginal chastity. Timias’ helpless state is suggestive of humanity’s dependence on heavenly grace to heal our “wounded”

³⁹ Satyrane overcomes the hyena, which is like chastity’s victory within the self, but meets with a greater challenge in Argante, a figure of female unchastity. Argante knocks Satyrane over the head with a “great yron mace,” suggesting the injury to the mind (Satyrane’s reason and will) caused by aggressors. This episode is not clear enough to me to read any further into it, but I do see Argante and Ollyphant, her twin brother, to be unchaste foils to the Amoret and Belpheobe, who are also “natural” figures, but raised in very different ways.

condition.⁴⁰ Belphoebe treats Timias' physical wounds, but his increasing love for her causes much deeper pains.

She his hurt thigh to him recurd againe,
But hurt his hart, the which before was sound...(*FQ* III.v.42.3-4)

Timias' experience is like the awakening of the human consciousness-- he is awestruck at the divine-like presence of Belphoebe, and is ridden with guilt and shame by his love for her. He struggles to suppress his desire because he would rather die than love disloyally.⁴¹ And so "with reason dew the passion to subdew," Timias fights his "enlesse durance." Timias has already shown his subordination of desire to honor and faithfulness by leaving the pursuit of Florimell to Arthur, and "after that wicked foster fiercely went" (*FQ* III.iv.47.4).

Though his passion is against his will, Timias demonstrates chastity through his conscious struggle against loving "disloyally." He is humbled through his devotion to Belphoebe ("thou art a meane Squire, of meeke and lowly place, she heavenly borne, and of celestiall hew"), and his beloved is certainly worthy, according to Spenser's praise, to love with such humble service.

Eternall God in his almightie powre,
To make ensample of his heavenly grace,
In Paradize whylome did plant this flowre;
Whence he it fetched out of her native place,
And did in stocke of earthly flesh enrace,
That mortall men her glory should admyre:
In gentle Ladies breste, and bounteous race
Of woman kind it fayrest flowre doth spyre,
And beareth fruit of honour and all chaste desire. (*FQ* III.v.52)

⁴⁰ Belphoebe tells Timias, who believes her to be a goddess, that she is mortal like himself, and "bownd with common bond of frailtee" (*FQ* III.v.36.8).

⁴¹ Timias' resolve to die a martyr rather than love unfaithfully has interesting parallels to the Redcrosse Knight's refusal to deny his love even in mortal danger (*FQ* III.i.24). Redcrosse's love is Una, who is the figure of Truth in Book I, and so their love is the bond between Holiness (Redcrosse/St. George) and Truth; a spiritual love. Timias' love for Belphoebe, might also be like spiritual love, and is chaste through fidelity and his honest reasoning.

Belphoebe is the greatest expression of chastity, virginal chastity, and her virtue is tempered with courtesy and compassion. As the “highest stayre” of “womanhed,” Belphoebe is an idealized example of chastity, and her “faire ensample” seems to be more of a spiritual aspiration-- although she is mortal, her “chastity and vertue virginal” crowns her with “heavenly coronal, such as the angels wear before Gods tribunal” (*FQ* III.v.53). The achievement of chastity compares to a heavenly position; a high place on the scale of love, in which the sensible world no longer hinders the spirit from loving truthfully and faithfully, because the love is perfected through divine grace (such as Belphoebe brings to Timias).

Belphoebe is the twin sister of Amoret, and “twixt them two did share the heritage of all celestiaall grace” (*FQ* III.vi.4.6-7). They are born free of Original Sin, “pure and unspotted from all loathly crime, that is ingenerate in earthly slime” (*FQ* III.vi.3.4-5). Although they are mortal, it is clear from the circumstances of their birth that Belphoebe and Amoret do not share in humanity’s disparity of the will against the body. Therefore, we must view them differently than we do the “corrupted” figures like Timias. Belphoebe, for example, is not meant to be a reflection of ourselves so much as she is a reflection of the beloved (which cannot be divided from the lover, per se, because it remains within the self, but the beloved is distinct nonetheless).

Belphoebe is raised to be a perfect example of virginal chastity, and Amoret is raised in “goodly womanhed” to become an “ensample of true love” in marital chastity. Although Amoret is free from the pangs of lust in her perfect chastity, she is subject to the corruption of love through her betrothed, Scudamore. Amoret loves Scudamore faithfully, but does not want to serve his lust in their marriage. Because she fears sexual

pleasure and the loss of integrity, she is swept away on her wedding night to suffer the torments of Cupid in the House of Busirane, where she remains in captivity for seven months. During this time, her fears and doubts keep her from union (in love and consummation) with Scudamore.

