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Title

"Forgetful of their Sex": Virginal Heroics, Cultural Pluralism, and Material Intervention in The Faerie Queene

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7c07420p>

Author

Ayotte, Amy

Publication Date

2018-04-01

By

A capstone project submitted for
Graduation with University Honors

University Honors
University of California, Riverside

APPROVED

Dr.
Department of

Dr. Richard Cardullo, Howard H Hays Jr. Chair and Faculty Director, University Honors
Interim Vice Provost, Undergraduate Education

Abstract

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Introduction

“Though the sex to which I belong is considered weak you will nevertheless find me a rock that bends to no wind”—Queen Elizabeth I

For the Early Modern female in England, identity was almost always codified. Primarily categorized by her capacity to perform feminine characteristics, the female, more often than not, was the product of a patriarchal grip upon the performance of one's gender. Thus, we see an influx of male valor in Renaissance literature and art, for the male exerted a certain superiority that purported heroism in the simple fact of biological nature. The perfected feminine life, Jane Tibbetts Schulenberg suggests in *Forgetful of Their Sex*, was manifest within an obsessive “preservation of total virginity”; being silent, chaste, and obedient accompanied this virginal requirement in consideration of womanhood (138). Perhaps, then, we see the females that defied the “basic patristic and ecclesiastical male ordering of female values and their control of female sexuality” being cast into an irreconcilable niche of Renaissance literature, nearly lost because of their disobedience (Tibbetts Schulenberg 138). When we look to these Early Modern cultures, the female is overshadowed by a quintessence human—who was not governed by a leaky body or emotional stature—in the form of a male. Yet, a leading figure in the 16th century, Queen Elizabeth I, has been considered a primary contributor to the success of Britain's long standing superiority with her 44-year-reign as female monarch. What made her praiseworthy was, in fact, her virginity—a trait most admired by her subjects—because it was a quality of productive femininity, and, was carried out in a patriarchal role as ruler of Britain:

According to patristic writers, such Christian models of Virginity had successfully repudiated their own female identity; they had negated their unfortunate biological nature; and thus acting in a manner “forgetful of their sex” they were able to transcend

the weakness and limitations inherent in their gender. It was then as sexless, gender-neutral beings that these virgins were viewed as near spiritual equals. For their rigorous repudiation of their own sexuality and espousal of virginity, they often won the highest patristic compliment: they were praised for their spiritual virility, for progressing toward perfect manhood (Tibbetts Shulenberg 128).

As Shulenberg suggests, the female, only able to progress by complete abandonment of human desire is able to achieve perfection; perfection based solely on masculine tendencies and assertions of male gender. Leah S. Marcus in “Shakespeare’s Comic Heroines, Elizabeth I, and the Political Uses of Androgyny,” argues for the queen as “man and woman, king and queen, mother and firstborn son” (137). Making certain to emphasize the extent of her rulership—in the embodiment of male and female—scholars like Marcus accentuate Elizabeth’s duality to stress her capabilities as a woman and to develop a sense of androgyny within the queen’s identity. However, I argue that this notion of a genderless being, while pragmatic, does not derive from a teetering of the queen’s ability to identify with man or woman. As an extension of Elizabeth I, I shall explore the ways in which Britomart, a female knight from Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, promotes androgyny as an appendage of Elizabeth’s Protestant England. Chastity, for Britomart, signifies purity and compliance to a sole partner while Elizabeth’s virginity is predicated on an absolute disavowal of *all* sexual enterprise. While these categorizations are not interchangeable, the means by which each female is governed can be considered by the same religious terms. Perhaps, these subversive tendencies of Godly intervention strengthen the greater claim that Britomart is a representation of cultural pluralism; in that, her characterization and the actions that follow are product to those exemplars of Christian doctrine, ancient culture, and contemporary modeling that Spenser invokes through her construction. In my attempt to

explore these notions, I, too, will show how materiality—in the form of Merlin’s mirror, Britomart’s armor, and the literal and figurative configuration of the armor of God—is the conduit by which androgyny manifests itself, and, as a product, is asserted in Britomart’s heroism.

