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“The Mirror of Desire”: Britomart and Spenserian Perception in *The Faerie Queene*
Brandon Joseph Muri

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts in English

Department of English

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Dedicated

With a great deal of affection, to my darling wife.

Acknowledgements

Putting first things first, I need to thank my wife, Jenna. Without her support over the past year, this thesis would not exist, in its present form, at least. The hours that went into it—seeds planted, I hope, for future harvest in doctoral study—were made possible by her willingness to take on the financial burden as I whiled away days and weeks in my study, among piles of inscrutable old books. I am also indebted to my parents, who never questioned my choice of graduate study, and for their thoughtful manner of tiptoeing carefully past my study, and for graciously assisting with the care and nurture of our little Mabel.

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Contents

Approval Page.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Dedication	3
Contents	5
Abstract	6
Introduction: Through a Glass Darkly	7
Chapter One: The Obscuring Veil	18
Chapter Two: The Reflecting Mirror	24
The Mirror of Narcissus	32
The Mirror of Christ	46
Chapter Three: The Soul's Journey	61
Into the Self: Movement.....	62
Into the World: Process	69
Into God: Relation	81
Conclusion	96
Bibliography	98

Abstract

In modern usage, “love” and “justice” are terms used to describe universal standards of behavior even though the modern materialist worldview cannot account for such universal, abstract entities. Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* dramatizes the conceptual origin of these and similar terms in human experience; for, as C.S. Lewis has noted, Spenser’s poetry “Consists in giving an imagined body to the immaterial” (*AL* 322). Posing an answer to the question of whether these “imagined bodies” reflect an order of being transcending human experience, the romance narrative of Book III argues in the affirmative by demonstrating that universal standards such as love and justice become unintelligible when understood as private expressions of desire. For, if love and justice are conventional expressions of human desire, the drama of Book III is largely concerned with illustrating the ways convention inevitably distorts, restricts, and ultimately destroys human nature. Conversely, Spenser’s knight of chastity represents the indomitable power of nature unleashed in the service of a higher order of love—a standard for which the subjective experience of desire simply cannot account. Beginning with the desiring look in Merlin’s mirror, the alienation Britomart experiences in response to her reflection invokes the perceptual tension existing between self and other. Spenser’s allusion to Narcissus indicates that such subjective dislocation represents a divide insuperable to fallen intellects, yet the legend of chastity establishes love’s transcendent basis upon this very paradox, in the conjunction of opposites reflecting in their complementarity a figuration of universal, providential, order.

Introduction: Through a Glass Darkly

In his letter to the Corinthian church, the Apostle Paul gives expression to the infirmity of mortal perception in the memorable phrase: “Now we see through a glass darkly.”¹ Paul’s simple and elegant metaphor foregrounds the consequences of Original Sin for human knowledge: separation from the truth of God is coterminous with the epistemological and ontological double-bind to which man is now subject. We labor under a veil dividing the self from the larger reality (of God). Like human nature, this veil is a mixed thing—it conceals “Truth” even as it acquaints us with truth’s general character and outline. Fittingly, the word the King James Version translates as “darkly” is derived from the Greek word *ainigmati*, “enigma.”² Indeed, perception is an enigma. It is gateway between being and knowing, where we come to the end of ourselves and that which is undeniably other—the liminal frontier where language and thought begin to fail. Modern scholarship has devoted much of its energies to this tension, producing a rich and various nomenclature across the academic disciplines. The gap between “self” and “other,” reader and text, subject and object, consciousness and unconsciousness—are iterations of the same, essential dilemma.

What I propose in this paper on Edmund Spenser is neither a commentary on Paul’s letter nor a critique of postmodern theory, but an exploration of a specific poem, from a relatively unpopular genre of literature (I mean allegory) that presumes to resolve the difficulties presented in both. The *Faerie Queene* accomplishes this, to varying degrees, and in limited ways that I will discuss. In short, Spenser’s poem contains a sustained, contextualizing vision of life that is fully aware of the paradox of human perception, and even anchored in it. In this sense, Spenser’s work

¹ *Authorized King James Version*, 1 Cor. 13:12.

² The KJV was translated from Jerome’s Vulgate translation, *aenigmate*.

represents a valuable counterpoint to modern (and postmodern) insecurities of totalization and universality, and therefore deserves a place among contemporary discussions of literature and epistemology.

This paper will examine the ways sexual desire functions throughout *The Faerie Queene* as a heuristic Spenser uses to locate human identity through the expression of perceived needs. The chastity legend of Book III in particular asks whether desire of itself provides a reliable standard by which to measure. If we accept the hypothesis that the self exists as an aggregate of needs (real and perceived), it follows that the truest picture of human nature must be that which is most comprehensive: the corporate expression of these in the collective form of convention. Spenser's rejection of this position is clearly demonstrated in the legend of Book III, which is largely concerned with the ways convention inevitably distorts, restricts, and ultimately destroys human nature. For Spenser, desire reflects, rather than constitutes, the true form of Man. Rather than define the individual by his appetites—or by the appetites of others, which regulate powerfully in the guise of social convention—Spenser expresses a dynamic notion of perception that compasses the social form of Man as well as the individual. He accomplishes this by locating the self, paradoxically, as a relation between the flux of desire and the stability of reason, codified in the virtues of chastity and justice.

Spenser's angle of vision is characteristic of his age, an age obsessed with Man's place in the cosmos (Shire 89), and this Renaissance project is apparent in Spenser's consistently totalizing vision, which seeks to integrate the individual consciousness with a cosmic order. His genius appears not in the originality of his theme but rather in the execution. And he is without peer in this regard. The *Faerie Queen* itself is a cosmos, a brilliantly-accorded disposition of elements reflecting in every part, the same, unifying *telos*. Part reflects whole; whole reflects

part—identity and difference correspond equally within a grand, harmonizing vision—what might be called an ontology of love, established upon the Platonic idea that a thing’s unique form is existentially and essentially its metaphysical positioning in relation to other things.³

My argument is oriented around a central image in Book III, Britomart’s encounter with her shadow-lover in “Venus’ looking glas” (i.8.9). The mirror functions as originating cause of Spenser’s chastity legend, the paradigmatic quest to authenticate the self in the undeniably “other.” The fact that the image is a shadow, that she must go in quest of the actual body, and that she herself must undergo a transformation to bring this about—identifies the narrative rhythm of the chastity legend as the recurring struggle to surmount the perceptual divide which separates every viewing subject from its ideal self. This struggle typifies the cosmic process through which the fallen world is redeemed, as Nature states in Book VII: “All things by their change their being doe dilate” and thus “Doe worke their owne perfection so by fate” (VII.vii.58).

An illustration of this process, Britomart’s virtual encounter with Artegall symbolizes the inward and outward process of becoming within the mutable world. Love, specifically sexual love, furnishes the dramatic location in *Faerie Queene* where the conflict between self and other might be resolved⁴: it is here that Spenser’s knight of chastity liberates romantic desire from the destructive, subjective experience immortalized in the figure of Narcissus. Appropriating archetypal imagery from Old Testament scripture and Neoplatonist philosophy, Spenser presents a definition of love that emerges unites line and circle, Logos and Eros in a single complex

³ In contradistinction to Aristotelian “immanence”—which is the idea that unique individuals are what they are by nature, the notion of some abstract (or even, in a sense, autonomous) individuality. For Spenser—and many Renaissance intellectuals influenced by Neoplatonism—conceptions of being in terms of individual substance fail to account for the irreducible, ontological relations that bind immanent, finite beings to each other and to their transcendent, infinite source in God.

⁴ As well as the conflict between desire and reason, chastity and justice—the “vertical” level of Spenser’s allegory.

statement, a marriage of two opposing metaphors representing the way the mind imposes forms upon reality.

The poet explains that the magic mirror was created by Merlin as a gift for Britomart's father, King Ryence, "That neuer foes his kingdome might inuade" (ii.21). Ironically, as the knight of chastity, the mirror provides the means by which Britomart's "kingdom" is invaded by the knight of justice. Though it is important to note that the mirror does not *project* a vision so much as it *unveils* the vision of the viewer. The poet explains:

It vertue had, to shew in perfect sight,
What euer thing was in the world contaynd,
Betwixt the lowest earth and heauens hight,
So that it to the looker appertaynd. (III.ii.19)

Showing perfectly any object as it "pertains" to the viewer, the mirror exposes the self's true relation to the objects of the world. But when Britomart first looks into the magic mirror, she ignores the "virtue" of the mirror, preferring to look with vanity, the sense implied in the following:

Her selfe a while therein she vewd in vaine;
Tho her auizing of the vertues rare,
Which thereof spoken were, she gan againe
Her to bethinke of, that mote to her selfe pertaine. (III.ii.22)

When Britomart begins to reflect ("Her to bethink of"), her perception changes from that of unconscious, instinctual pleasure to a one conscious and cognitively ordered. The reflection is transformed from the familiar image of desire to a spiritual vision. The reflection is still her self—but the person she sees is not *her*. The second image is elusive; it has been altered by cognition. At once foreign and unreal, Artegall appears in the form of the masculine ideal such as it appears only in poetry:

Eftsoones there was presented to her eye
A comely knight, all arm'd in complete wize,
Through whose bright ventayle lifted vp on hye
His manly face, that did his foes agrize,
And friends to termes of gentle truce entize,
Lookt foorth, as *Phoebus* face out of the east,
Betwixt two shadie mountaines doth arize;
Portly his person was, and much increast
Through his Heroicke grace, and honorable gest. (III.ii.24-25)

The image arouses inextinguishable passion, driving her out of her father's house and into the world. She is transformed by her quest of an imagined lover into the knight of chastity. Spenser links the mirror episode with the myth of Narcissus, raising suspicions as to the legitimacy of Britomart's perception and the desire it arouses (exacerbated by the fact that the marriage does not take place within the poem). In conceptual language, Britomart's reflection and the subsequent vision creates an antithesis between two modes of perception: the literal and the figural, bodily sensation and cognitive extrapolation. The episode suggests that the attainment of ultimate satisfaction—synonymous with the discovery of the true self—requires the soul to leave behind the tactile pleasure of its sensuous relation to beauty for the pursuit of beauty's transcendent meaning.⁵

In the Old Testament, the Mosaic Law represented a similar challenge to the nation of Israel. It was a literal code masking a spiritual reality. The law represented the “works of the flesh,” a veil signifying the complete separation between God and man. It was never intended to provide the means to holiness, because its purpose was not to offer salvation but to reveal sin—and through dim figures, shadows, and signs point to the coming Messiah. According to Paul's letter to the Corinthians, those who seek salvation *by means of the law* find themselves trapped

⁵ Richard of St. Victor wrote: “[the mirror] shows us an image of eternal beauty in the beauty of a momentary body. But that image is fleeting, it has no substance; and we must learn how to leave the mirror behind and to love a being that is invisible and immutable” (*De Trinitate*, V.vi).

within the veil of the law, but those who look to Christ are liberated. Seeing through the veil, they experience transformative vision:

Even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart. Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away. Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. *But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory*, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.
(2 Corinthians 3:16-18, my emphasis)

Because the law functioned as a mirror reflecting the people's sinfulness, it served as a veil protecting them from the holiness of God—for the sinner cannot look upon the holiness of the Lord (Psalm 24:3-4), nor the Lord look upon the sinner (Habakkuk 1:3).⁶ But, *mirabile dictu*, the writer says that when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Equipped with new vision, the self experiences its reflection as the image of God. An apt analogy for the present thesis, Spenser's cautionary example of Narcissus corresponds to the blindness of the Pharisee—for, in seeking wholeness in a mirror reflecting his own, broken image, Narcissus is blinded to the vision of wholeness lying beyond. Britomart, in contrast, typifies the obedient soul who turns from that image to the contemplation of the thing itself, finding there the self in its perfection and glory.

The vision in Merlin's mirror foregrounds the nonliteral dimensions of the *Faerie Queene*, evoking the conventional mirror metaphor of Elizabethan literature and the love allegory of courtly lyric. Inner and outer are held in balance as the reader must determine to what extent the vision is the reflection of Britomart's psychic interior or the phenomenal description of her future husband produced through Merlin's art. The subsequent action reveals that the

⁶ "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart" (Psalm 24:3-4); "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity" (Habakkuk 1:13a).

opposition is only virtual; the sundering of Britomart and her idealized reflection in the mirror is merely an accident of time, as Merlin will declare: “The spouse of Britomart, is Arthegall” (III.iii.26). However, in the course of Britomart’s efforts to “guyde the heauenly causes to their constant terme” (st. 25), a curious reversal takes place. The form of her inner desire becomes reflected in her own person, as she herself becomes transformed into the image of a chivalric knight. Taken together, the revelation of Merlin’s mirror and its meaning, as it unfolds in the course of the narrative, serve to illustrate Spenser’s belief that the division between the inner world and the outer is a conflict mediated and resolved through perception.

At stake is the harmonization of the self and society. Spenser inverts the courtly trope of the questing knight by reversing the traditional gender roles—as if to suggest that the conventional portrayal was somehow *backward*. Set against the traditional narrative, Spenser’s romance exposed the false dichotomy at the heart of *fin amor*; for by promoting ascetic renunciation at the same time that it provided occasion for a socially-acceptable form of adultery, courtly love had created a bifurcation in the faculty of desire by inserting a division between purity and passion. The courtly misconception became insinuated in the social consciousness, its effects still felt in Spenser’s day.⁷ In contrast to the traditional portrayal, in which the lady is idealized: pure, austere, and coldly abstract, Spenser’s narrative depicts her as the passionate lover and the knight as the idealized image of perfection. In Spenser’s legend, the sexual nature is affirmed as well as spiritual, combined in a heightened vision of monogamous marriage.

⁷ Admittedly, my hasty summary commits the fallacy of overgeneralization, a regrettable necessity as a more in-depth discussion falls quite outside the scope of this paper. However, whether one agrees with the conventional view promoted by Gaston Paris at the turn of the century or with later critics who insist that *De Arte Honeste Amandi* and similar works be taken as nothing short of satire—in other words, the social reality aside—the point I am arguing is that Spenser incorporated the contradictory system of courtly love *as it existed in literary form*. In other words, my paper will assume that Spenser is responding to the literary tradition he received, not to the poet’s personal reservations. Sources: Lewis, *AL* pgs. 13,18,36,41,60; Ferrante and Economou, *Introduction*; Economou, pgs. 17-23; Goldin, *Perspectives* pgs. 51-3.

The process of restoration begins with the desire aroused through recognition of one's image as in a mirror. As Maurice Evans has said, Book III is the book of sex (152). Sexual attraction is the locus where flesh and spirit collide, a place of sacred knowledge where, as Xenophon put it, a man in love becomes "one transformed, the cynosure of all initiated in the mysteries of this divinity" (*Symposium* 1.10).⁸ A harmonizing force, sexual desire represents the mingling of conflict and union, mortality and procreation, the eternal and the temporal, love and war—the multiple senses of which are evoked by the virtual dislocation evident in Britomart's reflection.⁹ Sexual knowledge establishes the nexus between flesh and spirit in *Faerie Queene*, a correlation Benjamin Lockerd has noted between Spenser's poem and Apuleius's myth of Cupid and Psyche. Lockerd argues that the legend of Psyche "Introduces the notion that the soul (Beauty, Psyche) transforms and assimilates the dark, destructive part of human nature by marrying it, by accepting the fact that spirit and flesh are indissolubly joined" (115). Accordingly, Britomart's transformation from maiden to knight expresses a corresponding illustration of human nature responding to beauty's higher form—which the example of Narcissus mirrors as demonic parody by illustrating the inverse tendency of the dark and destructive forces of human nature to assimilate and transform the image of beauty into its own likeness.

The reference to "Cephisus foolish child" (III.ii.44) evokes the contrasting danger of such encounters for those without self-knowledge. Ovid's tale portrays the flattering illusion that is produced when the viewer's perspective is confined to the form of its own desire. Like the Pharisee who thought to make himself holy through his observance of the law, Narcissus

⁸ C.f. also Plato, *Phaedrus* 245a.

⁹ For Kathleen Williams, these antitheses contribute an essential pattern to Spenser's design for *The Faerie Queene* (*Glass* 3).

foolishly thought he could achieve self-actualization through love of self—to such a mind, all the world is self. Narcissus represents a verminous selfhood that is immune to the transcendence of love—which requires the recognition of, and submission to, the desires of another—and the narcissist simply cannot do. A central presupposition of my thesis is the notion that “desire” is a volition incapable of self-denial or seeing “beyond” itself. Desire is by definition restricted to the centripetal orbit, a self-defining form. *My* desire cannot be *your* desire: they may appear similar, or compatible, but the necessarily private and subjective nature of desire as an expression of an individual ego renders each categorically distinct. This, in fine, describes the self-generated veil dividing the self from God, or Intellect (vertical axis) and from society (horizontal axis).

Patrick Cheney rightly asserts that “Chastity derives from understanding the unity of human desire and divine will, earth and heaven” (3). Britomart’s quest parallels a corresponding struggle in the imagination to uncover the sacred center lying beneath the deceptive surface of appearances. Encompassing heart, mind, and soul, her desire corresponds to the three Neoplatonic movements of mind found in Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium Mentis*: conversion *intra nos* (inward), *extra nos* (outward), and *supra nos* (above). In this view, the aim of Britomart’s quest is no less than the recovery of Eden, which should not be understood as a location in space, but the recovery of an ontological relation. Such a recovery necessarily requires the anterior recovery of man’s unfallen perception, vision synonymous with biblical *apokalupsis*. Contrary to the popular understanding, the actual meaning of “apocalypse” has nothing to do with Armageddon and the end of the world; in Greek it means, literally, “unveiling.” Appropriately, the actual Greek title of the Book of Revelation is “The Unveiling of Jesus Christ,” for it describes Christ revealed in the end of times first to his bride, then to the world.

Significant to my argument is the manner in which this occurs. As the archetypal groom, Christ reveals himself to his bride *by lifting her veil*. Accordingly, Christ's work throughout history has been the removal of the veil of blindness over the Lord's people, revealing the God who is already there.¹⁰ In biblical imagery, then, "unveiling" does not describe a change in reality but a change in one's perception of reality. The point is illustrative, for Britomart's quest is also a perceptual unveiling. Like the "seed" of the Gospel message (in Luke 8:11), containing an inner meaning that can only be reached by penetrating the outer shell, Spenser's mirror similarly penetrates the heroine's imaginative soil; it becomes her "engraft paine" (III.ii.17) a metaphor suggestive of conception.¹¹ The vision is a type of parthenogenesis by which she has been implanted with an allegorical seed, which speaks to the fecundity of allegorical vision.

My argument is divided into two parts. The first section deals primarily with the theoretical basis of the perceptual conflict of Book III, and the second with applying those concepts to the poem itself. My first chapter, "The Obscuring Veil," introduces the problem of desire, which Spenser viewed as a faculty confused in human consciousness between the conflicting instincts of purity and passion. The following chapter, "The Reflecting Mirror," examines the ways Spenser intended his *Faerie Queene* to function as a mirror for his society. As an exemplary model, Spenser's poem exposes the ways Elizabethan perceptions had become corrupted through flattering conventions that reflected a distorted view of desire, and of human nature. Beginning with a brief look at the Renaissance mirror metaphor and how the concept informs Spenserian perception, I examine two expressions of it, in two contradictory forms of perception in *Faerie Queene*. The first, named after Narcissus, is a perception of unconsciousness, subsisting entirely in subjective experience. Existing *in itself* and enjoyed *for*

¹⁰ The title of a book by Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (InterVarsity Press, 1998. Print.)

¹¹ implies the implanting of virtues, dispositions, sentiments in the mind (OED 2.a).

itself, desire does not “get” anywhere, philosophically speaking; therefore, this is the reflection one gets by simply looking “into” the mirror of desire. The second, which I have called the Mirror of Christ, describes a spiritually-guided perception achieved by looking “through” subjective desire to the vision of sacred reality. This is generative perception, for it “reproduces” the spiritual reality within the viewer, transforming the subjective desires into the image of the higher, spiritual pattern.

