

Blurred Contours: An Attempt  
to Deconstruct the Female Character in  
Books I and III of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*

*Ana María Sánchez Mosquera*

UNIVERSITY OF SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

Medieval asceticism configured a pattern of glorification for the female founded upon the Virgin Mary as the supreme teacher of all virtues; this pattern coexisted with that other obsession of the female as the source of all evil, the edenic Eve. Thus, the female represented the most destructive and gentlest aspects of natural creation--prey to sin and to idealization, the bride of Christ and the devil's gateway. These traditional patterns of feminine stereotypes continued to be apparently stressed in the Renaissance. Thus, there was, on the one hand, a current of courtly idealism which glorified the female: purity, chastity and virginity are highly praised; and, on the other hand, there was an exultation of the female body as a sensual object (i.e. Donne's poems). Nevertheless, these apparent clear demarcations commenced to give way to a new type of conception of the feminine in Renaissance literature and culture:

For since in the Renaissance period, Love was at the centre, and since the days of idealistic peredasty had gone with the Greeks, so it followed that the female principle was at the centre, invested with a new sanctity which came not so much from the Cult of the Blessed Virgin as from the mystery religions of the ancient world, supposed to have been founded by Orpheus. (Davies 4)

The feminine emerges as an all-inclusive ideal where "vulnerability" cohabits with "stout hardiment" (Heale 81), and female stitching labours are substituted by battlefield enterprises: "She is the coincidence of opposites in person, Venus and Diana, war and love, male and female: numinous, mysterious, carrying unaccountable energy, all power and all gentleness" (Davies 6). Stevie Davies refers to Edmund Spenser's heroine, Britomart, in book III of *The Faerie Queene*: Britomart, androgynous in nature, represents that new type of woman where cosmogonic forces seem to converge, and, where the "Idea of woman" is to be revalued as "a constituent part of the God-reflecting universe" (Davies 6). Indeed, we encounter in *The Faerie Queene* a new type of woman that differs from the traditional patterns of medieval configuration of the "feminine."

On the one hand, female glorification and female degradation apparently conform to the binomial antagonism in which female characters seem to be immerse in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590): "The angel, the radiant figure of precise contours, glittering chastity of form ..." (Paglia 43) such as Una, Florimell or Belpheobe, or the evil, loathsome, misshapen being--Error, Duessa, Argante--who dwells in the shadows of the Averno or "in the sinister fogs that frequently blanket the landscape" (Paglia 43). On the other hand, that clear demarcation is blurred as the reader pierces through this blanketed landscape the poetic voice displays in "faerie land," and, as a result, traditional dichotomies become unstable.

It is my purpose to deconstruct, and by this, I mean that, through Derrida's concept of "différance"<sup>1</sup>, I will attempt to deny the existence of absolute opposites in the configuration of female characters in Books I and III of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*: "The poem's opposites always flow towards and occasionally enter deeply into one another, like strong currents meeting" (Davies 39). This analysis will equally allow me to disclose, 'by an activity of semantic 'freeplay'" (Lodge 108), the paradoxes and contradictions arising in the depiction of such female characters.

To aim at this, it is necessary to bear in mind, first that "the transparency of language is an illusion" (Belsey 4), and that "a masking, disguising, personating vision is the typical Spenserian style" (Paglia 48). In Duessa's words, a malefic hag, we can suggest the play going on in the long poem: "I that seem not I, Duessa am" (I.v.26.6)<sup>2</sup>. Alchemy, magic and deceit operate on the inhabitants of the Spenserian realm of faeries, offering, sometimes, a world of seeming that it is not the world it seems--for example, Duessa assumes other's physical appearance in an attempt to confuse, tempt and deviate the characters from their quest. Books I and III have been chosen as focus for discussion: Book I establishes the parameters and coordinates that will regulate the rest of the work as far as the depiction of women is concerned. These parameters are based upon the supposition that manichean divisions of good and evil seem to initially rule the poem's thematic structure: for example, Una is said to allegorically represent truth and purity; she is, consequently, enveloped in an aura of brightness and light; Error is presented as a filthy monster that inhabits the earth's entrails, and, represents the evil and dark side which the Redcross Knight must overcome in his pilgrimage to holiness. These opposites are, nevertheless, undermined and exploited subversively through the poem's thematic axes in the depiction of the distinct female characters. Book III has been chosen because Britomart's hybrid nature provides the focus to study the "Idea of Woman," using Stevie Davies' expression (p. 56), in the Renaissance period:

In Book III Spenser locates the most powerful and terrible mystery of the whole *The Faerie Queene*, founding a pastoral world which is not casually Arcadian, for it mingles blood and soil, the earth as simultaneous womb and burial chamber.