According to Augustine, marriage is second to celibacy,⁴² but it can be a “home” for human love that is too weak for a life of strict abstinence.

Married people, therefore, not only owe each other fidelity in relation to sexual union for the sake of having children, which in this mortal state is the human race’s first social union, but also in a certain way they owe each other a mutual service to relieve each other’s weakness, and thereby avoid illicit unions. (*EM* 6)

Marriage, then, is a sacred bond between two souls with the idea that two weaker souls can unite in Christ to perfect their love. Amoret and Scudamore, however, are unable to bond in marital love because Amoret is not bold enough and Scudamore is too bold. The warnings on the walls of the House of Busirane read: “Be bold, be bold, be not too bold.” Chastity in love is strength and reserve, but it is also boldness before God.

Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we boldnesse before God.
(I John 3:21)

John teaches that love makes us bold before God because love, in truth and action, not merely in word and speech, reassures our hearts. The warning in The House of Busirane suggests that we must be bold enough to be free of doubt in love, but not over-bold, for we would be in danger of losing our humility before God. We can interpret Amoret’s suffering as the effect of the imbalance of slavery and tyranny in love. Chastity is the ideal boldness, for it combines force and reserve; love is contained so that it might also

⁴² In The “Excellence of Marriage,” Augustine says of the superiority of celibacy: “...since among all peoples everywhere there is an abundant provision of the spiritual kinship required for creating a true and holy society, even those who desire to marry solely for the sake of having children should be advised to avail themselves rather of the greater benefit of abstinence” (*EM* 9).

be given more freely. The blessing of marriage is that it teaches us to be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ, and dispels fear in love, which keeps us from God.

There is no feare in love, but perfect love casteth out feare: for fear hath painfulness: and he that feareth, is not perfect in love. (I John 4:18)

Augustine, relating fear and the origin of evil, tells us that “either there is evil and we fear it, or the fear itself is evil” (*Conf.* VII.5). Fear causes the torments Amoret faces in the House of Busirane; she suffers pain because of the fear she holds before her marriage to Scudamore, which makes their love defective.

It is not a matter of efficiency, but of deficiency; the evil will itself is not effective but defective. (Ephes 5:21)

What Augustine says can help us to understand how the “evils” of Cupid and The House of Busirane are not active forces, but the result of love’s perversion. Fear can asphyxiate the soul, and though it does not lead Amoret into licentiousness and unbridled lust, fear is a perversion of desire that results in disorder.

Chastity and Consciousness

In seeking love, might it be that we also seek order? For love that exists as unrestrained physical desire quickly turns foul, as we can understand from the figures of Book III. Chastity, then, may be the means to achieve order within our bodies and our minds. Without chastity, we may find ourselves in Castle Joyous, in service to our senses. Yet if we abandon love through jealousy, we are like Malbecco, who loves neither himself nor anyone else. When love is misdirected, weak, or fearful, we become captives in the House of Busirane, subject to Cupid’s torments. We must be willing to

submit our hearts to love, but we must learn to be bold and without fear, for fear and weakness are aberrant to the order of love.

But what of Britomart? Shouldn't a study of chastity in *The Faerie Queene* place the Knight of Chastity as the dominant subject? Why do I wait until now to look at her function apart from the whole? I answer this by saying that until we have looked at the smaller pieces, we cannot expect to understand what holds them together. And, indeed, Britomart's interventions in the fragmentary episodes of chastity have made her a worthy heroine for the Book of Chastity. However, even reading Book III within a Christian Platonic lens does not guarantee a unified image. Britomart can be seen from many different angles even from this one lens. For example, Janet Spens, among the first to explore deeply a Platonic interpretation in *The Faerie Queene*, undermines the significance (as I see it) of Britomart's champion role in Book III. She writes:

I believe that the third book was to deal originally with the stories of the twin-sisters Belphebe and Amoret, and that Britomart is an afterthought and has usurped much of Belphebe's adventures-- notably the rescue of Amoret. It is artistically wasteful to make no use of the twin sisters' ignorance of each other's existence; and the ethical significance would be much clearer if Amoret were saved from the evil pangs of passion by her other self, her twin-sister Virgin Chastity. (Spens 34)