The second section of my argument begins in Chapter Three, “The Soul’s Journey,” and consists in my exposition of Spenserian perception in the *Faerie Queene*. My analysis is divided into three sections, corresponding to Bonaventure’s three mirrors—self, world, and God. To each of these I have appended an additional term describing the soul’s response to each encounter using a pattern modelled after Pico’s triadic theory of emanation.¹² Beginning with the awakening of desire, the journey into the world of the self describes the soul’s *movement* out of the unconscious toward the widening (re)formation of individual consciousness. The journey into the world describes the *process* in which the soul is tested through its encounter with false appearances. The final movement “into God” describes the restoration of the soul’s natural *relations*—self-knowledge on the cosmic scale, accomplishing the inclusive harmonization of *eros* and *logos* within society, which is to establish God’s kingdom on earth.

¹² My cycle is a modification of Pico’s system, which he divided according to the following headings: overflowing (*emanantio*), conversion (*conversio*), and return (*remeatio*). See Wind, 43.

Chapter One: The Obscuring Veil

The place to begin an analysis of Spenser's contradictory appearances is at the Temple of Venus, where the poet describes the figure of Concord. A principle moderating the oppositional powers of her children, Hate and Love, Concord is the universal form at work in all expressions of concord in human life. She is the source of "blessed Peace," "Friendship trew," and "strength, wealth, and happiness" (IV.x.34). She is also the spiritual principle of concord holding the universe together with "inviolable bands" (x.35). Operative in human as well as atomic relations, her rule extends to the realms of matter and spirit. She appears in Spenser's "Hymn of Love" as the god of love who creates the universe out of chaos, first by imposing distinction upon material forms and then harmony:

The world that was not till he did it make;
Whose sundrie parts he fro them selues did seuer,
The which before had lyen confused euer,
.....
He then them tooke, and tempering goodly well
Their contrary dislikes with loued meanes. (lines 78-89)

The complex function described here exceeds the traditional personification of love as the cosmic "uniting instinct"; it is Concord, rather: the mediating power incorporating the distinct powers of her offspring. Like Hate, she divides the elements: "Whose sundrie parts he fro them selues did seuer" (line 80); as Love, she tempers "Their contrary dislikes with loued means" (line 89). Encompassing union and division, she is a principle of desire and also of order, as we see again in *The Faerie Queene* under the auspices of Love:

Well did Antiquitie a God thee deeme,
That ouer mortall minds hast so great might,
To order them, as best to thee doth seeme,
And all their actions to direct aright;
The fatall purpose of diuine foresight. (III.iii.2, my emphasis)

Directing “mortal minds” to fulfill heavenly providence, her office includes the unexpected implication that, as Love, she directs “*all* actions.” What we thought was the corrupted force of human passion is actually the instrument of heavenly purpose.

Spenser presents this idea more explicitly in canto five, where he describes Love’s effects in human conduct: “In braue sprite it kindles goodly fire,” culminating in “all high desert and honour.” Among the “baser wit” on the other hand, “it leads to “sensuall desire” and “lewd slouth” (III.v.1). It is a strange fact of human psychology that a beautiful image can terminate in such diametrically opposed conclusions, a paradox illustrated in the medieval conception of the two Venuses. The distinction began in response to what George Economou has identified as a difference between heavenly love (*caritas*) and earthly (*amor*).

It is, in a word, a representation of the paradox of human existence since the fall: a single instinct or impulse, which before the Fall enjoyed both moral and psychological integrity, may lead to opposite and mutually exclusive ends because it has become fragmented and confused in human consciousness. (Economou 20)

In *De Planctu Naturae* Alan de Lille represents the conflicting, human response toward beauty as two dispositions of the same goddess, *Venus caelestis* and *Venus scelestis*. The first has to do with the propagation of spiritual forms, the second with the propagation of physical bodies. Pico della Mirandola broke with earlier philosophers, including his mentor Marsilio Ficino, in identifying three powers arising from the image of beauty:

. . . in our Soul, (naturally indifferent to sensible or intelligible Beauty,) there may be three Loves; one in the Intellect, Angelical; the second Humane; the third Sensual. The two latter are conversant about the same object, Corporeal Beauty; the sensual fixeth its Intention wholly in it; *the humane separates it from Matter.* (*Commento* 3.4, my emphasis)¹³

¹³ For more discussion of the ambiguities of the names of these Venuses see Wind, pp. 1, 3, 8-9, and Panofsky, pp. I44-5, note 5I.

Returning again to our heroine, Britomart, the poet declares her to be the agent of Love's power in whom "none doe triumph more" and the executor of "The fatal purpose of divine foresight" (III.iii.3). Pico's scheme describes her well: she unites the powers of the celestial and the sensual into a third power (Pico's "Humane"), the composite reflection of all three. She is not an inviolable virgin nor a slave to lecherous passion, but a virgin aspiring to passionate and pure, monogamous marriage. She embodies infinite passion united to infinite purity, particularized in human form.

Thomas Roche has correctly identified in the Spenserian *discordia* "the emergence of order from chaos and of friendship from enmity" (*Kindly Flame* 17); however, as is often the case when dealing with Spenser, precise formulae rarely hold true in all points. As we have seen in the operations of the god of Love in the "Hymn of Heavenly Love" and the figure of Concord in *Faerie Queene*, Spenser does not simply mute the antitheses of union and distinction by erasing their differences in a higher synthesis. Concord's role is not to diminish either of her children, but to bring her conflicting powers into that generative balance by which individuals in the sensible world "Doe worke their owne perfection so by fate." Lockerd suggests that Spenser saw in the instinctual drives of sex and aggression an indication not of schizophrenic polarity, but of a universal principle at work in organic matter. He cites a distinction between *eros* and *logos* made by Jung: "Eros is interweaving; Logos is differentiating knowledge, clarifying light. Eros is relatedness, Logos is discrimination and detachment" (C.W., 13:41, qtd. in Lockerd 62), Lockerd argues that, for Spenser, these drives are simply physical manifestations of much larger, cosmic, forces recognized by modern psychology as constituent factors of consciousness.

Spenser's use of this antithesis in *The Faerie Queene* may have been inspired by the Platonic theology of Pico della Mirandola, who ascribed a similar, dual activity to the

intermediary Neoplatonic realm of Mind (or Intellect).¹⁴ In the *Phaedrus* Plato describes the origin of Love as the offspring of Lack (*penia*) and Plenty (*poros*). In Pico's system, these substantive personifications become dynamic powers denominated by the Aristotelian terms "act" and "potency." Their functions correspond to Jung's Eros and Logos, respectively. Pico defined Mind's "act" as the upward-regarding, loving contemplation of the Father's perfection, and "potency" as the downward, regulating power through which it shapes the lower substance of World-Soul into the image of the Father (*Commento* I.9.472-3)¹⁵; "potency" is equated with the unlimited quality of matter as famously stated by Plato in the *Philebus* (23Cff) and "act" with limit and form.¹⁶

Combining Pico's concept with the Jungian gives us a thick description of the two forces and their many guises: desire (Eros) is the upward movement seeking union with upper forms; law (Logos) is the regulatory power that transforms the unlimited substance of matter—as much as possible—into accord with the infinite formal perfection of the Ideas.¹⁷ Eros drives us to seek the creator; Logos, regulating, does not allow us to approach as we currently are (as fallen creatures). Eros is associated with matter, the many (Pico's "unlimited") and the feminine; Logos with form, the one, and the masculine. "Act" (desire) is matter's response to form; "potency" (regulation) is form's response to matter.¹⁸ The latter is destructive, the former, generative.

¹⁴ Michael Allen writes, "In regard to this being, Angel or Mind is compounded of two contrary principles, like every other created thing existing between the two uncompound extremes of God and prime matter" (96).

¹⁵ Valery Reese discusses a similar conception in Ficino's *De Amore* IV.iv, where Ficino discusses how the soul through contemplation may rise to the heavenly realms, or, forsaking "divine light" may descend completely into matter (85). In the commentary on the *Phaedrus* Ficino says Venus is the active power drawn to beauty through two kinds of intellect: the contemplative, which he names the Saturnian, and the active, or imitative, that is, the Jovian (see Michael Allen "The Birth Day of Venus" pg. 96).

¹⁶ Also in the *Timaeus*, where Plato identifies matter as "receptacle and in a manner nurse of all becoming" (49a); C.f. Aristotle in *Physics* I.ix.192a.

¹⁷ The interpretation of Pico's *Commento* is largely derived from Allen pp. 88-92.

¹⁸ Sear Jayne writes that "Love in man is not only a God-given and cosmically necessary and irresistible search upwards toward a perfection which is both spiritual and intellectual; it is also an irresistible, God-given, and cosmically necessary compulsion downward to create the likeness of Divine Beauty in the physical world" (226).

Relating these competing drives to the figure of Concord, it becomes clear that we have been describing the powers attributed to her rival sons, Love and Hate. As noted earlier, Spenser's ambiguous terminology obscures the fact that Concord, not her son, embodies the harmonizing power of Love; for it is she who reconciles the warring Eros and Logos.

Once again, Spenser presents the critic with a double challenge. In his essay "Spenser's Garden of Adonis and Britomart's Quest," Humphrey Tonkin argues that Spenser's imagery equates Adonis with matter and Venus with form. While Tonkin's interpretation seems correct within the context he uses, one should recall that the garden itself is essentially a feminine space (as Kane notes, pg. 126). The garden's association with fecundity carries an implicit association with Plato's definition of formless matter as "receptacle and in a manner nurse of all becoming" (*Timaeus* 49a). Spenser's garden echoes Plato's concept; it is a generative space, much like a womb, surrounding and containing Venus and her lover. Spenser's description of the garden as "the first seminarie / Of all things" (III.vi.30) is equally ambiguous, since "seminary" may be taken to mean either, primarily, a "seed plot" (OED "seminary" 1), or "place of education" (OED "seminary" 4). The feminine character of the first becomes immediately challenged by the second, which suggests the masculine implication of form *upon* matter. Clearly, reducing matter and form in the Garden of Adonis to either male or female is inexorably problematic. For Spenser, these terms are interpenetrating.

As indistinguishable as these two principles appear in their perfect unity in the Garden of Adonis, the mutable world tends to distill them into diametrically-opposed powers. The antithesis invades the sensible world as light enters a prism: its form dictated by the nature of the receiving medium. In human emotion this conflict presents itself in the form of love and hate, in society as harmony and discord, in the political state as submission and rule (C.f. Kane 109,119).

As nature groans under the burden of these warring opposites, Britomart's indomitable control throughout Books III and IV indicates her transcendence of this conflict. As the human representative of Spenser's Concord, she embodies the harmonization of both the masculine and the feminine. As C.S. Lewis has said, Britomart *is* married love (AL 340, my emphasis). As a woman, Britomart lacks the masculine drive to possess or control; as knight she is without the feminine vulnerability to coercion. Androgyny renders her superior to the powers of either sex (Williams, *Glass* 92, 131).

Returning to Britomart and her vision, we should remember that her physical transformation is the effect of a virtual experience. This is a crucial point, for this is where the eruption of the ideal into the real begins. The vision teleologically invests Britomart with the power of the completed pair. The comingling of Britomart and the strange knight in the mirror presents an image reverberating with mythic and archetypal suggestion. In this image Spenser seems to imply that the *discordia concors* in *The Faerie Queene* is not absolute, but a matter resolved through a spiritually-guided form of perception. Spenser dramatizes the restorative process (not the achievement) in which human perception is returned to its unfallen Nature—that “nature” being its unimpeded growth from within to perfection, neither checked by accident nor sophisticated by art (AL 330).

Chapter Two: The Reflecting Mirror

Merlin's mirror functions as a metaphor of an allegorical mode of vision transcending the antitheses of sensible experience. Like Suzanne Akbari's definition of "vertical" allegory, it "points toward a hidden meaning" the observer must construct within his own mind, "a transcendent truth that cannot be conveyed through literal language" (Akbari 14). It is a magic mirror, for it entails subordinating the discursive reason to inner vision. Like the examples of Tiresias and St. Paul, one must become blind in order to *see*: a metaphor which might be applied to the art of *The Faerie Queene* as a whole, its deeper sense concealed beneath "coloured shows" (*Letter to Raleigh*). This chapter will attempt to demonstrate how Spenser uses Merlin's mirror to polarize sense perception and spiritual vision at the same time that it illustrates their conjunction.

Spenser's use of the mirror remains largely conventional. Personal mirrors had become available to an unprecedented degree during the sixteenth century, which saw a corresponding increase in mirror titles in English literature, illustrated in such popular works as the *Mirror for Magistrates* and George Gascoigne's *The Glass of Government*. Venetian innovation had produced a new kind of mirror made of crystal glass that was a marked improvement over the steel mirror, which, despite the frequent polishing required to prevent oxidation, never offered more than a cloudy or often distorted reflection. Interestingly, the new mirrors were the cause of a cultural backlash, observable in titles such as Gascoigne's 1576 *The Steele Glas*, a satirical poem that orchestrated its censure around the crystal glass mirror (Kalas 519). Gascoigne's poem is representative of the increasing anxiety among the cultural elite, many of whom feared the moral repercussions of the new mirrors in the belief that its ease of use and undistorted view made it a device particularly suited to the sin of vanity. Indeed, it is not difficult to image how

the new mirror might have presented the material cause of a paradigmatic shift in the cultural imagination: the mirror, which for centuries had served as a reminder that only God sees the individual as he truly is—and functioned also as a metaphor for the perfection of God’s creation—had become the possession of nearly every bourgeois in England. Among the ladies it had become a vain accessory, worn on a silken ribbon tied about the waist (Kalas 521).

By defining his text as a steel glass, Gascoigne and other reactionaries aligned their works with the older interpretive tradition. In contradistinction to the worldly vanity of the crystal mirror, these works hid their shadowy meaning from common view (Kalas 524). The vain observer did not want the uncomfortable encounter with alterity; he wanted affirmation. Gascoigne’s anxiety appears in Spenser’s proem to Book VI, where the poet describes the deleterious effects of courtly flattery as a “glasse so gay that it can blynd / The wisest sight” (VI Pr.v). Linking false courtesy to the flattering mirror, both signify by means of the deluding self-image.

Art, another mirror, also possesses the ability either to deceive or lead to truth, as Gascoigne and Spenser aimed to do in their works. Like the deceptiveness of the crystal mirror, Spenser denies that “liuing art” or “life-resembling pencil” can accurately figure the true character of chastity embodied in Queen Elizabeth (III.Pr.ii). Consequently, Lockerd argues that Spenser is here consciously subverting the realistic, flattering mirror, by asserting that poetry should not attempt to “picture the world in a straight-forward, realistic way at all”:

[Spenser’s] brand of poetry is frankly unrealistic and artificial—“colourd shoves”—and claims only to “shadow” its subject rather than displaying it clearly and fully...For the allegorist, shadowing a character may be the best way to present the inner, ideal virtues that informs the particular manifestation. (65)

Lockerd notes an ironic undertone in Spenser’s comments on realistic poetry, where the poet rapturously claims that while reading Raleigh, his “senses lulled are in somber delight”

(III.Pr.iv)—hardly a positive comment from the sober-minded Spenser. For it was in becoming thus rooted in the superficiality of sense experience that Spenser believed “art falls asleep to the spiritual world of ideal forms” (Lockerd 65).

Spenser’s distrust of appearances suggests a precocious leap beyond modern subjectivity in questioning the stability of the homogeneous self. As Lewis has pointed out, character, or the “unified personality,” held little interest for the poet of allegory—his interest was in the warring elements within the human soul that character might be said to *produce*, those “accidents occurring in a substance” (AL 61). Spenser’s representation invited even the most virtuous lady to look beneath the mask she wore to the world. To Elizabeth, he offers in particular two visionary mirrors in which to see herself:

Ne let his fairest Cynthia refuse,
In mirrours more then one her selfe to see,
But either Gloriana let her chuse,
Or in Belphoebe fashioned to bee:
In th’one her rule, in th’other her rare chastitee. (III.Pr.v)

The poet’s injunction offers a clue to Spenser’s intent. Gloriana and Belphoebe are rarified beings with little presence or bearing upon the poem’s action. The reason being that each lady represents an incarnation of otherworldly perfection; Gloriana embodies the “rule” of Logos and Belphoebe the “chastitee” of Eros. Neither is intended as a realistic example to be imitated, because each reflects her virtue in superlative degree. In degree, therefore—not in kind—Belphoebe and Gloriana reflect perfection that is frankly unrealistic to human experience. Elizabeth cannot be expected to see herself in either, at least, not perfectly—as in a crystal mirror. There is, however, an intermediary mirror in which she might see herself. Spenser’s ideals “come to earth” as it were, in the character of Britomart. Exemplifying the virtues of “rule” and “chastitee,” Britomart is a reflection of both faery exemplars, but to a realistic

degree—an intra-textual mirror of both virtues and also as a didactic mirror for Elizabeth's consideration. Rhetorically, the comparison between Elizabeth and the faery ideals serves a dual purpose, ostensibly praising the queen even as it presents an implicit challenge for her to make an honest assessment of her shortcomings. The latter effect is compounded by added comparison to the fabled Britomart—herself a diminished, intermediary reflection of the “higher”—with whom none in Spenser's audience, not even the Queen, could honestly compare.

Like Virgil before him, Spenser believed that realistic art is the lie. Following Virgil's example, Spenser sends his shades into the world through the gate of false dreams. The passage in Virgil's *Aeneid* reads:

There are two gates of Sleep: the one is said
To be of horn, through it an easy exit
Is given to true shades; the other is
Made of polished ivory, perfect, glittering,
But through that way the Spirits send false
Dreams into the world above. And here Anchises,
When he is done with words, accompanies
The Sibyl and his son together; and
He sends them through the gate of ivory.
(VI.893-98)

The gate of horn admits truth and ivory, falsehood—a poetic fact infinitely complicated by Virgil's decision to send his hero through the latter. Spenser's agreement with Virgil might be seen in the proem to Book V, where he laments that men have forgotten how to distinguish between truth and falsehood: “For that which all men then did vertue call, Is now cald vice” (V.Pr.iii). Truth has been replaced, the poet writes, by “the wicked seede of vice...which shortly grew full great” (V.i.1). Therefore in Book I Archimago sends false spirits to Redcrosse bearing “true-seeming lyes” (I.i.38), an inverse, intra-textual mirror of Spenser's work itself—a work garmented in “coloured shoves” and bearing false-seeming truths. Similarly, the travesty of “false” Florimell, another true-seeming lie—which Nature “grudg'd to see the counterfeit should

shame the thing it selfe" (III.viii.5)—bears a semblance to truth that may dupe the fools Braggadoccio and Blandamour, but not the discerning eye of Britomart. For she, like Spenser's reader, has gazed into Merlin's mirror and learned to read the difference.

The paradigmatic example of the false, "true-seeming" mirror in *Faerie Queene* appears in the Bower of Bliss. Here, beauty creates a rupture in the reader's imagination between the bower's attractive appearance and the vicious appetite it signifies. Foregrounding the difference between the lifelike mirror and the allegorical, Spenser teaches his audience to read beyond the letter by forcing his readers to differentiate between real beauty and the meretricious forms encountered, a distinction clearly emphasized in Spenser's description—

goodly beautifide
With all the ornaments of Floraes pride,
Wherewith her mother Art, as halfe in scorne
Of niggard Nature, like a pompous bride
Did decke her, and too lauishly adorne. (II.xii.50)

This is an attractive, but unnatural, and clearly *evil* place. Here art is not a supplement to nature, but a perversion. It is with little surprise that when we finally encounter Acrasia, she is represented not as a mirror of generation, but the inverse: a witch keeping her lover in a humid state of docile half-sleep, sucking his spirit, "Quite molten into lust and pleasure lewd" (II.xii.73). Those who fall into her net are of two kinds: the willfully base (Gryll), or the merely ignorant, who are unable to detect the lie hidden beneath the glitter:

Over all of purest gold was spred
A traylor of yuie in his natue hew:
For the rich mettall was so coloured,
That wight, who did not well auis'd it vew,
Would surely deeme it to be yuie trew. (II.xii.61, my emphasis)

Foregrounding the insidious boundary between art and nature, the complex image emphasizes the thematic message of the inability to distinguish between false pleasure and the “true” it mocks through parody. For Spenser, knowledge of the one is necessary to discern the other.