Queen Elizabeth I and Britomart as Virginal Heroines

A puissant expression of national identity, Britomart’s chastity serves and fortifies the connection to Queen Elizabeth that literary historians and scholars have not only qualified, but made insistent. Although any connections between the two, among other characters, whether obvious or speculative, are expended by Early Modern academics, it would be an injustice to the poem’s integrity—and, more importantly, its didacticism—to overlook these pivotal features. The axiom between these chaste paradigms, specifically Elizabeth I and Britomart, are necessary in understanding the heroic standards by which the female knight operates under and succeeds by. The “Letter to Raleigh,” an antecedent to the 1590 edition of the epic, situates Elizabeth as the primary benefactor of female characterization:

In that Faery Queene, I mean glory in my generall intention, but in my particular I conceiue the most excellent and glorious person of our soueraine Queene, and her kingdome in Faery land. And yet in some places els, I doe otherwise shadow her. For considering she beareth two persons, the one of a most royall Queene or Empresse, the other of a most vertuous and beautifull Lady, this latter part in some places I doe express in Belphoebe, fashioning her name according to your owne excellent concept of Cynthia (Phoebe and Cynthia being both names of Diana). (Hamilton 716)

Although Spenser recognizes Belpheobe and Cynthia as his primary representatives of the monarch, his motion to assert “the most glorious person” comes to fruition most intently in the fact of Britomart’s celibacy. Especially shown in the epigraph preceding Book III, Spenser muses Britomart, a female knight, as the direct apostle to Elizabeth: “It falls me here to write of Chastity,/ The fayrest vertue, far aboute the rest;/ [...] Sith it is shrined in my Soueraines brest,/ And formd so liuely in each perfect part,/ That to all Ladies, which haue it profest,/ Neede but behold the pourtraict of her hart,/ If pourtrayd it might bee by any liuing art” (III.Proem.1-9). Nevertheless, we can see an intention on the author’s behalf to recall the simple truth that defines both figures: chastity. As superficial as it may appear, the two models, thus, are related by their celibacy and a continual adherence to that decision.

Britomart’s relation to Queen Elizabeth, in an allegorical form, is more profound than any superficial exponents that are perhaps apparent on the surface of this text. Spenser’s paralleling of the Queen’s purity with Britomart’s chastity, while absolute, is slight; it is in a microcosm of vestal femininity itself where this comparison resides. They are not only vessels of chastity, unyielding to worldly temptations they are extensions of Britain itself; that is, personifications of national valor. Lineage to the female monarch contributes, then, to Britomart’s ability to prevail in her quest. Thus, an attempt to resemble a continuity that, for any nation would assert an uncompromising bond to its historical precedents, certainly, stands out when applied to that of Elizabethan England. Modeling this antique precedent, we see, then, Britomart melding in an allusion to Elizabeth through the early heroes of Britain and basic Roman Christianity. When Britomart and Glauce enter Merlin’s lair, they are bombarded with a history of British heritage that assumes nearly the whole canto. Not only is the knight revealed as relative to Arthur, Artegall’s half-brother by Gorlois, but also is broadcasted a descendent of the

Saxons who “[...] seru[ed] th’ambitious will of Augustine” (III.iii.35.3). A definitive reference to the Classic paradigm and the Germanic peoples that conquered them, she is an intercessor of national power. To further solidify this continuity, we see specific language and construction of the canto contribute to this conglomeration of antique Christianity. A metaphoric progeny, Britomart is the “Tree” by which “heuenly destiny” is confirmed (III.iii.22.2, III.iii.24.3). In the same effort by which the New Testament’s Matthew archives the genealogical nature of Abraham to Jesus, Merlin’s cataloging is a remark upon her destiny; manifold in his attitude towards the women, the wizard’s historiography is an admonition on behalf of human fate. An extension, then, of these early Christian generations, she becomes a lineal coordinator by which Christian truth is established and continued. When Merlin halts his narrative explanation near the end of the canto, we, alongside Britomart, are granted a warning on behalf of ecclesiastical thought: “But yet the end is not” (III.iii.50.1). A foreshadowing of the knight’s evasion, he makes certain to embolden Britomart, so that she, like Jesus, can become the establishment by which human existence persists. Nonetheless, her unifying persona signifies the extension of multiple cultures to assert continuity between character and monarch.