Although Spens gives this view as a footnote, I think it is quite useful as a reminder of the interpretive complexity of the poem, and provides a place for me to unpack my own interpretation of Britomart. I do not have difficulty with the first part of her statement, since in his letter to Raleigh, Spenser himself seems to place Britomart's quest secondary to Scudamore's and refers to her love for Artegall as an "Accident," one of many adventures that are "intermedled" within the primary adventure of Scudamore and Amoret. Among these secondary adventures are those of Malbecco, Florimell, and

Belpheobe, which I have included as important aspects of my Christian Platonic interpretation of chastity. If they are truly accidents, as Spenser suggests (though we allow that his plan for the poem may have changed after writing to Raleigh), these adventures become crucial to *The Faerie Queene's* multifaceted portrait of chastity.⁴³

However, I believe that the separation of Belpheobe and Amoret is essential to the seemingly contradictory definitions of chastity as both virginity and married love, and rather than "artistically wasteful," I think it is due to Spenser's artistry that the twins are unaware of each other. The two ideal chastities are separate by nature, and Spenser's way of uniting the two is through a third figure, Britomart. Britomart is the earthly manifestation of ideal forms, that is to say, she is not the same kind of figure as either Belpheobe or Amoret, who do not share the Christian burden of humanity.⁴⁴ As Kathleen Williams has shown, Britomart

...honestly combines what each of them stands for, but Amoret and Belpheobe themselves remain separated, brought up according to two rigid and exclusive codes whose non-human quality is emphasized for us by the twins' sinless birth. (Williams 100)

To further this idea with a Christian understanding, I might add that the separation of the twins signifies the fragmentation of the virtue of chastity and suggests that the Divine is only revealed on earth as fragments; the light of God becomes known to us indirectly, through earthly means in the form of divine grace. Earlier we have seen Florimell's transmittance of divine grace through her beauty, and Britomart similarly transmits divine grace through her radiance and steadfastness. While Amoret and Belpheobe have the

⁴³ In this sense, we can think of Book III as a cubist interpretation of chastity, as the individual elements seem to be fragmentary and rather accidental. The portrait of chastity that results from these fragments is not a seamless whole, but a view from many angles, eluding a direct gaze to penetrate the matter within.

⁴⁴ Augustine holds that the sexual act is the transmitter of Original Sin, and so Britomart's natural birth places her in the Fallen state, whereas the twins are of divine parentage.

potential to inspire the virtue of chastity, Britomart has the potential to make chastity a human quality, and through her, the reader's experience of chastity becomes more intimate.

Britomart is not idealized beyond familiarity; she is capable of feeling the pangs of lust and true compassion for others and is far from a cold and unloving portrait of abstinence. Britomart's outward signs of passion (in the early stages of her love for Artegall) are similar to Malecasta's:

Thereat she sighing softly, had no power
To speake a while, ne ready answer make,
But with hart-thrilling throbs and bitter stowre,
As if she had a fever fitt, did quake,
And every daintie limbe with horror shake... (*FQ* III.ii.5.1-5)

Yet she is "pure from blame of sinfull blot," reassured in her love by her nurse Glauce and by Merlin, and is able to remain steadfast through all threats to her virtue. This steadfastness is perhaps the quality that relates Britomart to both virginity and chaste marriage.

As I have suggested earlier, mere abstinence or coldness is not the qualification, according to Christian teaching, for the virtue of chastity. And in itself, Britomart's steadfastness is not enough to describe her fulfillment of virtue. To draw from Platonist tradition an interpretation of her Christian virtue (chastity being a Christian idea), Britomart's steadfastness is a result of her state of mind, an external characteristic of her consciousness. I have spoken of the importance of consciousness to the virtue of chastity elsewhere, namely in Timias' example, but it is in Britomart that we see how consciousness becomes the unifying factor between seemingly contradictory definitions of chastity. Williams says of Britomart:

Constancy and a determined and steady progress are characteristic of her. She goes on her way, and events consequentially shape themselves into a pattern around her. (Williams 91)

However, I find it necessary to emphasize that from a Christian standpoint, the cause of Britomart's constancy and activity is her particular consciousness, which guides her through the poem. She is always fully conscious of her chastity, and her reason is always engaged in making a choice-- unlike, say, Amoret, whose unconscious has more influence over her actions. Britomart's consciousness leads to action, and in many ways she provides the energy that drives the poetic narrative.⁴⁵ Virtuous love orders this energy and guides her actions:

As for pure chastity and virtue rare,
That all her goodly deedes do well declare (*FQ* III.iv.3.3-4).