The prominence of the Renaissance mirror title arose not from a mistaken belief that the mirror could generate knowledge of reality, but that it had the ability to reflect an aspect of reality not directly accessible to the observer. It was the observer’s task to gain knowledge by interpreting the reflected image correctly (Grabes 112).¹⁹ A mirror text was deemed credible only if it could be said to mirror the divine idea, while actual mirrors were creditable if they enabled viewers to “read” their own images correctly. This was true of actual mirrors as well as the metaphorical mirror, as Rayna Kalas has argued in her essay on Renaissance mirror technology (523). The appearance of a mirror or “glass” in a Book title signaled that “the text was both a reflection of divine ideation and a practical instrument through which that ideal might be emulated” (Kalas 522). Such contemplation required active involvement on the part of the reader, as Lauren Silberman states in her book, *Transforming Desire*, “[the mirror tradition] provided both a focus on the ethical dimension of reading and a concern for the place of reading in the reader’s self-fashioning” (25).

The metaphor of text-as-mirror had a long history on the continent. In her book on the medieval art of memory, Mary Carruthers observes that medieval commentaries on devotion often depict the mirror as an object for meditation and private reflection. She cites Gregory the Great, who, paraphrasing Augustine, writes: “holy scripture presents a kind of mirror to the eyes of the mind, that our inner face may be seen in it” (qtd. in Carruthers 168-9). Similarly, late

¹⁹ Helena Shire describes a similarity in Renaissance views of poetry: “Poetry widens and deepens human experience, not through precept but by example: that is, it does not present something entirely new but provides a new way of looking. In this way poetry functions as a didactic mirror” (89).

medieval writings describe memory as an active process in which ideas pass through the body to be digested: “what we read is transformed into our very selves, a mirror of our own beauty or ugliness, for we have, like Ezekiel, eaten the book” (186).²⁰ In the same way, mirror titles claimed to “reflect” truth through words, an indication that the Renaissance concept of vision included much more than sense perception.²¹ For the Renaissance humanist, vision had to do with the apprehension of truth, which the mind unerringly represents in the form of pictures, analogy providing the link between the written word and the sensible image. The point is a significant one—signs are of no value beyond their ability to produce corresponding, spiritual, images in the mind. The significance of this analogical relation between the sensible and the eternal has been succinctly described by Kalas:

From Scripture to nature, from the human mind to the crystal ball, what all of these permutations of divine text share—what makes them all mirrors—is that they reflect both sensible reality and eternal truth. These mirrors, like Scripture, reflected divine ineffability in the shapes of worldly things that were accessible to the temporal and sensory limitations of human understanding. (524)

To the scholar of Spenser’s time, metaphor performed a mirror-like function. He believed—as Aristotle had taught—that through metaphor it is possible to grasp the similarity of things that are apart. Thus, even though he believed that the natural world had become separated from the spiritual both epistemologically and ontologically as under a veil, the Renaissance scholar nevertheless believed that the forms of nature still retained their correspondence, albeit darkly.²²

²⁰ The relevance of Carruthers’s study to the Renaissance mirror title was suggested by Kalas (524).

²¹ Akbari describes the Renaissance conception: “The act of vision is used as a metaphor not only for the faculty of judgment, but also for the other powers of the mind, divided during the medieval period into the three faculties of imagination, reason, and memory” (4).

²² John Hendrix writes in *Renaissance Theories of Perception*, “Images cannot be immediately or directly perceived; there must be an intermediary which translates the images in perception, as Plotinus held. The soul, though, ‘easily sees the images of bodies shining in it, as if in a mirror.’ The image can only be a reflection or representation of the idea, the image in the soul or intellect. The intellect, through the medium of the spirit, corresponds the form of the idea with the form of the imprint or impression of the sensible body, and this operation is called the imagination” (94).

Correspondingly, Debora Shuger has noted the peculiar fact that Renaissance artists almost never painted mirrors that reflect the actual person looking into them. Instead, denying the viewer a subjective position, these mirrors typically present an oblique view of an exemplary character: often a saint, cultural hero, or symbolic figure—the mirror in Jan David’s *Speculum propriae vilitatis* reflects, in place of the viewer, a death’s head (Shuger 27). Though Shuger disappointedly interprets this trend as indicating a lack of interest in psychological reflexivity, one could aver the opposite: that the evidence demonstrates an *obsession* with self-conscious reflexivity, but a reflexivity modeled on different epistemological assumptions than those of modern psychology.²³

The conflation of the observer’s literal reflection with the metaphorical figure suggests the antithetical approaches to history known as *Weltgeschichte* and *Heilsgeschichte*. The first is concerned wholly with literal events and proximate causes, the second with revealing the redemptive activity of God within human history.²⁴ Sense perception alone creates a spectral relation to reality—the image ceases to exist for the subject the moment it is no longer present to the eye; it becomes a phantasm of memory. For this reason, sense alone produces a past-oriented mode of perception. Spiritual vision, on the other hand, is creative, transforming the objects of sense into manifestations of divine providence. Vision encompasses both the physical and spiritual—it is future-oriented even as it points toward a vertical plane of meaning outside of

²³ At the beginning of her essay, Shuger states that her project began with a hope to discover in Renaissance mirrors the birth of subjective consciousness: the very thesis I am arguing against. The robust character of Renaissance epistemology—an epistemology of revelation, rather than empirical observation—precluded the psychological need for Cartesian subjectivity. The self-generating reflexivity of the Cartesian *cogito* would have been incomprehensible to Renaissance philosophy. For, as Augustine had pointed out in *De Trinitate*, the mind cannot explain its own judgments: why we desire that which we do not yet know (truth, being, the good, beauty, unity, etc.), without an *a priori* cause outside of itself (VII.ii.5). This *a priori* cause is related to the universal, abstract entities upon which, as I have been laboring to demonstrate, Spenser’s virtues are based.

²⁴ I borrow the distinction from Northrop Frye, who uses the same in *The Great Code* to point out the dual perspectives of Biblical narrative as recognized by typological hermeneutics. (47-9).

time. Through devotion to the latter, Renaissance art suggests a form of reflexivity that is, paradoxically, transitive. Shuger's examples illustrate not a "looking back" of sense perception but a visionary way of seeing "beyond" to spiritual form.²⁵ Rebecca Dark comments: "The person depicted looking into the mirror acts as a signifier of literal meaning while the metaphorical reflection takes on the significance of myth, or what Roland Barthes might call its mythic form. The viewer is immersed simultaneously in both levels of meaning" (6).²⁶ The image presents an experience at once personally felt yet universally figural. Herein lies the force of the truly typological, speculative figure. Nolan writes, "One's sense of individuation, of the figure occurring uniquely in history, is enhanced rather than diminished, precisely because one also, and simultaneously, senses its signifying power" (77).

Few have noticed the way Spenser consciously foregrounds this distinction in the episode of Merlin's looking glass. Viewed as a painting, Artegall's appearance is at once utterly foreign to Britomart—decidedly Other—and yet her apprehension of it in a mirror suggests a point of contact. Staring back at her, Artegall represents a fissure in the viewer's perception, a parallax mingling the temporal and the spiritual—the form of the future and the divine Logos penetrating the world of matter.

The Mirror of Narcissus

Opposed to the redemptive vision of Merlin's mirror is the deceptive reflection of Narcissus. In Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose*, the dreamer comes to a fountain. Above

²⁵ Kalas makes a similar observation, writing that "[Shuger] quite rightly observes that the Renaissance mirror was more transitive than reflexive (524). I realize that my disagreement with Shuger's conclusion appears to be a semantic one, but it is still a distinction, I believe, worth pointing out.

²⁶ Grabes says, "The persistence of the metaphor of an image-reflecting mirror from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century can therefore be explain as a sign of a largely continuous world-picture based ontologically on the model of the analogy and oriented epistemologically and aesthetically towards *imitatio*" (113).

it, he reads an inscription stating that this is the fountain in which Narcissus viewed his shadow, loved it, and died in excess of desire. In the bottom of the fountain lie two crystal stones in which the entire garden can be seen reflected. In them the lover sees a garden of roses, and one rose in particular which has not yet begun to bloom. He rises and approaches the rose garden to pluck the bud—but is ultimately unable. Because the reflecting surface only reveals what is directly before it, the dreamer is gazing into the reflection of his own eyes. The rose he saw was merely an aspect of himself. This is Suzanne Akbari's interpretation of Lorris's *Roman*, a poem she believes was meant to illustrate the delusional project of the courtly lover. "In Guillaume's Romance, the lover's desire for the rose was actually a veil concealing his desire for the image reflected in the mirror of Narcissus. There, knowledge meant despair, the certainty that the lover's desire could not be fulfilled" (174). The object of love is infinitely deferred because the narrator has been pursuing a signifier as an autonomous reality. The enclosures which separate him from his desire are self-generated, produced in the fateful look into the false mirror of Narcissus.

The Narcissus metaphor exposes the deceptive perception that emerges from flattering desires. To remain entranced by the form of its own desire is to restrict the soul to an orbit of centripetal attraction—desires inevitably too weak, or misdirected, to guide the soul to perfection. The soul contracts from such a diet, for it cannot grow beyond itself. Jane Gilbert explains:

In medieval philosophical, theological, or moralistic writing, mirrors figure in two distinct relations to truth. On the one hand, they offer their gazers access to a truth unattainable within normal earthly limitations; on the other, they lead into error, in the double sense of sin and falsehood. The former possibility is associated with the quickening of the eternal life of the spirit or mind, the latter with spiritual and intellectual as well as physical death. Narcissus in such writing exemplifies the subject presented with a deceptive but seductive image which flatters his desires so as to obstruct perception of the truth, with fatal consequences. (941)

The mirror of Narcissus came to represent a distinct variety of perceptual misrecognition leading to intellectual and spiritual error. Beginning in the intellect, narcissistic perception promotes the lie that the viewer's private, subjective desires are true reflections of reality. The loss of one's sense of contingency to the outside world results in spiritual corruption, manifest in malformed, vicious desires that inevitably overpower and displace the higher faculties, effects Spenser names "loose affection" and "lascivious desire" (IV.v.4). The intellectual nature of "loose" desire—desire that is "unbounded" or "unattached" (OED 1a)—suggests affections run amok, uninformed by a principle of order. While the first implies a lack of control, a sin of omission rather than *malum in se*, "lascivious desire" suggests corruption of the nature itself. Uncultivated Eros becomes manifest in the destructive excess of affection, but the corrupted Logos perverts its very nature. Illustrated in biblical imagery of water, the life-giving element becomes a symbol of judgment unleashed upon the pagan world in Noah's flood, but in an advanced state of corruption, as in Egypt, it turns to blood.

The movement from Malecasta to Busirane in the narrative of Book III reverses the progression of love's disease from the organ of desire to the organ of thought. Britomart is Spenser's plumb-line, the pattern of virtue exposing the fraudulent image of Narcissus embedded within contemporary conventions of romance. The mirror of Narcissus is a prison composed of the corrupted energies of mind and body from which none escape without chastity's intervention. Britomart's chastity reveals that the fragmentation, alienation, and confusion existing within the sexual nature are the impositions of a diseased perception rather than signs of illness within the nature itself. To understand Spenser's solution, we need to understand the convention from which the disease arose.

In *The Mirror of Narcissus in the Courtly Love Lyric* Frederick Goldin claims that medieval poets such as the anonymous French author of the twelfth-century *Narcisse* “saw in the tale of Narcissus a representation of an indispensable human experience, the birth of self-consciousness through love” (21). Ovid’s cautionary example became a pervasive *topos* throughout courtly lyric. Combining the tradition of speculative Neoplatonist theology with the tradition of *fin amor*, the myth provided a convenient model for medieval poets to dramatize the archetypal quest of the beloved, whose beauty was thought to reflect the idealized perfection of the lover’s self.²⁷ Goldin describes the origins of courtly love as a convention initially arising out of the lover’s awareness of his own unfilled potentialities. In the effort to repair himself, the lover projected all of his ideals upon the image of his lady, his guiding star. Goldin writes, “The force with which each man strives to become one with that idealized image is the force that preserves his identity.” The pursuit of perfection (also the title of Goldin’s book) gave rise to schizophrenic dislocation in the lover’s mind, as “this image of his hoped-for self...merged with the image of his lady in his mind” (*Perspectives* 55-56). The problem was not in the lover’s intention, but his standard. Like the flattering mirror, the idealized lady existed as a mere repository of his own, subjective desires. For this reason, the basic assumption of courtly love was intrinsically flawed—if not outright disingenuous. Despite his noble intentions, the lady was inevitably reduced to a material object in the lover’s mind, her beauty appropriated for his self-actualization. His devoted service was conducted under a misapprehension that amounted to a denial of its own premises. His identity established in the service of a fiction—an idealized lady signifying the liminal form of his unconscious desires.²⁸

²⁷ Augustine: “When the soul endeavours and becomes good, it cannot attain its goal unless it turns to something that is not itself. (De Trinitate VIII.III.4)

²⁸ Compare with Lacan’s definition of the imaginary in “The Mirror Stage,” where Lacan claims that one’s sense of reality is grasped purely as images and fantasies of the fulfillment of desire (1112).

Spenser portrays courtly love as a cultural analogy to the delusion of Narcissus, because courtly love conventionalized the lie that sexual desire in itself leads to transcendent knowledge. By emphasizing the personal and subjective over the social good, the idealization of sexual desire leads to a demand for the removal of the norms and customs that protect it. The result is not mutual love, but total war—a battle for satisfaction in which the lovers are replaced by victor and vanquished. Courtly love contained this insidious tendency toward anarchy and narcissism—a fact attested by the witness of contemporary literature, in which courtly love frequently appears in the guise of an antiestablishment ethic and transgressive behavior. In her aptly titled book, *Courtly Contradictions*, Sarah Kay explores these subversive effects, noting the example of Chretien de Troyes: “[Chretien’s] Lancelot is the best knight because he loves Guenevere so much that he is willing to pretend to be the worst knight, but he is also the worst knight because he loves Guenevere when he ought not to” (108). Private interest trumps all other concerns. Lewis declared more than half a century ago that courtly love represented an antithesis between the social reality of marriage, which “had nothing to do with love” on the one hand, and the “tenderness and delicacy” of the new erotic sensibility. Lewis exposes the untenable position of making marriage and desire exclusive in his statement that “Any idealization of sexual love, in a society where marriage is purely utilitarian, must begin by being an idealization of adultery” (*AL* 13).

We turn now to the “mirror perilous,” the disease of perception where the disorder of love begins. In Ovid’s tale the young Narcissus rejects out of hand the suits of all potential lovers. His conceit pricks the ire of Nemesis, who in reprisal arranges for him to fall in love with his own image reflected in a pool “with silvery-bright water” (*Meta. III.407*). He cannot obtain the object of his desire; he dies in despair. Though Narcissus does not recognize himself at first,

the moment of recognition eventually comes (Ovid does not explain how), and he realizes the futility of his desire. The theme of awakening self-consciousness is central to Ovid's story, but as an ironic reversal of the classical dictum "know thyself," Ovid's blind seer Tiresias predicts that Narcissus will live to an old age, provided he does *not* "know himself" (*Meta.* III.405). His subsequent death therefore implies that Narcissus appropriates this damning self-knowledge, though of what this knowledge consists Ovid does not venture to say.

His unconscious awakening suggests a violation similar to the sin of Adam and Eve. Like the story in Genesis, the tale revolves around the theme of forbidden knowledge and shares similar consequences—a "wounding" to his nature and "exile" from the state of innocence.²⁹ In place of Original Sin, Narcissus is afflicted by "fires which burn" (ln. 462), a state of exiled consciousness rather than physical removal, signified in his lost capacity for contentment. Knowing the loss to be irrevocable, he weeps for his prior state: "How gladly would I from myself remove! / And at a distance set the thing I love! (ln. 470). This is the agony Adam would have experienced had he remained in the garden after The Fall—close enough to pluck from the Tree of Life the fruit he can no longer taste. The Fall represents an awakening that is also exile. In similar fashion, the reflection of Narcissus causes an awakening of consciousness and separation, for the moment he identifies his desire he understands he can never possess it.

At the moment of recognition, Narcissus gives voice to the essential paradox of his misery, saying: "What I want, I have: my abundance makes me poor" (III. 466). Spenser's ongoing interest in this apparent contradiction can be seen in *Amoretti* 35, where he includes a near-translation of the same line from Ovid:

²⁹ Gregerson includes in her essay "Narcissus Interrupted: Specularity and the Subject of the Tudor State" a perspicacious quotation from Lacan: "The evolution of desire begins in narcissism: the self discovered in a reflection comes to govern all the multiple cathexes around which subjectivity forms" (10).

My hungry eyes through greedy couetize,
 Still to behold the object of their pain:
 With no contentment can themselves suffice,
 But having pain and having not complain.

 In their amazement like Narcissus vain
 Whose eyes him starv'd: *so plenty makes me poore.*
 (*Amoretti* 35 ln. 1-4, 7-8, my emphasis)

Spenser elaborates and amplifies the conundrum, as Ovid had articulated it, of the incoherence of subjective experience. Satisfaction is acquired neither from the objective source (“object of their pain”) nor in the subjective experience (“no contentment can themselves suffice”). Spenser’s solution—found in glimmers throughout his minor poems but developed fully in *The Faerie Queene*—reflects the Neoplatonist notion that physical pleasure is oriented toward the intellectual. Narcissus illustrates the reverse. By refusing to leave the garden of Edenic unconsciousness—the pleasures of sensuous perception—he chooses chaos, mutability, non-being. Calvin Edwards concludes: “Death is the only possible end to the quest of Narcissus. Here there can be no ‘birth in beauty,’ to use the words of Diotima; here beauty becomes its own object and can give birth to nothing except more insatiable desire” (66). Such fixation on material beauty, according to Neoplatonist philosophy, begets a never-ending wheel of desire.

That Narcissus did not know his true self was a central theme among Neoplatonist interpretations. Edwards’s reference to the Diotima of Plato’s *Symposium* is consciously done, since Plato’s “ladder of love” (*Symposium* 210a-211b) supplied the determining hermeneutic of the Narcissus myth throughout the Middle Ages, due in large part to the writings of Plotinus. Plotinus reinterpreted Ovid’s myth as an analogy of the corrupted soul lured away from divine beauty (or reality) by the deceptive beauty of appearances. In other words, he is one who has not learned to see beyond the physical:

Let him who can, follow and come within, and leave outside the sight of his eyes and not turn back to the bodily splendors which he saw before. When he sees the beauty in bodies he must not run after them...For if a man runs to the image and wants to seize it as if it was the reality (like a beautiful reflection playing on the water, which some story somewhere, I think, said riddlingly a man wanted to catch and sank down into the stream and disappeared) then this man who clings to beautiful bodies and will not let them go, will, like the man in the story, but in soul, not in body, sink down into the dark depths where intellect has no delight. (*Enneads* I.6.8, qtd. in Edwards 67)

Exposing his debt to Plato, Plotinus makes a distinction between the beauty appearing in bodies and the reality from whence that beauty comes. For Plotinus, beauty beckons the soul toward the contemplation of the source of beauty, the forms inhabiting the mind of God. The one that fails to transcend Beauty's physical appearance dwells within a reciprocal hell of unfulfilled desire (Hades), eternally chasing shadows with no hope of real attainment.

Marsilio Ficino, perhaps the most significant Neoplatonist philosopher of the Renaissance, offered yet another Platonic interpretation of Ovid.³⁰ In Ficino's version, the tale becomes a Platonic symbol of the universal quest for beauty. Moving the lover up through the three stages of the ladder of love, from sensual enjoyment of the particular object to the intellectual contemplation of the Platonic idea, desire leads the seeker beyond the epistemological and ontological limitations of the lower realms to the contemplation of the source of Beauty in God. The soul's progression is not only upward, but also inward, into the Self:

³⁰ Since the second half of the twentieth century, Spenser's familiarity with Ficino was a matter "too generally agreed-upon to require further comment," according to Irene Samuel (42), as Sears Jayne would declare that "No English author was so much indebted to Ficino as Spenser" (217). This belief endures among Spenserians, albeit with qualification (Kaske157).