While this canto establishes Britomart as an ethnic mosaic, the means by which she comes to understand her cultural pluralism, is in fact, accomplished through materiality. Where her heritage recalls Elizabeth’s “bodye politique” as a male feat, she fulfills a feminine guise in the form of her “bodye naturallye” through what she sees in Merlin’s mirror (Hamilton 716). Only secondary, though, is this feminine conditioning to the masculine power she exerts in rescuing Redcrosse Knight. As we are taken back to her childhood by memory, Spenser negates this masculine form to demonstrate the “bodye naturallye” as an innate characteristic of her womanhood. A wandering child in her father’s closet, the female knight explains that Merlin’s

“mirror fayre”, presented “A comely knight, all arm’d in complete wize” to her youthful eyes (III.ii.22.5, III.ii.24.2). Seeing Artegall simply through this glass structure, the knight relies on sensory certitude to legitimize her love. Not uncommon for the Early Modern culture, humoral theory attributed love as a connection of souls made possible by a fixed look between two individuals—only substantiated at the moment these souls would intertwine on an illusionary tightrope connecting the gazers. For Britomart, this witness, too, provides Spenser a platform to extend her womanhood. Resolutely impassioned by what her eyes witness, she conforms to the emotional traits of the standard feminine. Associated most insistently with females, emotional responses categorized women as result of reproductive qualities. While she would have been moved sexually if it were not for her inherent chastity, she nevertheless is sensitive to that which categorizes her as inferior. Thus, a melodramatic persona and humoral association to the leaky-vessel, render Britomart a product of the “bodye naturallye”. Like the Queen, then, she performs feminine characteristics, is physically capable of bearing children, and, most importantly, remains chaste. Without Merlin’s mirror, however, her virility would be lacking; for this material object is a conduit by which she realizes her quest. If not for the mirror, Britomart’s heroism would not manifest in a passion for Artegall, nor would she birth the successors of British rule. In these circumstances her womanhood can thus be deemed necessary, for it by this female association that she is impassioned to fulfill knightly duties.

Cultural Pluralism and the Whole Armor of God

Externalities play a prominent role in figuring the Renaissance woman—especially those that consecrated the female identity as inferior. Refiguring a typecast that asserted women as what Barbara Spackman qualifies as “the enchantress or the hag,” is “tantamount to refiguring

truth”; in that, truth is subject to the conditions under which the female could exist (22). In short, this debasing mentality commodifies, or perhaps motions toward the commodification of, women as a product to material culture. Though it is by these forces that the woman was constrained, it is by the same standards that she succeeded. There is something to be said about feminine productivity, if by these same terms, she is able to secede from the institution that oppresses her. Thus, the Early Modern female is heroic for her oppressed productivity; a capacity to intervene by moral integrity in moments of distress, while maintaining a strategic performance of womanly traits. For Britomart, this is only executed through an accompaniment of material intervention—a conduit to teeter between the institution and the feminine ideal. The armor she wields, then, fulfills this necessity; in that, it personifies the patriarchal institution in which Britomart operates and functions under with her female identity. This covering denies any forbearing notion of femininity, but, more incessantly, provides a platform for Britomart to realize her quest. A necessity for protective gear, her armor not only shields her body from damage; it confines her gender to a metal suit, limiting the performance of female characteristics. Under these same confines, though, she embodies what it means to be both chaste and powerful. Just as a Queen protect its people, Britomart’s armor serves to aid her semblance of Britannia itself. In her role as knight she dismantles any notion of a pigeonholed damsel—instead using her identity to express a moral extension of the Protestant church, and, as a result, inverting any notion of a struggle between male and female gender.

