

Male Anxiety in *The Faerie Queene*

The portrayal of women's physique and sexuality as dangerous and artful in Edmund Spenser's epic poem *The Faerie Queene* forces the female reader into gender-awareness and imposes a male perspective on her. It is first and foremost the women's outward appearance that the male characters read or misread. The façade of a woman can never be trusted, be it with the deceitful Duessa or the innocent Una. The moment a woman shows any signs of sexual desire, she becomes ugly in the male gaze and is consequently humiliated and deserted. Women, in *The Faerie Queene* invoke danger, duplicity and caution. Four passages establish Spenser's complicated relationship with the physique and sexual power of women: Una's introduction, Redcross's dream of Una and his waking to the false Una's unchastity; Duessa's introduction, and her exposure as a witch. In all four instances, the men judge the woman by her appearance. *The Faerie Queene* places gender before actions, thereby excusing the male's intemperate acts as caused by the female. In *Book I*, to err is not human, but female. The woman causes the man to err. The character Duessa in particular exposes male anxiety about female power; she is a female much like Queen Elizabeth, who was her country's mother, virgin queen, and object of desire and enigma.

At the beginning of Canto I, the Redcross Knight is introduced. Described as "gentle," "faire," and "as one for knightly giusts and fierce encounters fit," the reader is meant to sympathize with him (I.I.8-9). By his side rides a "lovely Ladie," the fair Una whose name stands for 'One Truth' (I.I.4.1). Until Redcross meets the Lady Una, he has been on a straightforward journey. Once he comes upon Una, he gets lost. It immediately strikes the reader that even the most innocent and chaste woman can be the cause for the man's erring and getting lost in the woods. The forest stands for chaos and implies the emotional tumult Una's beauty causes in the knight, leading him astray. The power of a woman's beauty is strong enough to impair the male's capacity for rational thinking. When Redcross is tricked into believing that Una is not the virtuous lady he took her for, it becomes clear that the notion of how a woman should be - chaste and virtuous - is imposed by the male narrator's point-of-view. The sorcerer

Archimago models his sprite into a false Una “so lively, and so like in all mens sight” (I.I.45.4). The emphasis is on *men’s* sight; it is important how the male gaze is going to perceive the false Una.

Redcross’s dream is told from a male position as well. The knight’s “dreame of loues and lustfull play/ That nigh his manly heart did melt away” implies that he is a victim. His immediate reaction of attempting to kill the false Una is an *overreaction*: “he thought haue slaine her in his fierce despight” (I.I.50.3). His passionate rage also reveals that he is actually fighting his own urges, not Una: “In this great passion of vnwanted lust/ He started vp, as seeming to mistrust/ Some secret ill, or hidden foe of his” (I.I.49.1-3). The woman is the dangerous ‘foe,’ because she has the power to rouse the man into a violent passion. When the knight sees the false Una and squire “in wanton lust and lewd embracement,” it is jealousy that makes him furious: “which when he saw, he burnt with gealous fire/ The eye of reason was with rage yblent” (I.II.5.5-7). Once more, the narrator excuses the knight’s actions by painting him as the victim of a woman’s sexuality. To be jealous signifies that the knight wanted Una for himself. He therefore doesn’t escape from Una because of his disgust with her wantonness, but because of his own inability to restrain his desires, and because she chose to be with someone other than him.

Just as the monster Error is female and described in the most repulsive manner possible, so is the main villain of Book I female and revolting. The latter, however, hides her hideousness behind a façade of physical beauty. Spenser describes both Error’s self-sufficient fecundity and Duessa’s infecund ‘nether-parts’ as offensive. Both extremes are a threat to the male: the female monster with her overpowering brood, and the female who does not need a man to be powerful. Duessa is sexual, but in no need of procreation. She is, therefore, the corruption of what a woman in patriarchal society is supposed to be: virtuous and chaste until married, then a caring wife and nurturing mother. The way Duessa is introduced at once urges the reader toward caution in an age of sumptuary laws. She appeals to the male gaze’s objectification of female beauty, but in truth, she never loses her power as a subject. Duessa first appears as “A goodly Lady clad in scarlot red/ Purfled with gold and pearle of rich assay” (I.II.13.3-4). Her clothes are so opulent that they distract from what is underneath them. The narrator first states that she is

“faire,” once more emphasizing the woman’s appearance as the first point of reference (I.II.13.1). The fact that Duessa is clad in overly ostentatious clothing (‘purpled/ornamented’) and that she is mentioned in relation to a Sarazen (Muslim), a Persian mitre, and a ‘wanton palfrey (saddle horse)’ instantly portrays her as a threat (I.II.13.7). Her horse is just as exotic as she is, hinting at something animalistic in her: With tinsell trappings, woven like a wave/ Whose bridle rung with golden bells and bosses braue” (I.II.13.8-9). Spenser uses too many colorful words, vowels, and alliterations, and he interrupts the meter from iambic pentameter into a trochee to stress “purpled.” Duessa is too beautiful to be good, which in patriarchal society equals chaste.