Hence it is that we read in Orpheus of the cruel fate of Narcissus. Hence the fateful misfortune of man in general. A certain young man, Narcissus, that is, the soul of bold and inexperienced man, does not see his own countenance, he never notices his own substance and virtue, but pursues its reflection in the water, and tries to embrace it; that is, the soul admires the beauty in the weak body, an image in flowing water, which is but the reflection of itself. It deserts its own beauty and never catches its shadow, since the soul neglects itself in worshipping the body, and is never satisfied by enjoyment of the body. For it does not really seek the body itself, but only its own beauty and is seduced by bodily beauty, which is the image of its own beauty. In this way Narcissus desires, and since he pays no heed to that true beauty while he desires and pursues something else, he cannot satisfy his desire. Therefore he is destroyed.
(Ficino 230)

For Ficino, the Self is not to be found in images or bodies—for these may change over time—but in the mind’s contemplation of itself, what Paul Ricoeur would call *ipseity*.³¹ Bodily beauty is only a reflection of the soul’s beauty. Summarizing the Ficinian theory of love, Sears Jayne explains that, for Ficino, all the physical drives of human love are justified spiritually and at the same time idealized intellectually because,

Love in man is not only a God-given and cosmically necessary and irresistible search upwards toward a perfection which is both spiritual and intellectual; it is also an irresistible, God-given, and cosmically necessary compulsion downward to create the likeness of Divine Beauty in the physical world. (Jayne 226)

Ficino poses a conflict between the objective experience of what is *seen* (beauty) and the subjective experience of what is *felt* (desire). Narcissus unconsciously seeks the innermost self of his soul, and his error, according to Ficino, is not in what he seeks but in how he seeks it: to desire a beautiful body is to desire neither the body itself, nor beauty itself, since the soul does not desire the body but beauty reflected in the body. Narcissus therefore pines for a non-reality.

³¹ Ricoeur’s *ipseity* is derived from his nonsubstantialist view of personality as a projection rather than an inherent quality of persons. His concept describes the mind’s quality of “sameness” that resists changes of time and experience, the reason an innocent child can mature into a depraved murderer and yet remain “the same” though fundamentality altered.

To remain fixed before the mirrored image is not to find, but to *lose* the self eternally in consuming desire for something that does not exist.

Nolan describes Narcissus as “The boy who (de)reflects all who desire him.” A pretty nobody who has refused everybody, he comes upon his image in the pool of his unknowing: “an antiplace, a place where nobody lives, a pastoral without pastors” (42). The passage in Ovid reads:

There was a fountain silver-clear and bright,
which neither shepherds nor the wild she-goats,
that range the hills, nor any cattle’s mouth
had touched—its waters were unsullied—birds
disturbed it not; nor animals, nor boughs
that fall so often from the trees. (*Meta.* III.407-12)

The place itself, like the mirror, has no being of its own. It is a strangely empty place, calling to mind the “wasteful emptiness” in Busirane’s house (III.xi.53); it is a location of absence. As Narcissus looks upon his image, he finds an unself, “an imagined body which contains no substance” (*Meta.* III.415-17). Falling in love with an “imagined body” invested with being and autonomy by his own unconscious desire, he comes to love an “other” that is not *other*. He believes he has finally found someone to mirror his desires—

All that is lovely in himself he loves,
and in his witless way he wants himself:—
he who approves is equally approved;
he seeks, is sought, he burns and he is burnt. (III.423-6)

He soon learns it is a trick, an impossibility. Love requires the birth of consciousness the distance of the “other” brings into being; self-consciousness is born through conflict.³² One cannot know the self *through* the self. Like Derridean *différance*, the image presents only distinction, and

³² Sean Kane writes (not of Narcissus, but of his inverse reflection, Britomart) that the lover experiences her identity *in* the distance from the beloved (133, my emphasis).

because the image is his own, there is no distinction to be made. Narcissus dies of knowing who he *isn't*.

Our inability to subordinate ourselves to the autonomous unity of the perceived object without subconsciously altering it in some way, making the object “about us,” implies an inherently narcissistic tendency of perception. The act of perception modifies nature in a way similar to art, reconstituting autonomous entities of objective reality into compositions of our own design; thus Ovid describes the boy as a sculptor musing upon his statue:

For so he marvels at himself, and lies
with countenance unchanged, as if indeed
a statue carved of Parian marble.
(III.418-19)

Ovid's Narcissus, looking at his reflection as pure *mimesis* resembles the artist seeking truth in a world of his own making. The simile suggests the danger inherent in the artist's profession. The statue and the fixed stare inject the scene with a sense of sterile hypnosis. His reflection does not lead to openness and freedom, but to an infinite deferral, as seen in the *Roman*. One's ability to love diminishes the further one pursues the flattering image, a danger recalling Dante's *Inferno*, where hell itself exhibits a narrowing of freedom, separation from others, and a hardening of heart. Not surprisingly, in Dante's hell, the doubled mirror is encountered frequently. Akbari gives an insightful analysis of Dante's use of the mirror to portray the true nature of sin as an inherently centripetal obsession with self:

Virgil likens himself to leaded glass, so immediately does he apprehend Dante's every wish.³³ Thus Virgil is a mirror in which Dante's desire is reflected. The metaphor is related to the hypocrites they are about to meet, who are shiny on the outside, but dull as lead on the inside.³⁴ For Virgil and Dante, the metaphor shows how they correspond to one another: the two are becoming one. Conversely, for the hypocrites, the metaphor shows how their identity is split: one becomes two. (Akbari 171)

Dante's journey dramatizes conversion as transformation into a mirror reflecting the heavenly "other" and the erasure of the self.³⁵ Ovid's Narcissus loses himself in the watery element, the primordial symbol of formlessness and void. Like the watery surface, a mirror is able to produce a reflection by virtue of the fact that it has no image of its own: it reflects insofar as it is devoid of substance. Neoplatonist philosophy held that beauty is not an intrinsic quality of substances, but a mirror reflecting the Form of beauty. Traces of this idea appear throughout *The Faerie Queene*, where beauty is almost always described as a mirror-like quality, and the beauty of Florimell shines "as cleare as Christall stone" (III.i.15). Therefore Book III does not represent Britomart's marriage to Artegall, but the process in which his image is unfolded within her. Like Pygmalion, who made a virtuous wife for himself out of marble—bringing her to life by loving her—Britomart "makes" her lover, in a sense, within herself. Her love begins in a mental image of ideal beauty, which leads to their material expression through action—actions reflecting the character of their ideal cause. And so Spenser would make his ideal queen.

Proceeding from a desire to possess the beauty belonging ultimately to the Father, the sin of Narcissus invites an oedipal interpretation, for it. In "The Significance of the Phallus," Lacan defines the phallus as a structural function relating lack and possession. It is that which the child believes that the father possesses and the mother desires—from which the child concludes that

³³ *Inferno* 23.25

³⁴ *Ibid.* 65

³⁵ C.f. John the Baptist, preparing the way for Christ, says "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:3).

possession gives the father the power over the mother's desire (Johnston). For Narcissus, perceived lack is converted to horror when he realizes that the object controlling his desire is the possession of "nobody." He has lost his self. Julia Kristeva explains the psychological basis for such loss in *Tales of Love*, where she writes: "The object of love is a metaphor for the subject, its metaphorical, unitary feature, the one thing which it requires in order to experience wholeness" (30). Because there is no substance to the object Narcissus loves, one would conclude from Kristeva's analysis that there is no basis for self-identification. By wanting what is not, Narcissus abstracts beauty from its meaningful context; he *desires* desire.

Lacan defines desire as a relation between need and demand—specifically, as that which remains after need is subtracted from demand. According to this definition, the utterance "My abundance makes me poor," indicates an absence of need. Narcissus experiences desire without limit, and identifies himself with it. By rejecting his identity of possession (his "abundance"), Narcissus relegates himself to the indeterminate state of the copula, an eternal state of want Kristeva calls "the emptiness of transference" (42). There is no antecedent for such a state of non-being. Narcissus thus becomes, in Lacanian terms, alienated from his natural needs, "derailed onto the tracks of non-natural desires...doomed never to reach enjoyable destinations" (Johnston).

The correlation between Narcissus and the twelfth-century troubadour lies in mistaking one's projected desires for an image of reality. In an essay on Spenser and Tudor subjectivity Linda Gregerson describes Lacanian desire as an endless hall of narcissistic mirrors:

The evolution of desire begins in narcissism: the self discovered in a reflection comes to govern all the multiple cathexes around which subjectivity forms. Each subsequent object of desire will be an approximation of the figure in the glass, receiving its aura from memory. (10)

The Lacanian revelation that one's self-conceptions reflect an imaginary correspondence to reality perfectly encapsulates the delusion of courtly love. Lacan believed that the inward retreat from reality is exacerbated as a child becomes acquainted with the use of symbols. From this point the child's desire becomes, according to Lacan, an endless quest for a lost paradise; they "must be channeled like an underground river through the subterranean passageways of the symbolic order, which make it possible that things be present in their absence in some way through words" ("Mirror Stage" 1112). Likewise, the troubadour became trapped within the symbolic means by which he would escape the world of necessity, his poetry. Failing to recognize that cause must be greater than the effect, his attempts to experience spiritual reality through external fantasy led to the enervation of spiritual vision, a veil of his own making.

Interestingly, Lacan's terms "lack" and "possession" offer a conceptual link between Spenser's sources and modern psychology. The antithesis at the heart of Plato's teleological myth of love's origin in the conflict of *penia* (lack) and *poros* (plenty), which Pico translated into the diametric, cosmic operations "act" and "potency," is compressed into the psychologic function described in Lacan's theory of the phallus. The structural tension presents the modern equivalent of the oppositional drives I have been referring to throughout this paper as Eros and Logos. By foregrounding feminine "lack" that defines the nature of Eros, Lacan's concept provides an explanation for the way a negative quality becomes manifest in positive action. Heaven—the realm of abundance, perfection, possession—imposes form, but it does so as passive response:

As the intellectual reaches toward God in its desire, it receives form. For God, who is omnipotent, imprints on the Mind, reaching out towards Him, the nature of all things which are to be created. (90)

Form enters the mutable world through the agency of matter. From its identity of lack, Eros strives for possession. Symbolically represented in the sexual nature, feminine “lack” is expressed as the female *giving* her virginity to the lover; masculine “possession” is expressed in the male’s *taking* of the virginity. Hence chastity describes a prohibitive barrier protecting what may be “given,” the gift constituting permission *carte blanche* to impose form.

The Mirror of Christ

In Alan de Lille’s *De Planctu Natura*, Nature denounces dreams and mirrors as false images, and yet Nature herself is garmented in an ornate mantle which reflects the glory of God as a mirror. The *imago dei* of Genesis 1:27 haunted the medieval imagination, providing what Nolan has called “a foundational link between Creator and creature, a correspondence which survived the Fall in the image of nature retaining her identity as a mirror of God, but a mirror now cracked.” That crack, Nolan says, “both reveals the imperfection of the human seeker looking into the mirror and “suggests tantalizing hints of the perfection of its Maker” (83). For those who have learned how to look, the mirror offers apophatic knowledge, what Augustine called *regio dissimilitudinis*. Nature is not God, but is made in the likeness of God. From the image of nature, then, man is not completely without knowledge of his lost perfection. The cynosure of such images is the image of Christ. The Incarnation was a mirror in which the medieval theologian saw reflected both identity and difference, self and other, flesh and spirit. Knowledge of Christ led to self-knowledge through the encounter with alterity.

In *Faerie Queene*, self-knowledge is acquired the same way, as Britomart’s encounter with the “other” in Merlin’s mirror reveals. The episode functions as an intra-textual mirror of *The Faerie Queene* as a whole, mirroring the visionary encounter with the Self that the reader experiences in the act of reading. The mirror motif, and the “mirroring” function of symbol

provided the poetic means through which Spenser and his contemporaries dramatized the momentary conjunction of the ideal and the material. Spenser wrote within a conventional framework in which mirrors carried universal connotations. In this genre, Goldin explains, “The mirror is the instrument of illusions, barren of every attribute except its ability to reflect.” But despite its lack of material significance, its reflection gives to the soul its first captivating glimpse of the ideal—”The soul looks into the mirror to see the promise and the task of its perfection, and the moment it turns toward its ideal, it must study how to leave the mirror behind” (*Narcissus* 14). Like the reader of poetry, the soul in search of its perfection must create within itself the reality encountered externally in tantalizing hints.³⁶

In contrast to the distorting “glass” of earthly passions, the Florentine Neoplatonists taught that inner contemplation leads to the vision of love, which does not generate a deceptive image or mere illusion. To the contrary, they believed that purity of love *removes* the distortion to which divine beauty has been subjected through “fleshes frayle infection” (*HB* 220). Spenser’s enthusiasm for this notion is reflected in the “Hymn of Love”:

Such is the powre of that sweet passion,
That it all sordid basenesse doth expell
The refyned mynd doth newly fashion
Vnto a fairer forme, which now doth dwell
In his high thought, that would it selfe excell
Which he beholding still with constant sight,
Admires the mirrour of so heauenly light.
(*Ins.*190-95, my emphasis)

The poet explains that the vision of love transforms the “fairer forme” arising from the lover’s imagination into a mirror of “heavenly light.” Clearly, this “form” possesses an objective quality transcending either the merely subjective or emotional experience. Spenser’s poem demonstrates

³⁶ For this reason Ficino instructed his followers to abandon the deceptive appearances of the senses in favor of spiritual contemplation: “Then indeed the soul will see through itself, and it will see that light of the intellect more clearly than it now sees the light of the senses through the glass windows of this bodily prison” (qtd. in Reese 88).

“soul refashioning” according to the Ficinian concept of Beauty as a cosmically necessary compulsion downward to create the likeness of Divine Beauty in the physical world (Jayne 226). In this process, the mind “refined” by the heavenly form of love reforms itself (and excels itself) through contemplating the mirror of heavenly perfection.

Ficino’s student Pico della Mirandola believed love was first generated by the image of beauty, which, awakened, actively seeks union with the object of beauty. Beginning with God, emanating to his creation, and reflected back to its source, Pico taught that beauty is transmitted from higher to lower and lower to higher by means of love.³⁷ According to Pico, it “flies onward, through the air,” and, penetrating the eyes of the beholder, “pierces his soul, kindles his appetite and then leads the wounded soul and the kindled appetite to their healing place. Ascending by the same route as it had descended, it returns through Soul, through Angel, and finally back to God” (qtd. in Reese 86). Desire is the lowest rung on the ascent to God, yet it is the spur which, in Neoplatonic theology, shapes the cosmos, replicating the order of the divine Logos within the cosmos, in human political institutions, and in the soul.³⁸ Hendrix explains:

Prior to the creation of forms the world is chaos, formless and dark. Chaos turns to order through the creation of the substance of the mind, the archetypal idea, which is its essence. The essence, which is itself formless and dark, is imbued with a desire to ‘turn towards God,’ as it is born from God. (90)

³⁷ “The ray of beauty...has the power to be reflected back to what it came from, and it draws the lover with it. But it descends first from God, and passes through the Angel and the Soul as if they were made of glass; and from the Soul it easily emanates into the body prepared to receive it. Then from that body...it shines out, especially through the eyes, the transparent windows of the soul”(De Amore VI.x. trans. Jayne, 126).

³⁸ Lewis writes in *The Discarded Image* that “the celestial Hierarchies are revealed to us in order that the Ecclesiastical hierarchy on earth may imitate, as nearly as possible, ‘their divine service and office.’”(74). Also, Ficino’s student Carlo Musippini believed that beauty is culturally conditioned: “we find the person beautiful in so far as they conform, either physically or intellectually, to our idea of beauty as it exists in and is defined by the matrix of laws and customs in which we operate, that is, the ornament of the world, the cosmos” (From the fifth speech of Marsuppini’s Commentary on the *Symposium*, qtd. in Hendrix pg. 94).

Desire, for the Neoplatonists, supplied both the cause—and the means—by which nature is transformed into the image of God.³⁹

Spenser seems to have had the Neoplatonic conception in mind as he envisioned the poetic setting of Britomart's vision. Calling to mind the allegory of the cave, the episode reverberates with Platonic significance. Foregrounding being and semblance, Merlin's glass projects a vision of reality beyond appearances:

It vertue had, to shew in perfect sight,
What euer thing was in the world contaynd,
Betwixt the lowest earth and heauens hight,
So that it to the looker appertaynd;
.....
For thy it round and hollow shaped was,
Like to the world it selfe, and seem'd a world of glas. (III.ii.19)

While the mirror shows Britomart what “pertains” to her, Spenser's use of the archaic form “appertayne” contributes the significance of ontological composition by way of the older denotation, “belonging as part to the whole” (OED 1.a). The mirror implants in the viewer the cognizance of a deeper relation between the self and the wide world. For Britomart, the vision creates the dark impression of a larger, more complete self—formerly hidden within the amorphous experience of subjective reality. This mode of vision poses a fissure in the perceptual veil separating subject from object. Recalling the Neoplatonist account of Creation, Hendrix describes the Renaissance theory of perception as an activity ultimately ascribed to the eternal Self—the single perceiver whose thought reflects everything that is:

³⁹ Augustine writes in *De Spiritu et Littera* that the just man “receives the Holy Spirit, by whom there is formed in his mind a delight in, and a love of, that supreme and unchangeable good which is God even now while he is still “walking by faith” so that he may conceive “an ardent desire to inhere in his maker, and may burn to enter upon the participation in that true light, that it may go well with him from Him to whom he owes his existence.”(qtd. in Hanby pg. 203.

The world around the subject desires what the subject desires. The world becomes a world when it has received the forms from the mind, that is, when it is perceived. Without love, without the subject being present to perceive it, the world would just be formless matter, disconnected and haphazard. But love is innate in it, and it turns toward order. (90)

As the mind partially comprehends the form of the Ideas which it desires to possess more perfectly (one cannot desire what one does not know), the vision exposes Britomart to something she already in part possesses, the form of her desire as it exists *beyond* the world of appearance and sensual gratification.

Writing in the mode of the previous and still-influential tradition of courtly love, in which the lover's projection of the self onto the image of the beloved was considered a stock contrivance (Grabes 184), Spenser inverts the courtly trope by making his lover receive—rather than project—the form of desire.⁴⁰ The mirror imprints upon Britomart's mind the form of that which is to be created. In seeking what “pertains” to her, she seeks a form beyond her own understanding. In so doing, Britomart taps into this formative, “visionary ontology,” resulting in her metamorphosis into a new creation. The vision bears fruit in the inward, prohibitive virtue of chastity and outwardly in the transitive virtue of justice.

Spenser develops the vertical significance of the chastity legend through consistent reference to biblical archetypes. Britomart's metamorphosis recalls the history of Israel—which begins as an insignificant, tribal nation that becomes a military power under the rule of David. Writers of the New Testament interpreted Israel's cyclic history of enslavement and redemption as a demonstration of God's activity of shaping his people into his own image. The Old Testament continually returns to the notion that faith—not arms—was the Israel's source of

⁴⁰ Cheney has similarly noted the mythic implications of the vision: “Britomart's idealized experience with Merlin and her active use of magic in Faeryland figure a visionary ontology in which the lover's image of the beloved within imagination is seen to have its origin in a divinely ordained spirit, and in which this spiritual image, if understood, motivates the will to virtuous action” (*Secret Power* 20).

strength (Leithart 110-111); it made them into an odd people. The Mosaic Law demanded the Hebrew nation to be a nation reflecting God's image (Deuteronomy 14:2).⁴¹ Faith, according to the writer of Hebrews, exists in contradistinction to subjective experience: "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (14:11).