If we consider Britomart in terms of the Queen’s Anglican values, it is feasible to understand how her beliefs may be a factor in the knight’s success. If Queen Elizabeth’s success as a female monarch is only possible by God’s divine guidance, Britomart’s conditioning can only be achieved by the same standards. Indeed, we see Britomart “tak[ing] up the whole armor

of God” so that she “may be able to withstand in the evil day” when she agrees to seek out Artegall (NKJV Bible Ephesians 6:13). It is by this metal exterior that she is able to withstand Guyon’s attack but a conforming to this notion of God’s armor allows her persistence. However, when she removes her helmet in Malbecco's castle, the results are shocking: "Which whenas they beheld, they smiteen were/ With great amazement of so wondrous sight,/ And each on other, and they all on her/ Stood gazing..." (III.ix.23). In one respect, Britomart’s helmet confines her carnal beauty. Thus, her combatants are baffled at the unbound hair and feminine features beneath the hardy exterior they formerly provoked. In refusing to reveal herself, she denies the wandering desires and lustful intentions she assumed to provoke as a silent, chaste, obedient woman. Although she adheres to these gender confines through an armored body, Britomart simultaneously shatters any imposing ideals of hyper-femininity. Both a literal and figurative paralleling of the “helmet of salvation” that God commands all His children to wear, the knight’s hat narrows her path to that of the righteous—one taken only by those that operate strictly under His workings (NKJV Bible, Ephesians 6:17). While it protects her mind from that which is evil, it brings about a conscious effort to serve Him through its construction. As Britomart’s vision is slighted by minimal facial exposure, her eyes are directed by a single opening—much like the narrowed path God reveals for those who follow Him. Her knighthood, then, cannot be considered a gendered feat, for, the path to God is not gendered either. Because God permeates human reality, it is solely in accordance to Him that she is able to thrive. Consequently, Britomart can be categorized as a productive feminine not for her gender managing but for her heroic efforts on the Lord’s behalf.

After Britomart de-horses Guyon, the narrator acquits his inferiority: “For not thy fault/

but secret powre unseene,/ That speare enchanted was, which layd thee on the greene” (III.i.7.8-9). Blaming his fall on the female knight’s weapon, he demeans her ability to perform heroically. Guyon’s lacking temperance and the narrator’s rebuke of female authority exert an uncertainty that is contained within Britomart’s victory; in that, the act of conquering a male is too overpowering for either to abide by. In an attempt to deflate her authority, it seems as though the narrator must rely on the supernatural to indulge these capacities; yet, we see Britomart continuously perform in a miraculous way. His excuse, though imposing in its nature, does, however, continue to press the notion of Britomart’s indoctrinated Christian modeling. Again, a glance to the staple verse regarding the armor of God distinguishes her as a credible heroine. Like Paul encouraging the people of Ephesus to arm themselves with the “sword of the spirit,” she rests in the divine force her spear provides her (NKJV Bible, Ephesians 6:17). Analogous to the jurisdiction provided in God’s word, her borrowed spear is a product of obedience. A mitigator between the sacred and profane, the weapon seems magical—when in fact, it is merely divine inspiration that gives the lance its power. Only as Britomart obeys God’s commands to remain chaste is she able to wield the spear; in keeping her armor on, assuming this knightly role, and remaining chaste does she abide in His doctrine. Thus, her counters, Guyon and Redcrosse Knight later in Book 3, are defeated by the magic-infused object simply in their lacking the qualities that support its function. Insufficient in either temperance or faith, each male is essentially unworthy of this divine affinity. Being already perfected in her chastity, she is not only able to carry and utilize the sword, but also, is capable of permeating the barrier that only one bearing the Holy Spirit could accomplish. The spear itself is not forged from God’s hand, but the allusion to His power that it conveys is necessary to consider because it presents a stark relation by Britomart to Christian doctrine.