Although Duessa is usually interpreted as the female personification and defamation of Catholicism, her overly ornate dress, and the pearls and brooches remind just as much of Queen Elizabeth, who was so artificial that nobody knew who the woman behind the clothes was anymore. In his letter to Sir Walter Raleigh Spenser claimed his authorial intent of The Faerie Queene was to “fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline” (Letters to the Authors). It is mainly for gentlemen that the poem was written. It is the *male* perspective that would judge Duessa by the description: “She wore, with crowns and owches garnished/ The which her lavish lovers to her gave” (I.II.13.5-6). The striking omniscience of the narrator who declares that *he* knows exactly where Duessa’s jewels came from interrupts the regular narration, which only foreshadows outcomes or hints at seeming vs. being. The narrator brands Duessa as promiscuous. Queen Elizabeth was beleaguered by suitors whom she strung along. A male subject such as Spenser arguably was disturbed by her unwillingness to give up her power to a man.

The lesson the narrator teaches the ‘gentlemen’ is not to be deceived by skin-deep beauty, but to be humble and find genuine beauty in the form of virtue. It is remarkable, however, that Spenser nonetheless adheres to a kind of Neo-Platonism, which allows Una to be beautiful on the outside because she is good on the inside. The emphasis on a woman’s beauty remains throughout the poem –e.g. the lion not attacking Una solely because of her beauty-and undermines the lesson. The same false emphasis on

beauty is mirrored by Fradubio, who tries to warn Redcross against Duessa, who turned him into a tree. Fradubio tells Redcross that he loved a beautiful lady when he came upon Duessa. Soon he cannot decide between the two women: "One day in doubt [Fra Dubio] I cast for to compare/ Whether in beauties glorie did exceede" (I.II.37.2-3). Fradubio tried to decide which lady he should court by comparing which of them was more beautiful. When Duessa takes the other woman's beauty away, Fradubio says he "would have kild her [Fraelissa]," but "the false witch did my wrathfull hand with-hold" (I.II.39.7-8). Both Redcross and Fradubio wanted to kill their ladies when they didn't appear beautiful in their male gaze anymore. To make matters worse, Fradubio spies on Duessa and sees her actual old and ugly shape. Instead of bemoaning his former lover Fraelissa's fate and his own actions, he says "that ever to have toucht her, I did deadly rew" (I.II.40.9). Fradubio solely regrets his own physical interaction with Duessa. He could not actually see her 'nether-parts,' but he is certain they are "misshapen, monstrous," and that they "did seem more foule and hideous/ then womans shape man would believe to bee" (I.II.41.1-4). Likewise, Redcross has to see for himself Duessa's ugliness to be torn away from her, so strong is the power of her beauty over him. Only Una, the woman, realizes that Duessa's spell can only be broken if the men see her beauty disappear and with it her sexual power over them.

The passages of Duessa's enforced disrobing read like a rape. They contain the most voyeuristic aspect of the male gaze in Book I. Spenser describes Duessa's undressing like a perverted burlesque-act, during which he details her body parts from head, teeth, breasts, arms (like talons), genitalia, to her legs and feet (like paws). Her female body is read piece by piece and Spenser describes the real Duessa as the epitome of feminine corruption, with the animal-likeness signifying her sexuality: "Her dried duggs, lyke bladders lacking wind/ Hong downe, and filthy matter from them weld" (I.VIII.47.6-7). Instead of being a medium of nurture, her breasts are a medium of excretion. She is the corruption of the mother, the Madonna, and at this point, even the whore. The male gaze has, in that sense, stripped her of all her power that was a threat to patriarchal society. Once stripped of her beauty, she is no longer a danger to men, and it is men who made up the society in the 1590's. Duessa might well express the male subject's anxiety

about having a woman as a queen. Much like Queen Elizabeth, Duessa presents an enigma to men. She is the country's mother without actual children of her own. She is the virgin queen who refused to marry. She is a manipulative seducer forced to strategically juggle suitors, and lead them on so she is able to remain in her position as queen, and, more importantly, as a powerful woman in a man's world. If, in The Faerie Queene, artistry's name is woman, then anxiety's name is man.