Israel's immaterial source of strength returns us to Britomart's epistemological dilemma, prompting her to declare in exasperation:

But wicked fortune mine, though mind be good,
Can haue no end, nor hope of my desire,
But feed on shadowes, whiles I die for food. (III.ii.44)

Though contrary to experience, it turns out that Britomart's strict adherence to the sustenance of "shadowes" is her source of strength, for it is the basis of her chastity. Once again, Spenser is foregrounding the difference between realistic and unrealistic art. Though speaking out of frustration, Britomart unconsciously evokes the efficacy of "false-seeming" images. Because Merlin's mirror displays a shadow, she infers, initially, that it presents a false correspondence to reality, since "Nor man it is, nor other liuing wight...But th'only shade and semblant of a knight, / Whose shape or person yet I neuer saw" (III.ii.38). Though from a materialist epistemology, her logic is sound, she is, of course, mistaken. Significantly, "shadow" contained definite hermeneutic associations for Spenser's audience, who would have recognized its typological significance as "symbol, type, prefiguration, or foreshadowing" (OED 6c). The shadow of Artegall in this sense not only prefigures an actual knight—appearing bodily in Book IV—more

⁴¹ Without the space to elaborate further, I would point the reader to two important books which develop this point significantly. The first is Peter Leithart's *A House for My Name: A Survey of the Old Testament* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2000. Print), the second is Northrop Frye's *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982. Print).

importantly, it signals the existence of a coherent and personal, spiritual Form toward which all desire ultimately tends.

Spenser's understanding of the human subject is inseparable from his understanding of contemporary science. To wit, his understanding of Man was informed (in part) by the medieval optical theory of intromission, which taught that visible forms were literally "sent into" the observer: creating a fundamentally passive viewer who "received" the image before him.⁴²

Akbari explains that, once the visible form (called "species") reached the eye,

The image is then propagated along the optic nerve to the foremost *cellula* of the brain, where the *sensus communis* gathers impressions received from each of the "outer wits" of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. The imaginative faculty receives the sense impression just as soft wax receives a seal; reason judges the image; finally, memory stores the image for future reference. (42)

A parallel can be observed in Britomart's vision, which essentially "creates" the image of Artegall within her—his image becomes imprinted upon Britomart's imagination, approved by reason, and stored in her memory. She carries this image with her, the "secret of her heart" (III.ii.34). His form comprises the boundary of an enclosed, inner order such as Angus Fletcher describes as *templum*—"a sacred space created to the exclusion of chaos within which all is ordered and theoretically indestructible" (15).⁴³ Britomart labors to bring about a reality of her vision that is not merely Platonic—she seeks real presence, in Glauce's words: "No shadow, but a real bodie hath in power" (III.ii.45). We are at the border of mystical territory, evoking the paradoxical "immanent transcendence" figured in the Eucharist—but here, time and eternity meet, as Lewis has noted, in the realm of mind "where the bifurcation has not yet occurred" (*AL* 323).

⁴² Though by no means the dominant theory in Spenser's day, the theory nevertheless continued to exert significant conceptual influence in the sciences (Akbari 17).

⁴³ See also William's *Glass* pg. 103.

Augustine suggests such a marriage of corporeal and mental vision where he prescribes the reflective activity of “examining the trinity within” (X.xi.17-18). This is a reflective activity in which “The mental gaze must be turned inward, not in a narcissistic act of self-contemplation, but in an effort to see beyond the created nature of the self to the transcendent nature of the Creator” (Akbari 26). According to Augustine, such vision generates an inner reflection of the trinity, the *imago dei*—not merely as imitation, but as real, *immanent*, presence. Grabes provides an excellent summary of how Augustine’s theory influenced the medieval science of optics:

It was a matter of distinguishing the image in the sense-organ from the image created in the soul, and of setting the latter at a higher premium than the former. It had to be demonstrated that the eye was passive, allowing itself to be shaped by a physical agency, while *the soul formed its image actively*; the image arose in the eye only for the duration of the act of perception, in contrast to the internal image in the soul, which persisted. (83, my emphasis)

Spenser reifies such “active” perception in the causal implications of Britomart’s vision upon the ensuing narrative—sensuous perception gives way to idealized perception she generates within herself, and which she brings into being within the world of *Faerie Queene*. Like Augustine, Spenser held that the fallen world, riddled with antitheses and chaos, is redeemed through an act of vision in which the soul becomes an active participant in creation by recreating the unity of the triune Godhead. Bonaventure, perhaps the greatest medieval representative of Augustinian theology (Benson 132), prescribed a similar method of vision for a later generation of Platonists:

Since our circumstance is the ladder which leads us into God, and since among things there are imprints and images, physical and spiritual things, temporal and transtemporal things—and, in this regard, things outside us (*extra nos*) and inside us (*intra nos*)—we therefore arrive at the point of considering the First Principle, which is the most spiritual and which is eternal and superior to us (*supra nos*). It is appropriate that we go beyond the imprint, which is physical and temporal and outside us: this going beyond is to be led into the path of God. *It is appropriate that we enter into our mind, which is the transtemporal image of God, spiritual and within us: this entering into our mind is to step into the truth of God.* It is appropriate that, by looking at the First Principle, we transcend into the eternal, most spiritual and superior to us—and this is to be glad in the knowledge of God and to dwell in the truth of His majesty.
(*Opera Omnia* I.ii, my emphasis)

Beginning with images of sense and terminating in transcendent vision, Bonaventure's mystic ascent incorporates Eros (heart) and Logos (mind), at the basis of their union, Psyche (soul). Spenser's legend dramatizes Bonaventure's journey in the movement of Britomart's quest, the point of which is not the attainment of sexual intimacy (though it is that), but the spiritual intimacy it signifies.

The archetypal space where such a marriage between the eternal and the temporal in Spenser's poem is in the Garden of Adonis. The sexual and spiritual comeingle in a closed, intimate landscape where Spenser locates the principle of eternal generation, a place where

All things, as they created were, doe grow,
And yet remember well the mightie word,
Which first was spoken by th'Almightie lord,
That bad them to increase and multiply:
Ne doe they need with water of the ford,
Or of the clouds to moysten their roots dry;
For in themselues eternall moisture they imply.
(III.vi.34.3-9, my emphasis)

In Spenser's garden, the Tree of Life has been replaced by the activity of *remembrance*. Here, eternal life and generation are produced through the relationship which "all things" bear to their creator through remembrance, by which they "grow, / And yet remember." Remembrance is the

source of an internal, life-giving fount whereby “in themselues eternall moisture they imply.”⁴⁴ To remember is to see and desire and recognize that existence is not self-generated—in the garden, so doing leads nature to “increase and multiply” in obedience to the “mighty word” by which all things *become* self-generating, independent of the external world (“ford” or “cloud”). The singular power of *anamnesis* recalls the function of Merlin’s mirror, which is to remind Britomart that she “pertains” to a larger world, the efficient cause of Britomart’s transformation. In *Faerie Queene*, memory relates the soul to a plane of reality beyond sense perception—enabling one, in Bonaventure’s phrase, “to step into the truth of God,” which is “the trans-temporal image of God in the mind.”⁴⁵

As the veils of the androgynous goddesses Venus (IV.x.40) and Nature (VII.vii.5) conceal a sexual mystery, the beauty of the sensible image similarly veils a spiritual mystery. Grabes has commented on the persistence of this concept throughout the Renaissance in the conception that the beauty reflected in the beloved was a mirroring of the cosmic order as a whole (*Mutable Glass* 122). In penetrating beauty’s veil separating the viewer from the mystery beyond, Britomart herself becomes a function of Nature’s veil, its guardian. Her office externalized in the Heben spear, her “secret power unseen” (III.i.7), Maurice Evans identifies it with the whole force of Nature, “The emblem of the love of God by which the universe was created and is maintained” (151).⁴⁶ Symbolically aligned with the world of matter, she is a figure at once invulnerable and unrepresentable; she signifies the eruption of divine potency into the material world. Her beauty is inscrutable to the uninitiated, as Kane has it, because “Whatever form formulates is form: matter remains illusive, mysterious, because it is itself mystery” (Kane

⁴⁴ Conceptually equivalent to “living water” in the Gospels. C.f. John 7:37-39.

⁴⁵ Recall that Memory is the innermost cell of the Castle Alma.

⁴⁶ “We all agree that temperance is a control of pleasures and desires, while no pleasure is stronger than Love: if they are the weaker, they must be under Love’s control, and he is their controller” (*Symposium* 197c).

127).⁴⁷ With the image of Artegall (Justice) within her, she outwardly wears a mask of terror to the world, hiding the beautiful form within.

Her “feigned armes” (iii.53) and aggressive chastity are expressions of the inviolability of this inner space, the site of the interpenetration of the masculine and the feminine described by Jung’s alchemical theory of the *coniunctio oppositorum*. Joseph Campbell briefly mentions the archetypal history of such enclosures in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, citing an example related by Nicholas of Cusa of a barrier of mystery, “the Wall of God,” which conceals God from human sight. This barrier, according to Nicholas, is constituted of the “coincidence of opposites,” guarded by “the highest spirit of reason, who bars the way until he has been overcome.” These obstacles include “being and not being, life and death, beauty and ugliness, which crush the traveler, but between which the hero must pass” (Campbell 73).⁴⁸ Like nature’s mystery, Britomart’s secret power is potent because it is unseen and unknowable, within her contradictory appearance: “full of amiable grace, / And manly terrour mixed therewithal” (III.i.46).

The romance of courtly love reveals an obsession with this forbidden knowledge, which, at some point during the Middle Ages came to be viewed as the gateway to spiritual transcendence through the sexual mystery. We find this concept clearly depicted in the *Roman de la Rose* as an enclosed garden which the hero must penetrate, where he finds the “mirror perilous”—the image that will be his death, as it had for Narcissus.⁴⁹ Medieval poets saw in the

⁴⁷ Also in Aristotle: “Therefore the ultimate substratum is of itself neither a particular thing nor of a particular quantity nor otherwise positively characterized; nor yet negatively” (*Metaphysics* VII.iii.1029a).

⁴⁸ A far older example of the sacred barrier may be found in the familiar story in the book of Genesis which describes how the nations in an act of blasphemous hubris, attempt to reach the heavens by constructing a tower and in an act of retribution Yahweh “confused their speech” so they could no longer work in concert. The Sumerian name of this tower was “Babel,” which means “gate of god” (Genesis 11:1-9). See Edgar Wind pgs. 221-222 for more on Nicholas Cusanus’s writings on the *De visione Dei*.

⁴⁹ See Akbari pgs. 75-7.

beautiful image a terrifying mystery as that between the visible sign of the created order and its latent, spiritual meaning, an affective regard synonymous with mythic tradition, which viewed the female is seen as the embodiment of this forbidden knowledge:

Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know. As he progresses through the slow initiation which is life, the form of the goddess undergoes for him a series of transfigurations: she can never be greater than himself, though she can always promise him more than he is yet capable of comprehending. (Campbell 97)

Britomart's beauty presents such a superabundance of meaning to Artegall when he sees her unmasked in Book IV. Her image outruns comprehension, "The maker self resembling in her feature" (vi.17).

Her activity is so intimately woven throughout the larger narratives of Books III, IV and V that her actions take on an overwhelming sense of necessity, linking her in a significant way to the total structure of Spenser's poem. She leaves a train of reverberating effects wherever she goes, effects that determine later developments. By wounding Marinell, for example, she precipitates his removal from the "rich strond"—a divisive space—his absence from which is causally related to the subsequent marriage of the rivers and his marriage to Florimell (the union of Land and Sea). All of which takes place prior to her encounter with Artegall, almost by necessity; through her agency the rivers become one, the land and the sea are made one, obviously foreshadowing Britomart's future marriage in which chastity and justice become one. By implicating Britomart in the fatal progression of the narrative in this way, Spenser seems to suggest that chastity is what makes marriage possible. It stands to reason, then, conceptually speaking, that the knight of justice is *created* through the imposition of Britomart's beauty upon *salvage sans finesse* through her contact with the world.

Britomart's marriage is dramatically determined by the moment the image of the perfected knight has already become her "engraft pain" as a result of her vision. While emphasizing her fertility, "engraft" also implies the implanting of virtues, dispositions, sentiments in the mind (OED 2.a). The vision is a type of parthenogenesis by which she has been implanted with an allegorical seed.⁵⁰ Recalling the theory of intromission, which taught that vision occurs when the eye receives the forms which radiate from objects, Renaissance perception drew an implicit connection between vision and conception. Lucretius made this relation explicit in his *De rerum natura*, where he wrote that "The impact of forms upon the body causes it to yearn to project forms from within itself, that is, to emit seed" (cited in Akbari17). According to Aristotelian biology, the passive matter of the female was required in order for conception to take place. By evoking the notion of fertility related to the seed as "the Word of God" in Luke 8:11, Spenser's mirror speaks to the implicit fecundity of allegorical vision, which contains an inner meaning that can only be reached by removing the outer shell.

As she comes to reflect the form that is within her, the unrepresentable "Other," Britomart's beauty can only be described in terms of light: "Such was the beautie and the shining ray, / With which faire Britomart gaue light vnto the day" (III.i.43). She takes upon herself the infinite distance of the apparent lack between creation and the Creator, reformulating "lack" into "love" through her chastity, the virtue constitutive of all unity (AL 339). Rather than seeking to "possess" the beautiful image, she becomes identified with it. Lacan adamantly claimed that the discovery of the self as "other" in the mirror leads to a separation between the

⁵⁰ The recurrent association between Britomart and "tree imagery" is explained in Merlin's pronouncement in canto iii, where he describes her as the mother of "fruitfull Ofspring," a tree "enrooted deep" (III.iii.22-3). Yet her "engrafted pain" implies another conjunction of opposites by recalling Paul's letter to the gentile Christians in Romans chapter 11 where he describes their inclusion in the inheritance of the Jews in similar terms of engraftment.

self and the Other in the real world—but this we find this inversely depicted in Britomart's transformation. Lacan writes,

[The mirror stage]...fashions fantasies which move from an image of a dismembered body to a form which we will call an orthopedic index of its own totality—and to an armor, finally put on, of an alienating identity, which will mark, with its rigid structure, the child's entire mental development. (*Ecrits* 97)

Similarly for Britomart, the image in the mirror can be conceived as an armor that she quite literally “puts on.” Its form is not intrinsic to her, but something acquired. Kane notes that, “In donning ‘advent’rous knighthoode’ she is giving form to confused and turbulent feelings” (129). Artegall is a form she experiences virtually and consequently adopts for protection, disguise, and retribution. She subordinates herself to the foreign discipline of war. Yet her identity is not diminished through her prosthetic adaption; she experiences, rather, a dilation. She is greater as the knight of chastity than previously as an unconscious maiden.

As a reflection of apocalyptic reality, Britomart represents, through her androgynous characteristics, the immanence of the transcendent.⁵¹ She carries her lover within her. Similar to Christ's declaration that “the kingdom of God is *entos hymon*” (Luke 17:20-21), which translates ambiguously into “within” or “among you.” Christ was telling his disciples enigmatically that the realization of all their desires had already come, as if to say: “The kingdom is *within* you, or *among* you, but it is not *here*. His point was that the kingdom is not to be understood as a thing to be “possessed,” because God reveals himself through selfless giving—his loving, unifying identity reflected throughout the thoughts, words, and actions shared among his people.

Britomart cannot “possess” Artegall until she has learned to submit to the form of justice he

⁵¹ See fletcher 38

represents.⁵² As Leone Ebreo has written, “In God the lover, the beloved, and their love are all one and the same” (cited by Lewis, *Images* 42). The prophetic vision achieves an identifying effect: Artégall *is* Britomart, or, at least, *within* her, unfolded in her actions throughout the remaining books of which she is a part.

⁵² Plato expressed a similar truth when he portrayed Socrates’ wisdom as a denial of possession of wisdom in order that he might observe it.

Chapter Three: The Soul's Journey

So far I have examined the theoretical framework behind Spenserian perception and gone to some length to explain how the nature of one's desire fundamentally affects the faculty of perception. Using the metaphors of Narcissus and Christ, I made the distinction between desire that occludes and the kind that reveals. What follows is my attempt to demonstrate how the legend of chastity dramatizes the progressive unlayering of perception. Each "unveiling" signifies a stage of revelation corresponding to Bonaventure's mirrors of self, world, and God. The triad echoes Pico della Mirandola's description of emanation, the eruption of heavenly grace into the terrestrial realm as a kind of overflowing (*emanantio*), producing conversion (*conversio*) whereby the lower beings were drawn back to heaven and rejoined the gods (*remeatio*)" (Wind 37).

I have adapted Pico's triad as a conceptual model for the legend of chastity. Celestial "overflowing" is the root cause of Britomart's desire, prompting her movement from unconscious state of being. Next, "conversion" becomes evident in Britomart's resulting self-consciousness, represented dramatically in the process through which she struggles to bring her vision into reality: that is, her quest. Finally, the "reunion" occurs through the re-established relation between Britomart's ego and Self, the revelation of her true identity as a fully-realized self. The final section of my paper is therefore divided into these three phases: movement, process, and relation, which have as their subject desire, self-consciousness, and identity. The contrivance will assist, I hope, in my explication of what (to my knowledge) remains a hitherto unexplored facet of Spenser's allegory—the quest to know oneself truly through the crucible of desire.

At this point we are concerned with three worlds, three actions. In the first stage, Britomart's desire illustrates the archetypal movement into the world of the self, toward the widening (re)formation of individual consciousness. The second comprising the encounters with Malecasta and Busirane typifies the process in which the soul comes to know itself through its false representations in the world. The third and final stage, her anticipated marriage exposes the soul's true identity through its relation to God. Like Britomart's marriage, which does not occur within the poem, the final stage figures a spiritual union that can only be anticipated. The larger significance of this marriage is withheld until Book V, where Britomart receives a second vision—much stranger than the first—in her dream vision in Isis temple.

Into the Self: Movement

The journey into self-knowledge begins with desire. Opposed to the mirror of Narcissus and its false image of wholeness, the true mirror reveals a state of imperfection. The dagger of guilt, or inadequacy that accompanies the encounter with perfection establishes the genesis of the soul's "movement" from its unconscious state toward higher levels of consciousness.⁵³ Beginning with sense perception, her look *into* the mirror is followed by an internal (cognitive) reflection, enabling her to see *through* the image of desire. Looking beyond the material sensation produces an "uncovering" of a spiritual reality, perhaps in reference to the Apostle's statement: "first comes the natural, then the spiritual" (1 Corinthians 15:44). The encounter with the perfect form of beauty necessarily exposes the inadequacy of the viewing subject. The difficulty lies in the fact that, as a rational being, man's relation to the world is mediated by the

⁵³ Augustine describes the self as a relational and dynamic entity that is constituted by an outward and inward movement, towards the multiplicity of the external world and back to its own original unity and wholeness (*Cont. Acad.* II.i.2). "In the process leading to self knowledge, the soul discovers that it is both substantial and relational--the self is some kind of substance that entertains relations with the body, the world, and God" (Pabst 102).

conscious mind. Perception transforms objective phenomena into subjective experience, which the mind is left to interpret according to the form of its desire. The ascent toward self-knowledge is therefore predicated upon desire, whether it is oriented toward form existing beyond material bodies, or toward the bodies themselves.

We see this progression clearly in the case of Britomart. Her journey begins with perception followed by the very personal experience of sexual desire, which is redirected outward, toward a social good, as Merlin declares: “Thy fruitfull Ofspring, shall from thee descend” (III.iii.23). Britomart’s reference to Narcissus (III.ii.44) places the episode against the context of failing to ascend this interpretive ladder by refusing to move beyond the sign to the signified. The interpretive error is made explicit in Augustine’s definition of the sign as “something that shows itself to the senses and something other than itself to the mind” (*De dialectica* 86). Because Narcissus denies that there is a difference between sense perception and mental perception, he fails to move beyond his sense-image to the higher reality of the mental-image, or self-conception.⁵⁴ Narcissism, therefore, presents the soul’s first test. Spenser transposes this epistemological dilemma into the essential challenge of chastity. Britomart must decide whether to obsess over what she knows—her sexual desire—seeking to *possess* it, like Narcissus; or, seeing *through* it, go in quest of the reality it represents.