The first "stereotype" of female angelical figure is Una, the Red Cross Knight's leman. She is the ministering damsel, the angelic figure that accompanies him, devoted to embellish the world with her chastity and virginity. She is the inactive type of fragile beauty with a special gift for tears, and, she fits perfectly into the medieval type of "bride of Christ" (she allegorically symbolizes the Church of England). Una, as most of the cherubic faces in Faerie Land, makes us question the traditional ideal of the female only to be valued by her face, and, whose "character [is] rubbed out" (Davies 35) from the hi/story to give way to the Knight's heroic deeds. Contrary to these expectations, it is Una who sets the world of chivalric knights in motion: she demands the Redcross Knight's help. Overall, in *The Faerie Queene*, women are often presented as the "deus ex machina" of the narrative structure.

Una's entrance in the poem underlines her statuesque character and her proclivity to immobility: she is pictorially described in a context of action. The Redcross Knight's appearance is teleologically directed to fulfill Gloriana's orders, but, Una seems to be framed by the language that presents her. Nevertheless, the stereotype commences to crumble in the language and imagery deployed. Una, supposed to be an emblem of unity and indivisibility, is fragmentarily presented through her outward appearance: "vele," "blacke stole," "whiter." Her bright-like nature--presented through images that evoke whiteness--is obscured, somehow, by the proximity of the "lowly ass," and accentuated by her veil-covered face. Una's purity is questioned by the presence

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida's concept of "différance" ("differing and deferring") implies that the presence of one term immediately calls out the absence of another, absence is made visible through presence: "For 'difference' puts in motion the incessant play (*jeu*) of signification that goes on within the seeming immobility of the marks on the printed page" (Abrams 269).

<sup>2</sup> The edition used and quoted is the following: Spenser, E. ed. 1978: *The Faerie Queene*. London, Penguin. My pattern of quotation for the primary source follows this order: Book, canto, stanza and line.

of the animal element as belonging to the realm of instinct, and, therefore, outside the sphere of temperance, prudishness and self-abnegation. Thus, the chiaroscuro imagery signals a fuzzy borderline where conflicting elements--light and dark--'endanger' the sifting of the 'stereotype'.

Una is also interestingly accompanied by a dwarf: Una's beauty coalesces with the dwarf's physical deformity; the contours are diffused through the presence of contrasting elements. Moreover, the dwarf evokes a world of comic buffoonery and ludicrous entertainment which immediately leads us to the consideration of carnival as a potential power for the female character:

Carnival with all its images, indecencies, and curses affirms the people's immortal, indestructible character. In the world of carnival the awareness of the people's immortality is combined with the realization that established authority and truth are relative. (Bakhtin 256)

Una's passivity is once again deflated by the witnessing evidence of language and imagery.

The spirit of carnival and the implications it portends--as a source of potential power for the female--are stressed by Una's proximity to the grotesque<sup>1</sup>. Later in the book, Una is, thus, captured by a group of satyrs and fauns, half-animal and half-human, and she is proclaimed their Queen<sup>2</sup>. David Evett comments that the art of the grotesque was a favourite among well-to-do Elizabethans<sup>3</sup>. Una's proximity to the grotesque and her initial presentation through dismemberment contribute to relate her to the Rabelaisian world of carnival such as Bakhtin understands it. Carnival imagery in the figure of Una inverts the logic of female passivity into that of a potential for action and power. Duessa enacts Una's counterpart in Book I. Her name "signifies doubleness and falsehood" (Heale 30) and her first apparition--in gold and red--reminds one of the whore of Babylon as opposed to the angelical Una: "The imagery of scarlet, gold and jewels is from the description in Revelation (12.4) of the Whore of Babylon" (Heale 30). The way she appears and the order followed in her description can be contrasted with that of Una--they are both described first through their clothes and then, in relation to the knight they accompany. The paralleled description puts them in a one to one correspondence. Moreover, as Una represented the powers of light, Duessa represents the powers of darkness. Nevertheless, Duessa acquires, by means of magic, Una's appearance, and uses it for purposes of deceit: like Una, Duessa can also dazzle and deceive the spectator; magical effects erase, once again, the demarcated contours of the stereotype and accentuate their invalidity by playing out the reader through the confusing glimmers of deceit. Duessa's protean-like nature backs the supposition that beauty is only a cosmetic quality which cannot ultimately point to moral righteousness. Indeed, other moments in the book point to the fact that women's beauty is unreliable as a token of moral perfection. In *Faerie Land*, beauty becomes synonymous with paralysis and superciliousness. Paglia manifests that women are overall icons "cunningly worked with gold and coldly glittering" (Paglia 45). Belpheobe's physical description in Book III is the epitome of denaturalization of beauty as a divine attribute: her ideal perfection suggests that of a lifeless statue. David Evett suggests that if we take the description of Belpheobe's physical attributes (II.ii.21-31) literally, it turns out to be grotesque:

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<sup>1</sup> David Evett talks about the nature of the grotesque and comments that one of the purposes of the grotesque is that, although confined to the surface, its effect is not to confirm the surface but to render it ambiguous. Precisely, the obtrusiveness of the grotesque as it is depicted in painting and sculpture (arts where it first found its origins) blurs the clarity, the transparency of forms and perfect delineation.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Heale interprets this scene in a different way: deviating the focus of idolatry from Una to her ass makes of this moment a scene of "comic ignorance" (28). Nevertheless, I consider that there are further implications as she is previously proclaimed their queen and the festive pagan rituals inevitably allude to the world of carnival and to the grotesque, as fauns and satyrs are hybrid types. One of the characteristics of the grotesque is precisely the overlapping of different motifs.

<sup>3</sup> The grotesque is initially connected to visual arts: "The word appears in Europe after the discovery in Rome during the early sixteenth century of ancient apartments decorated with bizarre animal and plant formations. As these rooms were, by this time, all underground, they were called caves or "grottoes" and their decoration, grotesque" (Rhodes 7).

She has ‘antickes’ on her buskins (st. 27). She also has roses in her cheeks, lamps for her eyes, a forehead of ivory, engraved with the triumphs of love, pearls and rubies for teeth and lips, gold wire instead of hair, and marble pillars instead of legs ...; furthermore, her eyelids are populated by a whole flock of little Graces. (203)

Evvett comments that her attributes will “appear ludicrous or deformed if set in a naturalistic context” (203). These qualities are probably a parody of Petrarchan idealization of the female as perfection. Therefore, the exultation of female physical attributes must be cautiously regarded as it turns the female into a petrified sign to be read, and exploited by the male. The play going on between doubles denaturalizes beauty as an intrinsic quality of feminine righteousness and contributes to our aim of deconstructing absolute stereotypes. This idea is also backed by the presupposition that, if the morally virtuous woman is the one characterized as physically perfect--since the evil and the misshapen always correspond to a flaw of character--morality turns out to be a cosmetic quality, confined to the surface. More than once, Spenser has shown discontent to the hypocritical ongoing of court life that caused him more than one misfortune in his desire to climb up.

Una is not exempted from an aesthetic of evil that humanizes her and pairs her up to Duessa who “alegorically” represents the wicked. Towards the end, Una chastises the witch by disclosing her filthy “nether parts” to public eye, that is, by stripping her off her masks in an act of cruel mastering the situation. This proves, once again, that Spenser does not conceive purely good or evil characters but tests them to the limits of their preconception through these hybrid attributes.

Cloning, duplicity and transformation continue to obfuscate the female stereotype and render the female characters equally ambiguous in Book III. Chastity is the heading virtue of Book III, but, chastity here can be viewed more as a means of enduring the rapist rather than as an intrinsic quality of female virtuousness. As an axiomatic label that introduces us in the poem, the idea of chastity seems to be lost in the variagated thematic crossings of book III, which suggest more a deviation of that chastity than the actual virtue itself. Indeed, in book III, male imagination tries to busily “dominate and possess woman’s will by art, by magic, by sensory illusions and threats--by all the instruments of culture except by means of persuasion” (303). Paglia interprets the frantic persecution of chastity and this predatory attempt to violate and rape the female in this way:

The rapist has not incorporated a feminine component and therefore pursues that fleeing malleable femininity with a headlong ferocity which represents a hunger for self-completion. (57)

Interestingly, the epicentre of this book is not a hero, but a heroine who has precisely incorporated the male and the female element: Britomart<sup>1</sup> constitutes the embodiment of fairness and masculine strength (Davies 34):

The androgynous Britomart is not a *lusus naturae* but the representative of an original free and heroic womanhood entitled to rule and adjusted to forceful action.

Britomart debates between gentleness and violence, fairness and “stout hardiment.” Her armour conceals her femininity, but, occasionally her hair evades the helmet’s confinement to catch the sun-beams and present her in blooming femininity. She shows determination to run into the battlefield, but she is a lovesick “silly Mayd” (III.ii.27.7) who suffers girlish pangs of love for Artegall. Her volition is just a reflection of other’s wishes as she takes up knighthood propelled by Artegall’s love: “The warlike maid was never trained in arms until she trained her eye in a glass...