Her virtue is expressed through external signs, which signify the inner control of the will. The "mist of grieve" she feels because of love's wound (*FQ* III.iv.6) quickly dissolves in to "vengeance powre," and the order Britomart possesses within makes it easy to convert her "cloudy care into a wrathfull stowre" when called to action (*FQ* III.iv.13).

Britomart's command of chastity implies the ability to subordinate base loves-- on the seashore, Britomart sees "pearles and pretious stones of great assay," and despite her wonder at the beauty, she "would not stay for gold, or perles, or pretious stones an howre, but despised them all; for all was in her power" (*FQ* III.iv.18). She wills not to stay for material wealth because her eye is fixed on virtuous love in the form of Artegall.

Why, then, is Britomart the chosen vessel of reason for Book III? I have tried to explain how Britomart is the most human figure, with whom the reader may most closely identify. As Williams notes:

⁴⁵ On page 14, I state that chastity, as defined through Scripture is an active virtue rather than a passive condition.

Britomart is the one person in the third book who has solved the problems of duality in herself, and consequentially, in her relations with others. Being, so to say, both masculine and feminine, with the blended power of strength and love, she can act as a point of reference for all those knights and ladies who, singly and jointly, fail to achieve concord. (Williams 93)

We can begin to understand Britomart's ability to reason and achieve balance through a Platonic perspective, in that she seems to have the ability to overcome her senses through reason and a gaze directed toward love of the soul, yet we have not resolved the most obvious contradiction: If celibacy is greater than chaste marriage, why, then, is Britomart, the Knight of Chastity, destined to marriage? Why has Providence directed her gaze towards Artegall? We know that marriage, not only celibacy, may support chastity, but we also read that marriage is second to complete physical and spiritual devotion in Christ. St. Paul says that those who marry do not sin, but the unwedded should not seek to marry because those who do will suffer more in this life.⁴⁶ St. Paul holds that marriage, which calls for emotional attendance in earthly affairs, hinders devotion to God.⁴⁷ Yet Britomart's destiny is to bear a "famous Progenee" to bring peace and leadership to future generations. She falls in love with a strange reflection of a knight, which she learns to be the likeness of Artegall (the knight of Justice in Book V). She goes to Merlin for his advice on her love (which has grown into the fit of passion sited above). Merlin reassures her:

It was not, Britomart, thy wandering eye,
Glauncing unawares in charmed looking glas,
But the straight course of heavenly destiny,
Led with eternall providence, that has
Guided thy glaunce, to bring his will to pas:
Ne is thy fate, ne is thy fortune ill,
To love the prowtest knight, that ever was.
Therefore submit thy wayes unto his will,

⁴⁶ I Corinthians 7:28

⁴⁷ I Corinthians 7:32-5

And doe by all dew means thy destiny fulfill. (*FQ* III. iii.24)

Spenser seems to praise fruitful marriage, but we have already seen, in the Garden of Adonis, that procreation can only give "partial" immortality through perpetuity (the mutability of eternal substance). So procreation, because it does not bring true immortality, is not the highest good of love. The allegory of Hagar and Sarah in the Bible says this in a different way:

For it is written, Rejoice thou barren that bearest no children: breake for thee, & crye, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hathe many more children, then she which hathe an housband. (*Gal* 4:27)

St. Paul does not mean that those who bear children are not virtuous, but that children are not necessary to take part in heavenly love. Those without children, like the unwedded, are more ready to turn their hearts towards Truth, away from all earthly cares.

Nevertheless, I have found that through a Christian Platonic interpretation of *The Faerie Queene*, virtuous love can mean both virginity and marriage, and Britomart is able to represent both the quest for wisdom and natural (earthly) love. Britomart's love for Artegall can stand for both the upward ascent of the soul and the union of opposites on earth. Through a Christian Platonic perspective, we may see beyond the superficial inconsistencies of spiritual and material desire-- Providence decrees Britomart's chaste union with Artegall, but the interpretation of her quest is also left open to mean the union with Truth or Divine wisdom.