Initially, Britomart’s gaze into “Venus looking glas” is motivated by simple vanity, the implication in the poet’s description that “Her selfe a while therein she vewd in vaine” (III.ii.22). Spenser’s description recalls the account in Ovid where Narcissus “looks in wonder, charmed by

⁵⁴ Such misapprehension characterizes the interpretive failure of idolatry, the worship and fetishization of images, which is not restricted to external objects; for, as Augustine had warned: an idol may be an internal mental image (phantasm) that perverts spiritual vision through obsessive fixation on material phenomena (*On the Trinity* 12.9). According to Augustine, such a sin occurs when the soul ignores the indwelling image of God for an obsession with the mental pictures formed from sensory stimuli. Plato warns against the same in the *Symposium* (see Wind pg. 219); Huijgen explains Origen’s neoplatonic stratification of being through which terrestrial beings much ascend upwards to the knowledge of God (63).

himself, no more moving than a sign formed of Parian marble” (*Meta.* 3.418-19). Both view the reflection with aesthetic pleasure. Unlike Narcissus, however, Britomart looks again—with purpose—seeking “that mote to her selfe pertaine” (III.ii.22). The second look performs a double function. While still addressing the mirror with her physical gaze, she simultaneously projects a gaze inward. The poet interrupts the action, mirroring Britomart’s introspection by directing the reader’s gaze likewise to her interior, informing the reader that the second look, “auising of the vertues rare” (st. 22), is guiltless of material fixation. The gaze generates a spiritual reflection because it is a “virtuous” reflection.” It is not her reflection itself which evokes the vision of Artegall, but her mental reflection *upon* her reflection. The first image she sees is her own, but the second—likeness revised—is elusive, the image has been altered by cognition. At this moment, to be sure, the unconscious pleasure of narcissistic perception has begun to rupture.

Britomart’s sequence of looking corresponds roughly to the structure of the syllogism. An instrument of logic by which two known propositions beget new information in a novel conclusion, the syllogism presents a syntactical analog to the sequence through which Spenser’s heroine arrives at her vision. She *looks* (1), *looks reflectively* (2), and *perceives* the image of Artegall (3). If we translate Britomart’s viewing into a pattern of syllogistic relations, the sequence take the form: the unconscious gaze (major premise) and the conscious gaze (minor premise)—related by Britomart’s unchanging reflection (middle term)—produces the image of Artegall (conclusion). As in logic, the conclusion, a new truth, is implicit in the conjunction of the premises; it is not implicit in either one of them alone. Hence the vision, like a syllogism, results in an advance in knowledge achieved in the conjunction of premises.

For Spenser, the path to enlightenment begins with the physical image of beauty, where it must not remain. Recalling again the *discordia concors*, we see here that the Eros of the

unconscious gaze has been transformed into Logos by the conscious gaze. To be dominated by Eros is to be at the mercy of perception; to be dominated by Logos is to live in a world of abstraction divided from the real world. Britomart reconciles the two using her capacity for judgment, which, Augustine says, “Involves and exceeds both sense perception and mental abstraction by relating individual form to pure form and back to its material instantiation” (Pabst103). This relationship reveals once again that for Spenser and his Neoplatonist forbears, the soul’s upward movement begins with narcissistic pleasure in the beautiful image.⁵⁵ Narcissistic pleasure gives way to the image of its perfected form. Looking *into*, and then *through* the image, Britomart perceives her self *in relation* to the world, rather than *as* the world. Set against the example of the courtly lover, who experiences the beautiful image as the perfected self, Britomart sees the reflection of her self and experiences an ideal *other*. Unlike the sterile reflection of the first, Britomart’s vision is generative—not only in the sense of her future offspring, but also in the transformation it works her character.

By presenting a tormenting image she cannot possess, “Can haue no end, nor hope of my desire” (III.ii.28), the mirror initiates a change in Britomart’s consciousness. Her dissatisfaction represents a movement beyond “beauty” as she once knew it; her desires now leap in pursuit of their true object, beauty as it truly “is”: Plato’s Good, which appears in human life as the virtue of justice. Merlin’s mirror precipitates a *peripeteia* no less efficacious than Paul’s conversion on the Damascus road (Acts 9:3-9). Paul was converted from serving the law to serving the Christ it was meant to shadow; so, too, Britomart turns from the subjective experience of beauty to search for the thing itself. With Merlin’s guidance, the tormenting image leads to an awareness of her

⁵⁵ Augustine has written that “Delight in the end, mediated by that end, is the principle of our movement” (Hanby, *Augustine and Descartes* 465).

inability as a subjective agent to obtain satisfaction for her desire.⁵⁶ According to Edward Edinger the struggle to bridge this gap is spiritual: “Understood psychologically, the central aim of all religious practice is to keep the individual (*ego*) related to the deity (Self)” (379).⁵⁷ This is not idolatry, but the realization that the ego is a contingent entity, dependent upon countless forces beyond itself—such as nature, other humans, and above all, God. In Spenser’s hands, the romance epic became an effective way to dramatize epistemology, for his totalizing vision of fairyland produced a narrative that works instinctively against narcissism by rendering the individual in relation to all the various dimensions of life.

Spenser’s portrayal of subjective dependency might be clarified by the alchemical theory of Carl Jung, specifically, his concept of the *coniunctio oppositorum*. Jung’s theory posits that every male possesses a feminine soul (*anima*) and every female a male soul (*animus*) clarifies the problem of subjective dependency by representing every subject as a divided self requiring a partner: the two sexes form essential, constituent factors of reality.⁵⁸ According to this conception, each male/female union presents the universe in microcosm. Jung clarifies, however, that these distinctions are meant to be taken as “conceptual aids” to describe the attraction between Eros and Logos. Put simply, “Woman’s consciousness is characterized more by the connective quality of Eros than by the discrimination and cognition associated with Logos” (qtd.

⁵⁶ The fear of unquenchable desire creates what Berger has called a kind of “moral” anti-eroticism. Berger traces this tendency throughout several *Faerie Queene* characters that hold themselves back from true love and from the natural demands and limits of life, summarizing: “All of them; all rely too much on themselves, feel too little sympathy for others, rigorously lock themselves up within themselves and, like closed elemental systems, resist the processes of concord and nature” (*Dynamics* 15). Lacan denies the existential hypothesis of a self that is always present to itself, always self-aware. To the contrary, he believes that the monadic “self” we are aware of is an imaginary product of the Mirror stage, or a “misrecognition” (“Mirror Stage” 1127).

⁵⁷ C.f. In *Answer to Job* Jung treats Job’s conflict with God as a comprehensive encounter with the Self, which encompasses Job’s fall, estrangement, and encounter with the complete Self who is God.

⁵⁸ C.S. Lewis expresses the same belief in *Perelandra*: “Sex is, in fact, merely the adaptation to organic life of a fundamental polarity which divides all created beings. Female sex is simply one of the things that have feminine gender, there are many others, and Masculine and Feminine meet us on planes of reality where male and female would be simply meaningless” (218).

in Lockerd 29). Thus the individuals of each gender are galvanized by an attraction to their complementary other half:

For a man, a woman is best fitted to be the real bearer of his soul-image, because of the feminine quality of his soul; for a woman, it will be a man. Whenever an impassioned, almost magical, relationship exists between the sexes, it is invariably a question of a projected soul-image. (qtd. in Lockerd 30)

Such mutual dependence is clearly of interest for Spenser. Britomart's vulnerability to the feminine power of Eros has already been discussed, and the glaring poverty of Artegall's masculine Logos throughout Book V very nearly undercuts his role as the knight of justice. Britomart's quest for Artegall therefore leads to her becoming *less* "buxome" to Eros, and union with Britomart tempers Artegall's iron-like judgment with feminine compassion.

Jung's concept reveals something I believe Spenser had intended all along: chastity and justice are Eros and Logos "reformed." Lockerd's suggestion that Britomart's quest represents the quest for the "inner self" parallels Edinger's individuation "quest" wherein the ego seeks union with the self. Lockerd says,

When Britomart looks into Merlin's magic glass and thinks of something "that mote to herself pertaine" (3.2.22), she thinks of her future husband and the glass shows her Artegall. He pertains to herself not only in the sense of "having something to do with" her but in the sense of belonging to her self, being a reflection of part of herself. For the image in the glass is not only her future husband but her own animus reflected by the magic mirror. (Lockerd 24)

In Lockerd's view, Britomart's quest illustrates the archetypal journey through the alienating world of objective experience in which one encounters the self as the outer projection of one's inner being.

Psychologically, the acceptance of a lover is an acceptance of death, the transition from a state of ego inflation to a state of rivalry, a loss of self ultimately resulting in identification a new level of being accomplished through the union of the idealized self in the form of the lover. Jung

describes the process of individuation as a journey leading to an encounter with the Self resulting in symbolic death, producing a healthy relationship between the ego and the self. Similarly, Edinger has stressed the mythic necessity of the fall or exile as events synonymous with the decentering of the ego. “The process is necessarily painful,” Edinger says, because “any encounter with the self is a defeat for the ego” (37). Applying the Jungian struggle to Book III, Harry Berger writes:

Psychologically, *eros* is always felt at first as an affliction, a pain-giving force which disturbs equilibrium and fills the soul with violent longing or frustration. It is this *eros* which assaults the world and Britomart in the early cantos of Book III...it drives the soul of lover or poet out of its childhood—out of its self-enclosed, self-delighting idyll of innocence. (11)

The collision between the ego and objective reality produces a dramatic reorientation. The individual comes to visualize the subjective ego as *part of* the self, and constituted *by* the self, but not identified *with* the self. Through imaginary death one symbolically abandons the infantile state of self-satisfaction for higher levels satisfaction in higher levels of consciousness. In her *Tales of Love* Julia Kristeva elaborates the concept of love as symbolic death:

An Ego is a body to be put to death, or at least to be deferred, for the love of the Other and so that Myself can be. Love is a death sentence that causes me to be. When death, which is intrinsic to amorous passion, takes place in reality and carries away the body of one of the lovers, it is at its most unbearable; the surviving lover then realizes the abyss that separates the imaginary death that he experienced in his passion from the relentless reality from which love had forever set him apart. (36)

Recalling that Merlin’s mirror had originally been given to King Ryence for the protection of his kingdom (III.ii.18), the mirror serves a similar purpose by exposing such a threat to Britomart’s “kingdom”—the embodied knowledge defined by her chastity. As the knight destined to penetrate this barrier and take possession, Artegall represents the bringer of order whose opposition works her perfection. On the psychological level, he comes to liberate her from

unconsciousness. His threat includes the dismantling of the enclosures protecting the partially formed, contingent self from its painful growth into the state of its perfection. The resulting, creative re-formation of the self can be viewed either as an expression of the Jungian *coniunctio* or the spiritual ascent of Neoplatonism. From the Jungian perspective, Britomart experiences her own image as the image of Artegall—her soul’s counterpart, its *anima*; from the Neoplatonic, the vision implies the transformative power of Beauty as articulated by Spenser in *The Fowre Hymnes*, where the image of beauty leads the soul to union with the divine nature. The consequence of this internal revolution—or journey, as Bonaventure called it—is the obliteration of the false image of the self, unveiling the true form of human desire. The liberated desire, accompanied by liberated perception, leads inevitably to conflict with the false images of the mutable world.

Into the World: Process

The reformation of Eros and Logos within the individual results in a “new creation”: a mirror of divine presence in the fallen world. The conflict between purified desire and the false, flattering desires of the world establishes the basis of Bonaventure’s second stage, the soul’s journey into the world. As we have seen, Cupid perceived on earth is “false” because his appearances are corrupted through matter. In “brutish minds” love “descends from sight into touch,” but approaches its true form as it rises beyond matter—the idea sublimated in Spenser’s description that, in heroes, love “ascends from sight into the mind.”⁵⁹ The legend of chastity demonstrates the latter principle in the figure of Britomart, whose love remains in the form of “sight” until it is prepared for virtuous expression in marriage. Her appearance throughout Book

⁵⁹ Similarly, Ficino writes: “Lust, which longs for touch, is one thing, but quite another is love, which rests content in beholding, hearing, and contemplating” (qtd. in Reese pg. 93).

III dramatizes the conflict arising in human desire between love's true expression and its imitators, false idols of convention.

Her progression from the familiar, feminine world of the Castle Joyeous to the foreign, masculine world of Busirane illustrates the process in which "true love" exposes the false imitations as they appear in corrupted passion and intellect. The first impostor, Malecasta, represents the corruption of Eros, her operations manifest in the convention of incontinence; the second embodies the corruption of Logos through the propagation of a vicious, oppressive convention of love which we encounter in the house of Busirane.⁶⁰ The structure of Book III itself reflects the deceptive nature of appearances: the figures of Malecasta and Busirane—false images both—frame the book as an outer shell which Britomart (and the reader) must remove, or crack, in order to reach the true center, the pattern of unfallen sexuality figured in the Garden of Adonis.

The Castle Joyeous inversely mirrors the internal, ordering power of chastity in the external, disordering power of lust, for it represents the convention of institutionalized adultery (c.f. *AL* 13, 340). The castle, a familiar symbol of oppression, stands in this episode for the external oppression of an inward power. The poetic intention is clear—this is a land in thrall to Eros. The conventional nature of this evil is apparent in the castle's denizens, "Faire ladies, and many a gentle knight" (III.i.31)—practitioners all of courtesy and "courtly play" (i.57). This is a socially-constructed world, enclosed, the six knights tell her, "Within this castle wall," where "soueraine beautie" is sole authority (i.26). Though Britomart easily defeats the six champions representing the six stages of courtly seduction, in so doing she falls victim to a bait and switch.

⁶⁰ By dividing the challenge to chastity between these two arch-fiends, Spenser anticipates the modern antithesis between Freud's theory of the sexual drive and Schopenhauer's "will to power," yet another manifestation of the tension between Logos and Eros.

The victory wins Malecasta's love (i.27), essentially binding Britomart to the law of the castle. Prowess is of little use in a society where virtue has been coopted into the service of vice. Taken together, her acquiescence to the law of the castle, and the subsequent wound she receives there (III.i.65) illustrate the dangerous inclusivity of the depraved social consciousness. Britomart learns that one cannot reveal the falsity of a position without somehow becoming involved with it.

Castle Joyeous demonstrates the virtual conflict at the heart of courtly love, what Lewis called "the similarity between the real and the pretended and of the archetype to the imitation" (*AL* 326). Spenser confronts his audience with the paradox of true beauty and its often drab appearance in the everyday—just as courtly love offered a titillating alternative to "drab" marriage.⁶¹ Britomart at this point is yet encased in her suit of armor. Her inner passion, like her outward appearance, is well-protected. Conversely, Malecasta's beauty, like the "rich purveyance" of the castle, "Exceeding much the state of meane degree" (i.33), is ostentatious in its display. It offers exorbitant sparkle, but questionable value. Their contrariety evokes the difference Gascoigne emphasized between the mirror of crystal and the steel glass: the first displays an attraction that is overt, skin deep, and false, the second is enigmatic, profound, and true. Like the steel glass mirror, Britomart distorts her beauty in order to protect it from the unworthy gaze.⁶² Figuring the extremes of feminine lust and masculine chastity, both wear a false appearance. Britomart hides her beauty (i.52); Malecasta hides "Her close intent" (i.57). Chastity conceals beauty beneath an exterior of danger; lust offers an attractive façade concealing a trap (i.54).

⁶¹ See Lewis *AL* pg. 13.

⁶² Again, Lewis: Spenser defies expectations that "the vicious loves are going to be warmly painted and the virtuous tepidly," according to Lewis, who says that, for Spenser, "intensity of passion purifies" (*AL* 330).

The poet says that Malecasta's seduction, her "hidden meaning" (i.50), is "dissembled" by innocence. The neologism punningly suggests that "semblance" is reversed and "disassembled." Chastity strips courtly seduction of its lewd *significatio*. Britomart's ignorance of seduction is mirrored in Malecasta's ignorance of virtue. Construing Britomart's courtesy to be as false as her own—"That from like inward fire that outward smoke had steemd" (i.55)—Malecasta speaks a language of self-reflexivity. Forthright communication is transformed into the flattering image of Malecasta's desire. The art of speech in the Castle Joyeous reflects an empty exchange of symbols—an inevitability where Eros is made the cipher of social intercourse. Appropriated to a predatory game of darts, language here comprises one-sided signification. It is no longer a means to establish relations; its purpose is only to neutralize. The deception of courtly seduction is clearly illustrated in Paridell's seduction of Helenore:

For all that art he learned had of yore.
 Ne was she ignoraunt of that lewd lore,
 But in his eye his meaning wisely red,
 And with the like him answerd euermore:
 She sent at him one firie dart, whose hed
 Empoised was with priuy lust, and gealous dred. (III.ix.28)

Helenore's response balancing "lust" and "jealousy" parodies the divine pairing of Eros and Logos. In order to do so, however, she stoops to a sub-lingual method of exchange—"darts" rather than words—primitive gestures signifying nothing beyond the universal language of body parts, a point Spenser emphasizes by way of florid innuendo to the dart's "empoised hed." Malecasta's court is inversely mirrored in the Garden of Adonis, where "Franckly each paramour his leman knows" (vi.41). Against the reality of Britomart's chastity and the later example of the Garden of Adonis, courtly love is exposed for a convention that trucks its meaning in flattering lies. When the corrupt heart is promoted to master of custom, reason and logic become apish servants to a lower impulse, and these consequences become manifest in the debasement of

language. In Castle Joyeous, law and language shallowly revolve around the social good of “getting some.” Fittingly, in this place, Britomart “did plaine apparaunce shonne” even as Malecasta tells “her grieuauunce” in “plainer wise” (i.52). Here, as in the courts of Gascoigne and Spenser, appearances are not to be trusted.

Malecasta’s professions of love are false, not because she misrepresents them, but because, as Spenser states in the “Hymn of Love”: “Such fancies feele no loue, but loose desire” (ln.175). Malecasta inversely mirrors Chaucer’s instruction in the *Pardoner’s Tale* that “God sholde have lordeship over reson, and reson over sensualite, and sensualite over the body of man” (l.262). Ruled by sensuality and giving “bridle to her wanton will,” Malecasta’s higher faculties are corrupted in the service of her appetites. Will, once the seat of Logos, has become the source of new lusts, “a coale to kindle fleshly flame” (i.44). Unchecked, Eros has become a flood “poured forth in sensuall delight” (i.48), a poison rushing through her veins: “And through her bones the false instilled fire / Did spred it selfe, and venime close inspire” (i.56). The comingling of flood and fire suggest boundlessness and destruction. Fittingly, Malecasta’s lack of restraint is paralleled externally in her court, where “Lydian harmony” provides a fitting background of “loose” notes (i.40). The carousing feast itself celebrates excess: “Fruitfull Ceres, and Lyæus fat / Poured out their plenty” and the cups “their banckes did ouerflow” (i.51).

Repeated images of “flitting” and “feeding” insinuate that Malecasta’s identity has become approximated with her loose appetite.⁶³ Her relation to the world is mediated by subjective pleasure. She is not attracted to the intrinsic value of objects, but to the pleasure these

⁶³ Ficino describes base love as “a certain passion or lust that rebels against reason; it overwhelms the opinion, which is trying to do what is right, and enraptures it instead with the pleasure of shape. Socrates assigns two leaders: one is an inborn appetite for pleasure, the other is a sort of legitimate opinion that we gradually acquire through learning that directs us toward what is honorable. The aery daemon moves the opinion, the water daemon desire” (*Phaedrus* 2.1.3).

produce. Malecasta is Narcissus, filled with “vaine thoughts” (i.41), pursuing desire as an end in itself, an exhausting, fruitless labor recalling the *contrapasso* of lukewarm sinners in the vestibule of the *Inferno*. Of course, desire as “an end in itself” is unintelligible—desire is a relation between a subject and an object. Malecasta, however, has identified herself with the unintelligible; she represents the sterile, in-between state of the self-relating copula, a signifier of meaningless copulation.