With a spear as her conduit, Britomart as weapon-bearer paints a unifying image of heaven and earth; while, simultaneously, she is the agent by which human existence persists. The actual arming of the knight provides the means for God's provoking, and a way for the glorification of Elizabethan beliefs by Spenser. When Britomart is "appareled" with a "mightie speare,/ Which Bladud made by Magick art of yore" she becomes a unifying factor between the Britain and Saxon cultures: the armor belonging to the Saxon Queene, Angela, and the spear as crafted by Bladud, a Briton king with supernatural powers (III.iii.59.8-9, III.iii.60.1-2.). She, as child-bearer and eventual queen, will provide the heirs of this conglomerative effort between the two cultures; thus, she is, yet again, a double entendre—an object of meaning in many forms. Typical of Spenser's work, duality is ever-present in nearly every facet of his epic; thus, it is unrealistic to assume that Britomart is not a multivalent figure like Spenser's other characters. As she plights-her-troth for Artegall's return Britomart invokes the heroes of the antique epic, like Beowulf or Sir Gawain, in an acknowledgement of Saxon heritage. In reference again to the Anglo-Saxon people, the female knight simultaneously acts as chieftom to Glauce: "Thus when she had the virgin all arayd,/ Another harnesse, which did hang thereby,/ About her selfe she dight, that the yong Mayd/ She might in equall armes accompany,/ And as her Squyre attend her carefully" (III.iii.61.1-5). Glauce's willingness to accompany her mimics a *comitatus* relationship, shared only between a leader and his thanes by the Anglo-Saxon people. For those who follow God, this action, too, resonates loudly; for our willingness, according to Christian doctrine, to sacrifice and obey those above us, we are rewarded by the ethereal gift of the Holy Spirit. Taking on the role of "Squyre" and chief, both women are conduits by which Spenser esteems classical reprise. Channeling each culture, the female knight, then, is a counter to Jesus; where his martyrdom unites nations, Britomart's abandoning of self, too, can be considered a

sacrificial binding on behalf of humanity. In a sequence of cause and effect, Glauce's pledge to assist Britomart is a mimicry of sacrifice; as is Britomart's dedication to her reminiscent of one made by a Saxon king for his men. Therefore, Britomart's operation under the power of the armor allows her to become a vestige for Spenser to communicate ancient technique amongst carefully intertwined Christian influence.

Chaste Paradigms: Mary, Judith, and Bradamante

While the binary between Britomart and Queen Elizabeth is nevertheless present throughout, additional female paradigms supplement the knight's heroism. The continuity between Queen and knight is recurrently alluded to, but it seems Spenser deliberately references other chaste, powerful women in an attempt to persuade his audience of Britomart's duality. Though many characters can be attributed as models for her fashioning, three specific figures assert the most prominence: the Virgin Mary, Judith from the bible, and Bradamante from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. What each provides for Britomart is found in their individual performances of female and male traits. Because of their biblical nature, understanding Judith and the Virgin by the same terms will prove most effective as Judith's characterization is a compliment to the Virgin's persona. Bradamante, too, succeeds in a similar manner, but, is only operational because of the establishments made by her counter exemplars.

Typical arguments for Judith's chastity stem from those that extort her as having a definitive role in Holofernes' demise. Some discourse around her heroism, like that of Peter Lucas, polarizes the biblical interpretation against the explication of the self-titled poem *Judith* in the Nowell Codex, a legendary manuscript containing the original tale of *Beowulf* from Medieval culture. Nevertheless, scholars have generally categorized Judith in both cases by three

different perspectives: the “seductress” whose use of “feminine charm” is “a means to an end,” a “virgin beauty seen as a type of chastity overcoming Holofernes's lust” or the symbol of the Church who “represent[s] the moral degradation and evil typified by Holofernes” (Lucas 17). While each label may hold its own truth dependent upon theoretical approach, typecasting Judith as a product of Holofernes’ demise does not qualify her identity; it is through her fashioning that she is transcendent of all three categorizations. Therefore, in an attempt to fulfill these obligations, she must embody the Virgin Mary’s moral perfection, refrain from profane desires in this female identity, and perform male heroics in slaying her antagonist. It is only after accomplishing these feats that she can be considered a heroine. Much like Britomart, Judith’s heroism is figured according to a capacity at which she performs female and male characteristics. Judith’s chastity as an accurate representation is “pushed beyond its biblical dimensions” in the tenth-century poem where she is ultimately converted from a widow into a virgin: “[...] here her heroism and invulnerability are predicated on her virginal purity because for the medieval church virginity contained in itself extraordinary power” (Cilleti 43). Indeed, we are convinced of her success as a product of divine inspiration; only by God’s hand is her defeat possible. Her accomplishments are mere extensions, then, of Old Testament exemplars, and undoubtedly, that of the Virgin Mary:

When the Anglo-Saxons converted to Christianity, they inherited a spiritual heroic past contained within the lives of various apostles, martyrs, and confessors. The general emphasis on chastity on Anglo-Saxon England seems to have derived from the patristic contrast between Eve and the Virgin as two women similar initially in their virginity but dissimilar in their obedience (or lack of it) to God. Where Eve failed, bringing death into the world, the Virgin succeeded bringing life into the world through her Son, by whom,

according to Saint Jerome, she reinstated the gift of virginity to women, and who created a new family for Himself in his haste followers Judith, Aman, James, and John (Chance 33).

Just as Mary's womb is shelter for Jesus, the martyr by which human succession is permitted, Judith's heroism protects and enables her kingdom to thrive. And where Judith succeeds in defeating Holofernes, and Mary in harboring Jesus in an immaculate conception, Britomart, too, prevails. Therefore, like the Virgin, Judith, and Queen Elizabeth I, Britomart as protector is an intervention on behalf of Christian doctrine: in the form of her virginal obedience to God. Only in her compliance to Him does she locate Artégall and continue her familial destiny. An extension of Mary, Judith's fashioning serves Britomart's androgyny; in that, she embodies both gender roles while fervently serving God.

Though she is considered pious, Bradamante, alternatively, shows intentional uncertainty in her gender role: "[She] is the contradiction in terms, the *guerriera donna gentile*, basically unsure which role she wishes to play. Her destiny requires her to be *donna* and while she may use her *guerriera* attributes when engaged in her quest, the completion of her search inevitably requires her to relinquish the role of *guerriera* and accept that of the *passive donna*" (Tomalin 540). Neither warrior nor beautiful woman, Bradamante, as Margaret Tomalin suggests in "Bradamante and Marfisa: An Analysis of the "Guerriere" of the Orlando "Furioso"', resides in the insecurity of her own manhood; always presumed as an androgynous being—until she abandons the war-like persona and embraces the feminine. Oscillating between feminine and masculine, the knight is called to abandon self in order to fulfill her quest. We see this, like Britomart, as her sex and identity are captive to an armored body; yet, she accepts the necessity to stand and wait on the Lord's behalf, which signifies her inner purity. A cohesion of "delicate

beauty with epic strength,” she is an oxymoron. While Spenser evokes the dual nature of Bradamante in expanding her relation to the epic heroine, he certainly beckons Italian Renaissance culture simultaneously. Through his invoking of Ariosto in Britomart’s character, the poet reveals an infatuation with the romantic epic—one that develops the Petrarchan ideal, essentially focusing on the beauty of the female character and its effects on male admiration. Typically superficial in its intent, the Italian form often commented on the ephemeral quality of human experience; however, Spenser makes certain to assert his ideals of love as those that derive from Christian morality. Nevertheless, a focus on the Italian prototype represents, again, the idea of the compendium nature Britomart’s performing body comes to embody.

Conclusion

The connective nature between Britomart and Queen Elizabeth I is essential in understanding how female heroism operated in Early Modern England. The notion that perfected womanhood had no heroic value, or very little if that, while surely a popular ideal for the period, does not accurately describe the contributions these figures had in Renaissance culture. Not only do they pride themselves in abiding to female regulation, but also they encompass the purported masculine features that any individual, whether male or female, would deem great. While this embodying of the two genders is made possible for these women by the fluid nature they come to learn from—in the form of materiality— even more prominent is their iconic nature as representations of national heritage. Through her cultural pluralism, Britomart as an exertion on Spenser’s behalf, is a means by which gender, ethnicity, race, and societal confines are made irrelevant. In her embodying of both male and female, she, too, is a symbol of androgyny. While Spenser may not be remarking upon these subjects in a blatant manner of regard or disregard, it

is entirely plausible to imagine that he uses Britomart and her correlation to the Queen as an exertion upon the idea of God's divine intervention as a non-gendered feat; thus, Britomart, in her symbolic state, can be deemed heroic.

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