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Shepherd points to the different consideration the Elizabethans attributed to the conception of “fighting woman” and to that of the amazon. Amazon was a pejorative term in Elizabethan culture, and, it was normally associated to “aggressive lust, unbridled will, disobedience” (14). On the contrary, the idea of the fighting woman, such as it is incarnated in Britomart, was full of moral significance, “she is not simply someone who dresses up as a man and who behaves hereafter as a man ... Armour is not just a token of honorary maleness. The aggression is not worn like a disguise, but is something inner” (Shepherd 8).

she will lose the fixed familiar contours of self only to find herself in a stranger” (Gregerson 18). The book celebrates Britomart as an emblem of chastity, but, she frequently indulges herself in forbidden pleasures by means of her glancing, looking and observing (her eyes are the only visible thing through the armour), breaking thus, the laws of chastity. For example, she remains chaste and impervious to Malecasta’s temptations, but, she is wounded by Gardante’s piercing eyes: “It is significant that Britomart is wounded only by Gardante (eye-glances; Ital. *guardante*, looking), indicating her susceptibility to Artegall’s image glimpsed in the glass” (Heale 79). Therefore, it is also by looking into the mirror that she desires Artegall, and her passion is compared with Aetna’s spitting fire, whereas Malecasta’s--her antithesis in virtue--is just a spark of fire. Finally, in Busirane’s house, “a place of delusion and art in which natural and passionate impulses of chaste love are transformed to fears and imagination” (Heale 92), her eye lingers on the tapestries full of erotic motifs. The poetic voice does not condemn Britomart for these deviations from a chaste behaviour, on the contrary, she is made real as she is tested in these situations. The contradictory aspects of her personhood exult her as a complete being who, eluding archetypes, “questions the simple antithetical labels of male and female, and looks for a new definition” (Shepherd 8). Britomart crosses out gender borders in her quest for an orderly society.

Florimell is Britomart’s counterpart in book III, and, she represents the frailest aspects of womanhood as she is constantly threatened by the rapist’s predatory eye. Despite their opposing characters, Britomart and Florimell are both united in their potentiality to exert power:

Opposites within the feminine principle (the extreme of activity, the extreme of passivity) reveal one divine power. Both have the power to terrify, like demonic portents in the sky which no one understands. (Davies 51)

Britomart embodies the principle of battle, strength and active power, and, Florimell exerts her power tacitly as she frantically attracts the rapist; she magnetically draws the iron-hearted rapist who experiences her beauty as a temptation. Both heroines share paralleling attributes which makes us think of the possible connection between both: their hair is said to resemble the sun, and seems to be endowed with the caustic potentiality of consumptive fire. This apocalyptic fire purges and kills, tempts and repels, is also ready to lighten the way of the righteous and to destroy the morally flawed.

Florimell’s beauty is misread in terms of “materia” rather than “spiritus” (Davies 72). This misreading leads to the construction of a false Florimell. A fake version acts as a catalyst for the true Florimell to escape the rapist’s eye. Only a parodic enactment of her perfection can redeem her from the plundering her beauty suffers. The false Florimell “substitutes for the faithfulness and chastity of the displaced Florimell the rolling eyes and the “wicked Spright” (viii.8) of unchastity” (Heale 82):

In stead of eyes two burning lamps she set  
In silver sockets, shyning like the skyes,  
... ..  
In stead of yellow lockes she did devise,  
With golden wyre to weave her curled head:  
Yet golden wyre was not so yellow thrise  
... .. (III.VII.7. 1-7)

Lust and idolatry are put side by side: “Petrarchan idolatry” (in the figure of the true Florimell) versus “frustrated Ovidian lust” (the false Florimell) proving that one is as bad as the other. Cheney argues:

men see a beautiful woman and they react to her in one of two ways: either as a Neoplatonist by depersonalizing her into something higher than she is, an abstract ideal, beauty; or as an Ovidian, by depersonalizing her into something lower than she is, a beast to be defiled by beastly lust. (317)

Both preconceptions are false: Florimell is neither an abstract ideal nor an eroticized object. Her name suggests--“flor”--that she is vinculated to the earth, and therefore, to death and renewal;

these images elude idealized abstractions. The necessity of a sublimated object of lust to canalize the rapist's desires proves that the real Florimell avoids this other reading as an eroticized object. Again, the reader's expectations are debunked by the poetic voice's playful manipulations in the construction of feminine characters.

The disruption of stereotyped absolutes contributes to humanize the characters and to envision a perfection that abides in that Platonist idea of the "One"<sup>1</sup>: the reconciliation of opposites is conceived within the visionary capability of the poem in the figure of the androgynous or through separate entities that complete each other. Moreover, we encounter a new conception of the female who abandons the indoor toils and jumps on to the battlefield in order to inscribe her name in the Annals of History.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Heale comments on Spenser's fascination with numbers, "like all Platonists he was forever trying to make these numbers add to One" (39).