But chaste Britomart is given to fanciful reverie as well. After hearing Redcrosse describe Artegall’s “shape” and “chivalrous array,” the poet says that “A thousand thoughts she fashioned in her mind” (III.iv.5). Spenser is careful to note, however, that “Her feigning fancie did pourtray / Him such, *as fittest she for loue could find*” (iv.5; my emphasis). Her standard is not sensuality, because she envisions his virtues rather than his physical characteristics. She imagines him “Wise, warlike, personable, curteous, and kind” (iv.5). Unlike Malecasta and Narcissus, Britomart fashions her lover after an ideal pattern, rather than after the subjective form of her desire. Spenser is careful to make his audience aware that Britomart’s love is fundamentally different from all the others we encounter in *The Faerie Queene*. She loves neither the beauty of a specific body presented directly to the eyes—the lowest source of love in Pico’s scheme⁶⁴—nor simply “ideal” beauty abstracted from the body.⁶⁵ She loves the ideal pattern of the virtue *as it inheres* in the particular knight who “Achilles arms did win” (ii.25); she therefore exemplifies the purest form of love that may be attained within the mutable world, as Wind writes:

⁶⁴ Wind, 138-9.

⁶⁵ That love which “choseth virtue as its dearest dame” (III.iii.1).

Love is desire aroused by beauty. Desire alone, without beauty as its source, would not be love but animal passion; while beauty alone, unrelated to passion, would be an abstract entity which does not arouse love. Only by the vivifying rapture of Amor do the contraries of *Pulchritudo* and *Voluptas* become united. (46-47)⁶⁶

Britomart's love exhibits the relation of the ideal, universal-abstract, and down-to-earth passion, exposing the fraudulent form of *voluptas* and the "base" love it produces.

The conflict between love and the desire exhibited in the customs of the Castle Joyeous, it turns out, is not much of one. Viewed side by side, there is no comparison. The juxtaposition furnishes the dramatic process in which social conventions become realigned with spiritual reality. Chastity's superiority to the false conventions of the castle is first exhibited in her triumph over Malecasta's knights. To Britomart they appear to be little more than "shadows" (i.35), their insubstantiality a material sign of their "non-being" when contrasted with the substantiality of chaste love. Spenser describes her superiority more overtly when her beauty is first revealed:

As when faire Cynthia, in darkesome night,
Is in a noyous cloud enueloped,
Where she may find the substaunce thin and light,
Breakes forth her siluer beames, and her bright hed
Discouers to the world discomfited;
Of the poore traueller, that went astray,
With thousand blessings she is heried;
Such was the beautie and the shining ray,
With which faire Britomart gaue light vnto the day. (i.43)

Spenser employs another epic simile to emphasize the mythic significance of Britomart's beauty, its efficacy to reveal truth to a "world discomfited." Her beauty appears as "the image of light breaking through an obscuring veil," an effect Spenser employs in every instance where her

⁶⁶ Sims has written convincingly that Britomart's character harmonizes the types of love presented in the faeries Belphebe, Amoret, and Florimel, who are archetypes of celestial, practical, and sensual natures, respectively. (Introduction). She is the complete woman.

beauty is described, as Roche has noted (*Kindly Flame* 56).⁶⁷ Here she appears for the first time as a Venus—for until this moment she has performed the role of an avenging Mars—and for the first time in *The Faerie Queene*, we become aware of her desirability as an object of beauty. Here, as everywhere else in Spenser's poem, true beauty is an outward sign of inner virtue, a glimpse of divine truth lying hidden beneath nature's appearances.

By connecting Britomart's beauty with enlightenment, the passage illustrates beauty's transcendent, ontological source. Her appearance strikes the observer with the force of spiritual revelation. We might recall once more the revelation in Merlin's mirror—for there, too, we noted that the beautiful image functioned as the literal signifier of a spiritual signified. Here we find it was the love aroused by that first image of beauty which has made her, in turn, beautiful. The Neoplatonic influence can be plainly observed: beauty makes the world beautiful through the transforming power of the love it arouses. Britomart's ontologically substantial inner beauty penetrates the meretricious beauty of Castle Joyeous, which "envelopes" the world in external darkness, a "noyous cloud." The comparison emphasizes Spenser's distinction between socially-constructed perversion of beauty, and the glory and power of the thing itself.

From the false desire of physical pleasure arising through the corruption of Eros, we turn now to the intellectual perversion of love in the corruption of Logos. As the figure of false desire proceeding from love's corruption in the mind, the character of Busirane represents the final challenge to the virtue of chastity (*AL* 340). If the figure of Malecasta suggests the sublimated physical pleasure of *amour courtois*, Busirane characterizes the perverse, spiritual mastery that

⁶⁷ C.f. III.ix.20; IV.i.13; IV.vi.19.

victory entails. The first weds herself to any object of desire; the second destroys the desired object by altering it beyond all recognition into the form of the subject's desire.⁶⁸

In Busirane's castle, Spenser exposes the insidious poison of courtly love. It proceeds from the intellect, as it is allegorically represented in the secret ritual of Cupid's masque. Here, Amoret—the personification of Britomart's love (*AL* 344)—appears between Cruelty and Despite, her heart “drawn forth” and “fixed with a cruel dart” (*III.xii.31*). With this image, Spenser represents through symbol the reality—the spiritual carnage—of this courtly game which destroys love and corrupts society. Kane interprets the figure of Busirane as an allegory of the masculine libido attaining sexual mastery through its monopoly on the conventional medium of love, poetry—

As Busirane writes his cipher from Amoret's blood he gains energy from an instinct suppressed, or rather hemmed in, by the conflicting injunctions of courtly love: scorn and vulnerability, boldness and caution—the whole parade of do's and dont's. In rescuing Amoret, therefore, Britomart is rescuing her capacity to love from the imaginary codes that have transformed it into a ritual of captivity and penetration, and so ends the polarization of sexuality and submissiveness; Scudamor and Amoret are finally able to embrace. (134)

Such are the social consequences of man making love “in his own image.” Human nature is suppressed, and love made captive—veiled and obscured behind the very ideals which sought to win her. As the face of the “love conquest,” Busirane embodies a principle Roche has called “the denial of the unity of the body and the soul in true love” (*Chastity* 195). The alienating and destructive consequences of the corrupted Logos appear throughout Book III in polarized images of possession and flight: in Florimell's panicked terror; Cymodoce's possessive love of Marinell, transforming him into an object she treats “like her thrall” (*IV.xi.7*); Malbecco's possessive

⁶⁸ An obvious contemporary example is the creation of the modern porn industry out of a predominantly male demand to see women portrayed as mere sexual objects. A less glaring example would be the unrealistic, Western ideal of beauty as seen in the Victoria's Secret catalog.

jealousy and Helenore's flight; and finally—perhaps illustrating a familiar stereotype of Elizabethan court—Paridell, the man who flees from whomever he has just possessed.

On the border of Busirane's estate, Britomart encounters Scudamor languishing, tellingly, beside a "fountaine *sheare*" (III.xi.7), imagery associating him with Narcissus—that other helpless lover who also viewed himself "in a fountaine *shere*" (III.ii.44). The scene suggests that Amoret's plight is somehow attributable to Scudamor's narcissistic love. Indeed, their rocky history evokes the narcissism of courtly love. Scudamor acquires the "shield of love" in characteristic, courtly fashion—a detail suggesting that both his "title" and his "right" to Amoret are conventional in nature. Several critics have suggested that the courtly love depictions in the tapestries and the highly conventionalized masque indicate that the House of Busirane is meant to suggest a prison of a mental nature arising out of Amoret's neurotic fears which Scudamor has unconsciously created.⁶⁹ Roche identifies Busirane as the abuse of marriage, claiming that "the mind of Busirane cannot distinguish between marriage and adulterous love" (195). I would modify Roche's conclusion to say that Busirane represents not simply the abuse of marriage, but its *negation*—for marriage necessarily entails the union of individuals, whereas the House of Busirane is a house of war: where we find only victor and vanquished, depicted in the tapestries (xi.28-46), the spoils of war (xi.52), and the profane altar to the conquering god (xi.49).

Scudamor's adoption of love as a "shield" suggests an uncomfortable parallel to the courtly lover, who resorted to a psychologically abusive convention as his means to subjugate. The conquest of the Temple of Venus illustrates the hubris and domination of the corrupted will that views the love object as a sacrifice to itself. With this interpretation, the inscriptions "Bold" and "Not Too Bold" should be read ironically; they expose the discrepancy between the patina of

⁶⁹ Fowler, *Variorum* III, 353-359; Kane 100; Roche, *Chastity* 195.

courtesy and the abusive reality. Thus, Busirane figures the masculine counterpart to the feminine vampiricism of Malecasta and Acrasia by destroying feminine liberty.⁷⁰ In this way, Scudamor is undone through his misconceived ideal of courtship. His “overbold” assertion of passionate mastery is incompatible with what he really wants: a happy marriage (Hieatt 201).

Busirane’s house contains three chambers that inversely mirror the division of the Castle Alma (II.ix), where Spenser represented the ordered soul through a spatial progression from fancy, to reason, to memory. In Busirane’s house we find three chambers illustrating a progression of realism accompanied by a proportionate increase of perversion. The first room contains works of fancy, “tapestries that “by their semblaunt did entreat” (III.xi.29). The middle room represents, in realistic fashion “a thousand monstrous forms...as they living were” (xi.53). The final room contains the live-action drama of Cupid’s masque. Moving from general to specific, the three rooms funnel all human expressions of lust—from myth, to history, to personal experience—into the central command center of the mind: the will. In place of Alma’s three custodians, here there is only one: the monomaniacal Busirane. Cupid, appearing in the center of the masque, is his true form:

Next after her the winged God himselfe
Came riding on a Lion rauenuous,
Taught to obey the menage of that Elfe,
That man and beast with powre imperious
Subdeweth to his kingdome tyrannous. (III.xii.22)

The blind god astride his ravenous lion inverts the iconography of temperance represented in Guyon and his steed. Here, the mismanagement of the passions does not merely result in the passions running amok, as it had for Plato (*Phaedrus* 249d-257b). Nature abhorring a vacuum,

⁷⁰ “Bold” may imply audacity in a lewd sense (OED 4); A.C. Hamilton also notes a sexual connotation in Spenser’s term “yron dore” (Hamilton’s note on *F.Q.* III.xi.54).

the soul without reason becomes beast-like and destructive under the ascendancy of blind Cupid. But the Cupid depicted here is not simply “lack”; he represents a fully conscious, positive evil. He momentarily removes his blindfold to survey his destruction with relish. As Lewis wrote, this Cupid is “blind to all except to the pleasures of cruelty” (*Images* 22).

A.C. Hamilton has noted a possible connection between the “brazen pillor” to which Amoret is bound and the emblem of the erect phallus (Hamilton’s note to *FQ* III.xii.30). As I have been identifying the male aspect of the *discordia* with power, it seems natural to interpret Busirane’s house as a kind of temple to the phallus, the sexual power principal. Consider the dragon lying conquered beneath the golden Cupid:

Whose hideous tayle his left foot did enfold,
And with a shaft was shot through either eye,
That no man forth might draw, ne no man remedye. (III.xi.48)

Spenser’s image presents the humiliation of one of the preeminent power of nature’s mysteries, subjugated to base use. Lewis similarly interprets the archetypal dragon as symbol of libido or the phallus (*Images* 22). Ironically, though, the ancient phallic cult had as its deity the feminine power of generation, a chthonic power mythically depicted as a dragon or serpent (Campbell 32). One of the first images of corrupt art in Busirane’s house is an arras which reflects how this sexual symbol permeates the place:

Wouen with gold and silke so close and nere,
That the rich metal lurked priuily,
As faining to be hid from enuious eye;
Yet here, and there, and euery where vnwares
It shewd its selfe, and shone vnwillingly;
Like to a coloured Snake, whose hidden snares
Through the greene gras his long bright burnish back declares. (III.xi.28)

Lewis relates the dragon’s role in the house of Busirane to Alciati’s *Emblematum liber* (1531), where it stands as a guardian of treasure, sacred groves and temples as it does in many fables,

from the myth of the Golden Fleece to *Beowulf*. The most poignant example is the blind dragon of the Hesperides in Hellenic myth, which is associated with virginity by its location, and even more so by the famous apples it guards, for it is “a guardian mutilated in the very organ that qualified it for guardianship” (*Images* 23). So too, in Busirane’s castle the symbol of mystery and power of generation and desire has become debased in the service of a corrupted intellect.

Like Lacan’s symbol signifying the principal relation between demand and possession, the proto-typical dragon symbolizes the tyranny of sexual possession. The phallic mysteries of Busirane’s castle conceptualize an ideological revolution that had taken place in the symbolism of romance: Eros coopted by Logos, had become a weapon of oppression. Though conceptually distinct from the biology of sexuality, Logos is inextricably linked to it in the mutable world through the mechanism of desire. In the abstract, Logos is the personalized form of transcendent reality, which transforms the mutable world into its likeness. In the terrestrial realm, Logos is a power of mind which seeks to perpetuate its ideal form. When corrupted, Logos becomes transformed into the will to power, generating formless destruction. Like water and fire, Logos and Eros are contrary elements essential to human life. When either power is abused—when we desire to dwell *in* it—the result is annihilation: either drowning or burning. Against this kind of destructive worship, Britomart demonstrates the harmony and the potency of “ordered love.” The process in which the soul comes to know itself through its desires is here expressed in the struggle to bring these extremes into balance.

Into God: Relation

As stated at the outset, this thesis intends to show how Spenser’s chastity legend illustrates the perfection of human nature through the operations of desire. But as we have seen, desire itself has become distorted in human nature as a result of Original Sin. Human nature is

therefore corrupted through the false perception proceeding from the false images of desire. Nevertheless, Spenser offers a tantalizing glimpse of restored perception in his conclusion of the legend of chastity in Book V. While human perception is not ultimately redeemed within the narrative proper (in a material way), Britomart's prophetic dream in Isis Temple refigures the problem of systemic, diseased, perception in the mutable world by presenting sexual union in the context of mythic time—where perception is undivided because unfallen. Imagining herself in the role of the goddess Isis, Britomart dreams of the human will identified with the divine—the union figured darkly in the splitting of the temple curtain described in the Gospel of Matthew (27:51), signifying the final shattering of the narcissistic mirror of the world.

In her dream, Britomart's desire becomes sublimated in the polarized virtues of justice and equity, a symbolic analogue to the mythic union of Isis and Osiris. While the content of the vision is, quite literally, false—Britomart is not a goddess—it expresses a relation between desire and virtue that is true, and which Spenser emphasizes throughout the poem as a whole. The internalization of Logos and Eros in the sexual allegory of Book III becomes, in the dream in Book V, a social allegory representing the universal desire for the harmonization of equity and justice. By equating Britomart-Artegal and Isis-Osiris, the vision links revelation, epistemology, and soteriology in an enigmatic picture of the resurrected *imago dei* as a heterogeneous being composed of multiplicity and unity, identity and difference—Logos and Eros—a *discordia* reflecting the higher unity of transcendent order.

In Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, the kingdom of God is vision, generated through the creative act of desire—desire which, being purified of material fixation (narcissism), has become the unified expression of the individual and corporate body. If the vision in Merlin's mirror had exposed Britomart's "ideal" self, creating a psychological rift between the desiring mind and

body, the dream vision in Book V elaborates and restores that relation by figuring the mystic marriage of the unitary mind (Logos) to the myriad creation (Eros). As a character poetically aligned with her entire class, the English nation, Britomart's dream reveals unity within the discord of human experience. The correspondence exposes Spenser's debt to the Neoplatonist hierarch, Plotinus, who taught that "In all the universe there is but one general harmony though it be formed of contraries" (*Enneads* IV.iv). Spenser's chastity legend represents this universal harmony as an experience encountered—in a partial sense—in the microcosmic union of the marriage of male and female.

Radical though it may seem, Spenser's conception of marriage is rooted in Pauline theology. In his letter to the Ephesian church, the Apostle references the Genesis description of marriage of husband and wife as "one flesh,"⁷¹ from which he derives eschatological significance:

He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: for we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and *they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.* (Eph. 5:28b-31, my emphasis)

In calling marriage "a great mystery" that shadows Christ and the Church,⁷² Paul's statement hearkens to the Jewish tradition of describing God's relationship with his people romantic terms. This romantic aspect of scripture came to the fore through the influence of Alexandrine Neoplatonism, an interpretive tradition largely responsible for the fact that the erotic poetry of the Old Testament book of *Songs* came to be read throughout the Middle-Ages as a metaphor of

⁷¹ Genesis 2:24

⁷² The word Paul uses for "mystery" comes from the Greek *mystērion*, which occurs twenty-eight times in the New Testament, which scholars agree generally refers to a truth undiscoverable except by revelation that was previously hidden. Paul's reference implicitly alludes to gnostic teaching, but linked to the cross of Christ, where "eternal wisdom" becomes "eschatologically fulfilled" (Bromiley 617).

God's love for creation that culminated in the Crucifixion. Consequently, desire came to be conceived as the central relational principle between God and creation. Medievalist Ellena Lombardi has suggested that, "In Augustine's work and in that of many medieval Augustinians thereafter, desire becomes the fundamental *trait-d'union* between the Christian soul and God" (97).

Neoplatonism did little more than complicate a theme already present in Hebrew Scripture. From the very beginning, Genesis describes the relation between God and his creation in terms of amorous division. Creation begins with a striking image of antithesis reflecting the notion that the higher "imposes" order upon the lower,

The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the deep,
and the Spirit of God moved upon the waters. (1:2)

The account suggests that inert matter responds to God's presence in the way a reflecting surface is transformed by an image passing before it. Reformed theologians taught that the divine Logos—the preexisting form of the incarnate Christ—formed the universe by exposing unlimited matter to the beauty and limitation of divine intention, dividing light from dark, the waters (above) from the waters (below), and the land from the firmament (Huijgen 71). According to Genesis, in the first three days of creation, God *divides*; in the final three days, he *creates*, filling each of the three realms with living bodies.⁷³ In a cultivated space called Eden, a land apart, God places Man, the only creature bearing the divine image. It is an important, but often ignored fact that Man was created *male and female*, according to the language of Genesis. Just so, the *imago dei* does not exist apart from the community of male and female.⁷⁴ Accordingly, as the divine

⁷³ On the first day, God divides light from dark; day two he divides waters above and below; day three he divides water and land. On the remaining three days, God creates, filling each realm with life: sun, moon, and stars on day four; birds and fish on day five; land animals and man on day six (Genesis 1:2-13). See Leithart pp. 44-5.

⁷⁴ "In the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:27).

image contained within two sexes, Adam reflects within himself the tension corresponding to the Holy Spirit over the formless waters—the desire uniting Creator and created.⁷⁵

The sexes share a mutual dependence, as implied in the material and formal causes attributed to Man's creation. Adam is taken from the womb of nature—"the dust of the earth" (2:7)—and Eve is taken from Adam's side (2:22). Before the Fall, Adam and Eve experienced identity as a relation shared *between* themselves as reflected images of God. Reflecting God's image in two distinct forms, Man was designed to exist as the metonymic signifier of God's transcendent beauty. In imitation of the Holy Spirit's operations during the first six days of creation, Man's intermediary role is divided between the joint commands to "subdue" and "replenish" (1:28). This causal relation becomes reversed as a consequence of their disobedience. After The Fall, Adam must work *against* the uncooperative earth "by the sweat of his brow" (3:17-19), and Eve is placed into a subordinate role negatively defined as an orientation *against* the authority of her husband (3:16). Discord has been introduced into Adam's relationship with God, the natural world, and within himself; all of his relations have become corrupted because mediated by corrupted perception. In *The Faerie Queene*, the dragon St. George slays at the conclusion of Book I represents the mythic personification of Adam's curse, the autochthonous destructive power arising—not from a generative force of evil—but from Man's own corrupted relations.