Before seeing Artegall's face in the mirror, Britomart sees her own face reflected. This may suggest that Artegall, or her perception of him rather, is a part of her self that she needs to seek out (because it is still unknown to her). Beginning in perception (what appears in the mirror, and afterward, the physical symptoms of love), Britomart's love

can represent the Platonic hierarchy of consciousness that begins in the sensible and is lifted (by right love, or chaste love, we may say) through the relativity of opinions and beliefs and eventually into the immutable plane of the intelligible. It is also possible, because of the Christian sacrament of marriage, for Britomart to recognize her love for Artegall in the sensible world, and increase their love through procreation. Christianity, therefore, becomes the bridge between the Platonist conception of the sensible and the intelligible worlds, as Britomart becomes the bridge between virginity and marriage. If we were to read the poem as a strict Platonist, putting aside Christianity for the moment, we would probably not accept that Britomart's destiny, if she is to be a model for moral refinement, is in an earthly marriage. Love, in this strict Platonist perspective, may begin in the senses, but it soon turns foul if devotion remains in the sensible world. Britomart's love begins in perception, which is certainly plausible by Platonic ideologies, but she must look beyond the physical being of Artegall. Through Christianity, we might be able to understand why Britomart may continue to search for Artegall and also continue on an upward ascent of the soul.

Conclusion

I opened my study of *The Faerie Queene* with a verse from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, and if I am ever to conclude, I must go to it once again⁴⁸:

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we shall see face to face.
Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully
known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest
of these is love. (1 Cor. 13:12-13)

The world Spenser imagines in *The Faerie Queene* is indeed fragmented, and the reader can only come to see it through a veil. The world outside the poem- our world- is fragmented in much the same way, although it is much harder for us to see it as such. Our interpretation of the world is limited to our personal experience, which, as Augustine found, we cannot ever fully understand in our human condition. As a model for the Christian Platonist, Augustine sees beauty in the sensible world, despite its mutability, and so offers us a way to understand the complexities of *The Faerie Queene*:

Not all the parts exist at once, but some must come as others go, and in
this way they make up the whole of which they are the parts.
(*Conf.* IV.10)

Augustine perceives the beauty of the worlds as "parts of a whole," which can only be seen by turning our eyes towards the light-- then we may begin to order ourselves through love.

I have tried to express the value of a Christian Platonic interpretation of *The Faerie Queene*, and though I recognize the impossibility of truly becoming both a Christian and a Platonist reader, as both traditions are always being redefined, I think my goal has been worthwhile, at least for the experience of writing this thesis. What I hope the reader will understand is how a Christian Platonic perspective can reveal the various

⁴⁸ Oxford NRSV translation.

ways in which allegory can represent unchangeable virtues, and also the various ways in which a single poetic figure can be interpreted. This is more clearly articulated by Augustine in his reflections on the mysteries of Genesis, which he reads allegorically rather than literally:

I know that a truth which the mind understands in one way only can be materially expressed by many different means, and I also know that there are many different ways in which the mind can understand an idea that is outwardly expressed in one way. (*Conf.* VIII.24)

In *The Faerie Queene*, therefore, the singular virtue of chastity may be manifest in various ways (as in the figures of Belpheobe and Amoret), and a singular expression of chastity (the image Britomart perceives in the mirror and the quest for Artegall that follows) may have many interpretations as well. Through a Christian Platonic reading of *The Faerie Queene*, the reader may begin to see how these fragments become parts of a whole, and that the diverse kinds of love in the poem are all subject to divine order. Chastity is, for the Christian Platonic reader, the willful subordination to the order of nature, which exists through Providence. Britomart, in seeking Artegall, follows a providential plan,⁴⁹ and so experiences the order of nature as a positive force rather than a destructive, oppressive force.⁵⁰ I find that Book III can read as the harmonization of the self to the order of nature and Divine will, taking place through the subordination of base desire to spiritual desire (or the subordination of the flesh to the spirit). Through the virtue of chastity one may, by subordinating the self to Providence, experience the beauty of the cosmos and rise through virtuous love above the chaos of base desire.

⁴⁹ As revealed by Merlin: see pp. 37-38.

⁵⁰ An expression of the destructive force of nature is the figure of Tyme in the Garden of Adonis: see pp. 23-24.

Christian Platonism acknowledges that truth and wisdom come to us indirectly, not in the form of direct light, but in its reflection. Just as Augustine and Paul have illuminated my path of understanding, the light of Truth seems, for me, to be revealed through many diverse fragments. I do not seek only one image of truth in the world, and as I have learned through the poetry of Spenser, there will always be many ways to show the immutable wisdom of the divine. Yet Spenser reveals that any hope to dissect a work of art to reveal pure light of philosophical or religious truth will be deflated; no poem, painting, or any other material object ever contains pure light of the divine, but it may reveal fragments of indirect light. These fragments have the power of inspiration and are the true value of art.

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