Next to God, Eve was to be Adam's closest relation. According to the author of Genesis, her primary purpose was companionship. Paul clarifies the relation further when he calls her the visible reflection of Adam's own beauty—which is also the Creator's beauty (1 Corinthians

⁷⁵ The opposition between the sexes in Genesis becomes problematic the moment the identity of each sex is examined in relation to its material cause. That Eve is "from" man suggests that the feminine relates to masculine as part to whole. Conversely, the fact that Adam is taken "from" the womb of nature indicates that the masculine is derived from the more inclusive, feminine principle of generation.

11:7). From both contexts, one may safely conclude that Eve is taken *out of* Adam in order *to complete him* (the reason given in Genesis 2:18). Milton's *Paradise Lost* imagines, I think correctly, the inherent danger such narcissistic beauty represents. Milton describes Eve's first encounter with her reflection in a pool (a poignant nod to Narcissus—and probably, Britomart's mirror), when she is suddenly distracted by a voice:

What there thou seest fair Creature is thy self,
With thee it came and goes: but follow me,
And I will bring thee where no shadow staies
Thy coming, and thy soft imbraces, hee
Whose image thou art. (468-75)

Milton's Eve is arrested by her beautiful image until the voice reminds her that her identity is defined in relation to something beyond herself—him whose image she bears. Taking the relation a step further, one might say that Eve represents the beautiful, generative element of androgynous nature—the beauty of the *imago dei* abstracted into individual form. As such, Eve's beauty confronts Adam with the test of Narcissus. Interestingly, Eve's function in Genesis parallels the motif of the fountain in the story of Narcissus; both embody the love-engendering aspect of the self on account of which the viewer succumbs and falls under the spell of death.

As the executor of Logos commanded to “subdue,” Adam's job had been to protect the Garden from such error, and his failure leads to the corruption of Nature. Adam's Fall is reversed in the New Testament in the image of the Incarnation. Christ inverts Eve's role by representing the abstracted corruption of Adam's sin. Christ is thereby made the “scapegoat” whose death reverses Adam's trespass, redeeming the corporate body of Adam (Leviticus 16:8, 2 Cor. 5:21) by uniting himself to it. As Adam was seduced by his own image to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge leading to death, Jesus invited his followers to become his “images” by drinking the

cup of submission *unto* death, bringing life. The first brought division (Logos); the second resulted in union (Eros).⁷⁶

As spirit, Christ is the eternal Logos pictured in Genesis, the Creator by whose power all things are held together (Colossians 1:17). As Man, he is the embodiment of Eros, the image of creation submitting to the will of the Father, reflecting his likeness.⁷⁷ Spiritual beauty particularized in human experience is Wisdom. Its form is law, the visible representation of Logos. The sensible world cannot bear its appearance; it is a fire that divides the righteous from the wicked. The inverse is law made universal. Incorporating the discordant elements of creation into the personalized form of law, Wisdom is called by a different name, Love. In Biblical imagery, transcendent wisdom is masculine, personal and anthropological; love is feminine, communal and cosmic (Jewett 26).⁷⁸ In the New Testament, the two become reconciled in Christ's union with the Church, the head and the body (Ephesians 5:23, Colossians 1:18).

In *The Faerie Queene*, chastity and justice share a relation that mirrors the biblical image of the head and the body. Justice is a virtue associated with the intellectual nature of Logos; chastity is associated with bodily passion, the domain of Eros. While Britomart's significance as the knight of chastity has been explained at length, Artegall's contribution deserves comment. Spenser aligns Artegall with intellect using the detail of Achilles' arms, "which Artegall did win" (III.ii.25) to associate Spenser's knight with Homer's crafty hero using a subtle nod to the

⁷⁶ Christ's identification with death and absence is reflected in Paul's description of the Incarnation in Philippians 2:7 as Christ "emptying" himself; that is, leaving the infinite presence of the Trinity, he descended into a world of emptiness and vanity, and united himself to it.

⁷⁷ Phil. 2:8-11

⁷⁸ The voice of God is rendered masculine, as are the various Old Testament Christophanies (appearances in angelic form). The obvious exception being the voice of Wisdom in Proverbs, which is distinctly feminine. The author's purpose in feminizing eternal wisdom is to illustrate the implicit beauty of wisdom (3:15)—as opposed to the false beauty of the harlot (2:16-19). The contrast, while not upsetting the overall, masculine character of Yahweh, nevertheless adds a layer of complication. If anything, this paradox merely reinforces Spenser's androgynous image of Nature in Book VII.

Metamorphoses. Ovid's poet explains that, following the Trojan War, Achilles's arms "went to the most fluent, most incisive man" (13.382-83)—a title clearly designating the famous Ulysses, as the hero boasts: "In me, the head outweighs the hand; / all of my power lies in intellect" (13.372-73). The Homeric archetype invests Spenser's knight of justice with particular significance. Ulysses is a romantic lover enduring many hardships on his journey home; he is also the epic warrior who precipitates the fall of Troy by directing the immense power of Greece with his counsel. A warrior *and* a lover, his return to his kingdom of Ithaca is no less significant than his return to the marriage bed and Penelope. The association invests Artegall with the significance of the Archetypal king, and Britomart with the kingdom. In addition to the sexual union of lovers, the dream presents the mythic figuration of the marriage of the head and the body, monarch and kingdom—a relation Queen Elizabeth herself evoked in a 1559 speech given to Parliament, where she had declared "I am already bound unto an husband, which is the kingdom of England" (59).

Lockerd argues that *The Faerie Queene* resolves the tension between epic and romance by "making love itself a heroic quest" (58). As we have seen, the misdirected convention of courtly love exhibited a failed attempt to fuse the two by sublimating the epic conquest into the language of romance; the alloy was false, not because the correspondence was untrue but because it valorized the dominating principle at the expense of the submissive. For Spenser, these forces are interpenetrating and equal, as they are within the tradition of Florentine Neoplatonism. Wind summarizes the interplay as it inspired artists of the Renaissance:

We find that the roles of Mars and Venus, which would normally be divided between man and woman, both recur within man and woman as such. The principle of “the whole in the part” entails this rather baffling conclusion: that Venus is not only joined to Mars, but that his nature is an essential part of her own, and vice versa. True fierceness is thus conceived as potentially amiable, and true amiability as potentially fierce. In the perfect lover they coincide because he—or she—is the perfect warrior. But whenever their “infolded” perfection is “unfolded,” the argument requires two opposing images which, by contrasting the martial with the amiable spirit, reveal their transcendent unity. (94)

As Wind’s conclusion suggests, the Logos drive to subjugate material bodies—women or land—is inversely related to the Eros drive to propagate form—biological or cultural. Their destructive, mutually-cancelling operations can be overcome only through the resolution of complementary relation in marriage. This recalls again the passage in Genesis where the androgynous *imago dei* is commanded to “subdue” the surrounding lands and to “replenish” and “multiply” the human race. For Spenser, the desire for intercourse and the desire for the order of law are ultimately reflections of the same, universal desire for the return of the King, the restoration of Eden.

In Britomart’s dream, the private, sexual conflict of Malecasta and Busirane is transmuted from the individual body to the civic. The tension between Eros and Logos within the individual is expanded to include all individuals, expressed in the social tension between law and equity. According to Spenser’s sources, Plutarch and Diodorus, Osiris and Isis represented the male and female generative powers, earth and water, moon and sun, Demeter and Bacchus, as well as patrons of death, fertility, justice, and monarchy (“Isis, Osiris”). William Nelson claims that in the Temple of Isis Spenser resolves the tension between “sword and scepter, rigor and clemency” (126). Depicted in a statue of silver, the idol of Isis sets her foot upon the crocodile, restraining it, as a temple priest explains:

For that same Crocodile Osyris is,
That vnder Isis feete doth sleepe for euer:
To shew that clemence oft in things amis,
Restraines those sterne behests, and cruell doomes of his. (V.vii.22)

The crocodile-Osiris, represents the violence of imposed rule expressed in the destructive force of law. Coercive power is a necessity precipitated by The Fall, prior to which “All loued vertue, no man was affrayd / Of force” (V.Pr.ix). The poet elides the historic examples of Bacchus, Hercules, and Artegall—figures each of “strong hand” regulation and “The club of Justice dread” (V.i.1-3). Such reforming power is present in the individual farmer subduing the uncultivated earth as well as the king conquering foreign nations. Regulating power of this kind is the Logos at work in human life—the energy that transforms the amorphous natural environment into the pastoral, cultivated, civilized world of human shape and meaning.⁷⁹

With these examples, Spenser acknowledges that regulating force is necessary, but a power which must be controlled. Its visage is manifest in all exertions of power, whether implicit or explicit—”Both forged guile / And open force” (V.vii.7). The oldest symbol of raw, threatening power in Hebrew scripture is the Leviathan of Job, a monster of terrible proportion and strength. This beast becomes metaphorically aligned in later Hebrew writings to the nation of Egypt, a foreign military power and Israel’s paradigmatic oppressor. Northrop Frye explicates the political significance of the Leviathan in his study of the Bible and literature. He describes the Leviathan as an archetypal symbol of opposition, cosmic, as well as personal:

What is true of Israel in Egypt is typologically true of the human situation generally. All of us are born, and live our natural lives, within the leviathan’s belly. In the political aspect of the leviathan, we live in subjection to secular powers that may become at any time actively hostile to everything except their own aggressiveness, the leviathan being “king over all the children of pride.”⁸⁰ (*Great Code* 190)

⁷⁹ “In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for ‘subdue’ is the same word used to describe victory in war, as when David “subdues his enemies. It can also mean ‘subduing’ someone to slavery” (Leithart 51).

⁸⁰ Frye cites Job 41:34

Note the thematic parallel: in Old Testament imagery, Leviathan symbolizes the individual manifestation of power that becomes identified later with the corporate power of the nation of Egypt. In the New Testament, God's love is pictured in the individual image of Christ and later corporately, in the image of the Church, his body.

In *The Faerie Queene*, the opposition of Isis and the crocodile-Osiris, alludes to the biblical antithesis of human life and the Leviathan—a struggle which begins in the book of Genesis, in prophecy of the war between the descendent of Eve and the Serpent.⁸¹ Throughout the Old Testament, serpent iconography symbolizes the works of the flesh resulting in judgment and death. Eve represent the type which anticipates the ultimate triumph (temporal and spiritual) of love and life figured in the deliverance of Christ. Similarly, Spenser's goddess, with her foot upon the crocodile's head, recalls images of ancient kings posed victoriously over the conquered foe, symbolizing total conquest. The victory of Isis over Osiris mirrors the prophecy of Genesis. Like the biblical idea of death swallowed by victory (1 Corinthians 15:54), the goddess's dominance over the crocodile figures the triumph of love and life over judgment and death, generation over destruction, Logos subdued by the behests of Eros.

In her dream, Britomart envisions herself transformed into Isis, her foot similarly resting upon the crocodile. A hideous tempest suddenly erupts, stroking the holy fire into a conflagration threatening to consume the temple itself—when the crocodile, suddenly awaking, devours both tempest and flames. Grown proud and swollen in his power, the crocodile turns upon Britomart. She defends herself with the scepter of Isis until the beast is subdued, seeking grace at her feet,

Which she accepting, he so neare her drew,
That of his game she soone enwombed grew,
And forth did bring a Lion of great might;

⁸¹ God tells Eve: "I will also put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed. He shall break thine head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15).

That shortly did all other beasts subdew. (V.vii.16)

The image mirrors the destructive Cupid depicted in the house of Busirane. But here, the cruel, blind god standing upon a blinded dragon (III.xi.48) or riding upon a ravenous lion (III.xii.22), has been transformed into the serene figure of Britomart peacefully restraining her power. Here the composite embodiment of inner, “lawful” love (Chastity) and outward, “loving” law (Equity) rules the dragon and gives birth to the lion. Alone, Logos can only divide and destroy—but under the authority of Eros, he is able to produce offspring. The dream corresponds to the Neoplatonist triad of movement, process, and relation by recounting a pattern of conflict, then intercourse, then childbirth. In the linear (or temporal) sequence, sexual intercourse comprises the middle term uniting conflict and generation, but categorically,⁸² the sexual act links two distinct entities into “one flesh,” an image evoking both the literal, biological union of male and female as well as the symbolic union of Logos and Eros.

Paradoxically, Britomart’s power is acquired through submission. Recalling the Neoplatonist “circle of graces” (giving, accepting, returning), Britomart surrenders her superior power the moment she encounters Artegall face to face. Lowering the weapon with which she has been defending her maidenly chastity, she speaks to him with mildness and grace. In response, Artegall “voluntarily imposes on himself the restraint that she has had to enforce upon would-be, but inappropriate lovers” (Sims 75). At which point, Glauce helpfully steps in, directing the bashful lovers. Artegall is told that he must cease to be “rebellious unto love,” and Britomart that she must relent her “wrathfull will” (IV.vi.35). Both fear losing their power (Hamilton’s note, st. 35), but mutual abdication of power is required in order for love to occur. Artegall must forgo his ruling power by acknowledging the authority of a higher—and

⁸² I am referring to non-sequential reasoning, or *meaning*.

Britomart, as the executive of that higher power, must relinquish it to his care. Spenser's notion of love is dynamic, like Aristotle's definition of virtue as *hexis*—it is an active quality of having-and-holding. The lovers exhibit mutual sway and voluntary submission, simultaneously.

As William Nelson has gracefully stated, "It is just both that man should excel woman in strength and that feminine beauty should vanquish the heart of a gentle man" (119). And so with Isis: Britomart restrains the "sterne behests" and "cruell doomes of his" (V.vii.22). Outwardly, peace reigns when the "inhumane" force of justice is mollified by "humane" equity, as the temple priest explains:

That knight shall all the troublous storms asswage,
And raging flames, that many foes shall reare,
To hinder thee from the iust heritage
Of thy sires Crowne, and from thy countrey deare. (V.vii.23)

There is an inversion here, as Lewis notes in his little book, *Spenser's Images of Life*:

"Outwardly, justice rules; in secret, equity" (104). Without Isis, Justice is ugly, *salvage sans finesse*. Artegall embodies raw, destructive force, but without it, Equity lacks the force to press her interests. Britomart needs Artegall in order protect her "just heritage": her "crown" and "country dear." Equity ruling Justice, the moon ruling the sun, presents an inverse mirror which affirms the opposite: the moon rules *because of what it reflects*. So, too, Eros rules by virtue of the Logos, the order it signifies.

Throughout her adventures, Britomart's appearance has, until this point—by lack of the divinely-ordered form of love appropriate to human natures—become polarized into a naturally and spiritually beautiful element which attracts and a militantly chaste element that drives off:

As the one stird vp affections bace,
So th'other did mens rash desires apall,
And hold them backe, that would in error fall. (III.i.46)

But in the presence of Artegall, Britomart's chastity is expressed in mild and modest love, which simultaneously arouses Artegall's love and restrains his passions. The poet says "it his ranging fancie did refraine, / And looser thoughts to lawfull bounds withdraw" (IV.vi.33).⁸³ Hence a kind of harmony, or concord, is established. Like the *imago dei* of Genesis, their union represents conterminously both cosmic beauty and power: the ability to "divide" and "create."

Spenser represents this cosmic paradox individualized in Nature's androgynous appearance in Book VII—

For that her face did like a Lion shew,
That eye of wight could not indure to view:
But others tell that it so beautious was,
And round about such beames of splendor threw,
That it the Sunne a thousand times did pass,
Ne could be seene, but like an image in a glass. (VII.vii.6)

The poet's first response is fear, the natural reaction to Nature's ruling attribute, that power which "refrains fancy" and forces "looser thoughts" back to "lawful bounds." But, surpassing the terror, her beauty is such that the poet, in paucity of description, resorts to hyperbole—as he had done with Britomart—comparing her beauty to the light of the sun. So potent is Nature's beauty, the poet says, that it may not be experienced directly—but "like an image in a glass." This is because Nature's beauty is the instantiation of the eternal form Logos—which divides light from dark and good from evil—within the body of Eros. Her beauty is the totality of existence.

Arthur's complaint in Book III presents this distinction in miniature, dividing human action into two kinds:

For day discovers all dishonest ways,
And sheweth each thing as it is in deed
.....
The children of day be the blessed seed,

⁸³ For more on Britomart's restraining effect upon Artegall see Broadbuss, pg. 30.

Which darkness shall subdue, and heaven win:
Truth is his daughter. (III.iv.59)

Expressing a generalized form of the desire particularized in the narrative cycle of the chastity legend, the soliloquy sublimates Arthur's longing for Gloriana into naturalistic terms of day and night. What Spenser is really doing in this passage is dramatizing a universal human longing to see the fulfillment of the symbolic meaning of which human desire is but a shadow. To imagine the marriage of Arthur and Gloriana is to picture a universal state of human flourishing that includes the cessation of all knightly quests, the victory of light over darkness and order over chaos, and true sexual intimacy—a state in which there exists nothing external to the self to be desired because the self has become identified with the Self.

Conclusion

To make a general observation, when we use the term “body” to designate all individuals comprising a particular nation or state, we employ a figurative conception by which we limit the unlimited, potential agency of human beings within an artificial construction. What makes this possible is the unifying rule of a single, defining character that restrains and gives shape to the collective, establishing limiting boundaries by which one “body” or group of people becomes distinguished from another. In the political state, this regulating characteristic is represented by the executive. The executive “head” rules the “body.” According to Frye, The essential function of the head—the king as a cultural symbol—is primarily to represent, for his subjects, the unity of their society in an individual form. Frye called this figurative association the “royal” metaphor, named thus because it establishes the symbolic basis of kingship:

The individual member of the royal metaphor, the invisible king, is related to the social member, the kingdom he rules, as a bridegroom to a bride. The sexual union of man and woman, which is symbolically an identifying of two bodies as one flesh, becomes the image for the full metaphorical relationship of God and man. (*Great Code* 154)

As Britain’s head of state, Queen Elizabeth presented a dual metaphor: she represented both Logos, as God’s executive on earth—and Eros, as the embodiment of her people. The two functions are united in *The Faerie Queene*, in Spenser’s metaphor of sexual intimacy. In Spenser’s poem, Britomart *is* England and Artegall *is* the perfect form of law. When she first sees Artegall, the effect upon her character and the ensuing narrative is Spenser’s allegorical portrayal of what happens when spiritual truth penetrates the values, traditions, and customs of a nation. Spenser’s narrative offers a mirror of desire in which the “natural” gives way to the “divine. The final vision prophetically suggests the consummation of all desire—the queen’s desire for peace and a woman’s desire for a lover—a heavenly realm on earth.

The kingdom appears when the individual has learned to identify its desires with the social whole. To break free from the self-deluding mirror of Narcissus is to redirect the flames of uncultivated desire from reflexive, autoerotic impotence into a consuming passion for the truly “human,” which is to identify oneself with the social whole. Recalling that Britomart’s personal experience of sexual desire is transformed, through Merlin’s guidance, into a desire for social generation—a “famous progeny” (III.iii.22) destined to lead England against its foes “Till vniuersall peace compound all civil iarre” (iii.23), Kane argues, appropriately, that Spenser’s Britomart “substitutes a romantic obsession for heroic obligation: an image of a lover for one of the city” (129). Her journey illustrates that the dilation of consciousness—beginning in unconscious perception (sexual desire) and culminating in spiritual perception—exhibits a corresponding widening of human relations. Britomart’s mastery of her sexuality expressed in the virtue of chastity becomes perfected in Artegall’s mastery of political rule. Judith Anderson writes:

In discovering the relation between Artegall’s quest in an external world and his honor, she also becomes conscious of a relation between an impersonal and a personal world. Thus Britomart deals “true Iustice”; she reforms Radegone, moderates her own smart, and tempers her passion. In short she embodies the inner mean, and she becomes truly like Isis. Yet even in these stanzas, we do not find an all-inclusive Eden, only the world of inner order to which Britomart belongs. (461)

The instantiation of universal order revealed within Britomart’s internal order reveals Spenser’s interest in the Renaissance obsession with the analogy of Man as microcosm of the universe, in Raleigh’s phrase, “the bond and chain which tieth together” both divine and mortal natures (*History of the World* I.v.58). The chastity legend reveals the indeterminacy of human desire as a means of acquiring self-knowledge at the same time that it valorizes desire’s intermediate function as a mirror revealing universal, abstract truth.

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